

Chicago Tribune

Tuesday, August 25, 1998

Bad-air lawsuit seeks to close school

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TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Parents of two girls who suffered ailments reportedly from air in a Warrenville elementary school filed a lawsuit Monday seeking to close the school until problems are remedied.

The suit, filed in U.S. District Court in Chicago by attorneys for Janna and Moimir Andrejevic, states Johnson Elementary School, which opened in 1990, is plagued by mold on

ceiling tiles and carpeting and high levels of carbon dioxide from a ventilation system that fails to circulate air. The lawsuit also alleges Wheaton-Warrenville Unit School District 200 has denied the problems existed.

According to the suit, parents of 122 children—18 percent of the school's current enrollment—reported health problems believed to be "caused by the horrendous poor environmental conditions in the Johnson School."

The family sued the district and 13 school officials, accusing them of violating their duty "to use ordinary care to maintain the Johnson School in a reasonably safe condition."

"It's very well-documented that these poor environmental conditions exist in the school," said Thomas A. Zimmerman Jr., an attorney representing the Andrejevics. Zimmerman and another attorney for the family held a news conference in the

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lobby of the Dirksen Federal Building on Monday morning to announce the suit, which seeks \$83.65 million to compensate students, parents, teachers and other school employees for medical treatment from illness traced to the air in Johnson and to punish the school district for its alleged inaction.

But District 200 spokeswoman Denie Young said virtually all the air problems in Johnson have been corrected since the school district created the Indoor Environmental Quality Committee in October in response to complaints about the school's air.

Since then, Young said, several people have complimented the school board on its effort.

"I believe everybody is feeling pretty good about what's going on at the school," Young said, adding that District 200 has spent about \$600,000 on a number of projects, including replacing carpet with tile, improving drainage, adding fresh-air intakes, establishing new maintenance programs for room ventilation systems and reducing cleaning chemicals.

"Continuing efforts have been made to address all the issues that were before the board in October," Young said, "and when problems have arisen, those have been addressed, as well."

Classes for the estimated 670 pupils in kindergarten through 5th grade will resume Tuesday morning, as scheduled, Young said.

But Zimmerman called the corrective efforts "inadequate attempts" to solve air problems in

Johnson. The suit contended the environmental problems remain, citing a memo in July from the school's head custodian in which he detailed numerous leaks from the roof and elsewhere.

"There's mold on the ceiling tiles. There's mold in the ventilator shafts," Zimmerman said. "And one of the responses of the administration has been simply to shove tiles underneath leaking air-conditioner units instead of addressing the problem."

Robert A. Holstein, another attorney representing the Andrejevics, said the school's primary problem is that it was constructed on a wetland. He said that leads to a buildup of moisture and mold.

"It's not a question of doing a certain amount of patchwork and fixing it up," Holstein said. "They've got to do something very dramatic and basic."

Teachers and students reportedly started complaining of headaches, nausea, sinus infections, fatigue, bronchitis and related problems at Johnson in about 1995. In April 1997, 33 staff members at Johnson petitioned the district to resolve health concerns promptly.

Studies taken throughout that time showed high carbon dioxide levels, mold buildup on carpet and ceilings and musty odors.

In September, 2nd grader Heleh Andrejevic was hospitalized for three days after suffering respiratory arrest from the school's air, according to her parents. After she returned to school, the symptoms returned, and her parents withdrew the girl and her younger sister.

They have recovered fully and moved to San Diego.