

## Community

# District 200 hedges bets in 'sick' school lawsuit

By Terry Ryan

REGIONAL EDITOR

With the start of the school year less than two weeks away, Wheaton Warrenville School District 200 is working out a contingency plan if a DuPage County judge rules Tuesday to close Johnson School in Warrenville as a result of a lawsuit filed by 40 parents claiming the school is a "sick" building.

After Judge Hollis Webster delayed the ruling earlier this week, school district attorneys announced the district will transfer students involved in the lawsuit who are suffering from headaches and respiratory infections. Seven to eight students involved in the lawsuit currently attend Johnson, Superintendent Gary T. Catalani said Wednesday.

The lawsuit - filed in DuPage County court in June on behalf of 72 former students - seeks a \$33.6 million damage award and an injunction calling for the school's permanent closure.

"We feel very comfortable in the status of our building," Catalani said. "Offering people this option is not an admission that we have a problem. It's a matter that if we have parents that are fearful of sending child to school, that will impact the education of the children ... The accommodations made was more of an education concern than settling the lawsuit. We have grounds to defend ourselves in the lawsuit."

The lawsuit charges that high mold counts, deteriorating ceilings and even the appearance of worms crawling up through the floors have all contributed to health problems at the school, which is north of Route 56 between Route 59 and Ferni National Accelerator Laboratory.

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

Despite \$600,000 spent on repairs and a new carbon monoxide detector to check air quality that was done even before the lawsuit was filed, parents and students say symptoms haven't gone away.

"It is my belief and the position of the school district that Johnson

School is environmentally safe. We are 100 percent sure of that," Catalani said.

The district is inviting parents and the public to tour the school and bring questions to the meeting, scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 18 at the school, 700 Continental Drive, Warrenville.

District spokeswoman Denie Young said there have been four or five phone calls inquiring about the district's offer to transfer the students, but no formal applications.

A policy already exists for parents to request a transfer for their children that has to be OK'd by the existing school principal, the transferring school principal and the superintendent "for whatever reason (the parents) deem necessary," Catalani said.

"The guiding principle of considering those things is the space available, and we don't have a lot of space," he said.

In the meantime, the district is working on a contingency plan if the judge rules to close the school, Catalani said.

*The Associated Press and Sun correspondent Don Grigas contributed to this report.*