

TribWest

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Covering DuPage County, southern Kane County
and parts of Kendall County

Suit seeks to clear air at school

Warrenville parents seek trial, damages

By LeAnn Spencer

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

By the time school begins in August, officials at Johnson Elementary School would like to have put behind them a half-decade of controversy over whether the school is a health hazard to its occupants.

According to the 40 or so families listed in a class-action suit filed in DuPage County, however, the Warrenville school poses dangers to the 600 students who attend. The suit is asking for a jury trial and is seeking at least \$32.6 million in damages.

The suit alleges that the school ignored teachers' and parents' complaints about health hazards, tried to cover up the building's problems and was

negligent in maintenance and repairs needed to maintain healthful conditions.

"What are the parents supposed to do? They have no alternative but to sue," said Tom Zimmerman, one of the attorneys who filed the suit.

A similar suit against the district was filed in federal district court in Chicago last year, but it was withdrawn after a judge said it should be filed in DuPage. It was filed June 29 in

DuPage County Circuit Court.

The renewal of the lawsuit surfaces as school officials are trying to move forward after spending more than \$600,000 to make numerous repairs at the 10-year-old school.

"They have presented nothing new that we weren't aware of, and we've moved to address all the issues," said Denise Young, a spokeswoman for Wheaton-Warrenville District 200. "We want to assure people that the school

is a safe place to be."

In an effort to inform the public about repairs that have been made, officials will hold a public meeting in late August with the school's environmental team. At the meeting, parents will be able to ask questions about the condition of the building.

The efforts in Warrenville are being repeated all over DuPage and Kane Counties as school administrators scurry to make

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repairs to their buildings and to reassure anxious parents that their children will not get sick when they go to school this fall.

The activity comes in the wake of a plethora of "sick school" reports by teachers, students and parents.

In Naperville, complaints about air quality have surfaced at Highlands Elementary, Elmwood Elementary and Naperville Central High School. As a result, District 203 officials created a new position and hired someone to monitor indoor air quality.

In St. Charles, District 303 officials last spring promised to overhaul the high school building's heating and air-conditioning system in the wake of parental and teacher complaints. The work would be part of a multimillion-dollar remodeling job, but school officials this week declined to elaborate.

Air-quality complaints are becoming more frequent, say health officials who attribute the trend to increased awareness of health and environmental issues.

Last year, the Illinois Department of Public Health investigated eight schools with reported indoor air problems. The department can investigate complaints, but state health officials said that they have no regulatory authority. The department can make recommendations but it is up to the individual property owner—in this case the school boards—to take action.

Most physical symptoms caused by poor air quality are eye, nose and throat irritation, said state toxicologist Mike Moomey. Other common complaints are about temperature and humidity, he said.

"You run into all kinds of different things in these buildings," Moomey said. "The most common complaints are of inadequate ventilation systems."

In Warrenville, reported illnesses included recurring sinus infections, headaches, nausea,

asthma attacks, bronchitis and pneumonia. Teachers complained that mold was growing in carpets and on ceilings, and that there was a lack of fresh air.

Parents also complained that children had a variety of medical symptoms while in school, but that the symptoms disappeared when their children were not in the school.

Shawn Brahm was so concerned that she pulled her daughter out of the school and is now home schooling 7-year-old Samantha.

"You trust a school to take care of your children. You leave them there for eight hours a day. You don't want them exposed to toxic chemicals," said Brahm, who complained that her daughter had repeated bloody noses and diarrhea while at the school.

In an effort to address complaints, the school two years ago formed a task force of parents and staff. School officials also moved to make upgrades at the school.

Improvements included removal of all carpeting and replacing it with tile, the installation of fresh-air intakes, new maintenance programs for room ventilators, new insulation for pipes to prevent condensation and dripping water and repair of the roof.

The school also purchased a carbon-dioxide monitor to ensure that there is adequate fresh air. School officials said that testing shows that the school no longer has elevated mold counts.

At least one parent is confident that the school is taking care of business.

"We're very pleased at what has been done at Johnson," said Karey Ross, whose 10-year-old son, Jimmy, will enter 5th grade this fall.

"It's terrible that so many people got sick, but the school now is a much nicer place," said Ross, once a vocal critic of the school and more recently a member of the school's Indoor Environmental Quality Committee.

"To drag this through a court is silly," she said. "When you are suing a school you are really just suing yourself."