

'Sick' school to let kids transfer out

But District 200 plans to keep building open

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After five years of fielding complaints that Johnson Elementary School in Warrenville is making its students sick, lawyers for Wheaton-Warrenville District 200 on Tuesday took the unusual step of saying that worried parents have the option of not sending their children to the school.

The school district instead will work to find alternative ways to educate children whose parents believe that the school is an unhealthy place, the lawyers said.

Officials say that they do not think many parents will pull children from the school, but the decision raises the possibility that an exodus of students could begin and other parents will join in.

The announcement was made minutes after a DuPage County judge postponed for a week any decision on a motion seeking the school's permanent closure.

That motion was brought by lawyers representing parents in a suit seeking class-action status that was filed against the district in June. The suit claims the school is a health hazard to its occupants, an allegation that District 200 denies.

"We don't in any way think that there is anything wrong ... at Johnson school," said school dis-

trict lawyer Michael Maher. "But we're willing to make accommodations for those people who have concerns."

The move to offer families educational alternatives is unusual, say state officials. Such tactics are typically used by districts that have suffered natural disasters that make it impossible to educate students—for example, the 1990 tornado that razed Plainfield High School.

Tom Hernandez, a spokesman for the Illinois State Board of Education, said, "Short of an extreme circumstance, we are not aware of a school district taking any action like this: still keeping its building open, still contending that there is nothing wrong with the building, but accommodating parents who might feel otherwise."

Johnson has been the target of health complaints from teachers and parents. A variety of symptoms have been reported by school occupants, ranging from headaches and dizziness to respiratory infections and nausea. The symptoms have been attributed to moldy carpets and ceilings and poor air quality.

The district has spent about \$600,000 on repairs to the building, including replacing carpet with tile, installing fresh-air intakes, fixing the roof and instituting new maintenance procedures. The school also has installed a carbon dioxide detector to ensure that there is adequate fresh air.

But in the suit filed by parents in DuPage County Circuit Court, the

district is accused of ignoring teachers' and parents' complaints about health hazards, covering up the building's problems and being negligent in the school's maintenance. The suit also claims that despite the district's work, the school still poses health threats.

About 40 families are named plaintiffs in the suit, which seeks at least \$33.6 million in damages. About 650 students are enrolled in the 10-year-old school, where classes are to resume Aug. 24.

The district's offer to worried parents "is a telling indication that the district recognizes that there are still problems with the school," said Tom Zimmerman, one of the attorneys for the parents group.

Zimmerman complained that the offer does nothing to help families who have already taken their children out of the school and enrolled them in private schools.

How children removed from the school will be educated is still a question. But district officials said that they already have a "permissive transfer policy" in which parents can ask that their children be allowed to attend a nearby school. Permission is granted if there is room in the other school's classroom and if principals of both schools agree to the transfer.

What is unclear is what the district will do should scores of families decide that their children should not stay at Johnson. Attorneys would only say that the district will explore all options.