



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Commissioner of Education
President of the University of the State of New York
89 Washington Avenue, Room 111
Albany, New York 12234

E-mail: commissioner@nysed.gov
Twitter: @NYSEDNews
Tel: (518) 474-5844
Fax: (518) 473-4909

June 11, 2019

To: District Superintendents
Superintendents of Schools
Nonpublic School Leaders
Charter School Leaders

From: MaryEllen Elia, Commissioner

Subject: **MERCURY-CONTAINING FLOORING**

The Department has received several reports regarding school districts with flooring of a certain type which may contain mercury. In response to the reports, NYSED staff have consulted with their colleagues at the Department of Health (DOH) to obtain information to assist school districts. While there is not an established New York State protocol to address this situation or a standard for acceptable presence of environmental mercury, DOH has provided advice to districts with these concerns in the past.

We have learned that rubber-like polyurethane floors using phenyl mercuric acetate (PMA) catalyst were installed in school multipurpose rooms, gyms, cafeterias, auditoriums, stages, and indoor tracks between the 1960s and the 1990s. PMA can break down and release odorless, colorless mercury vapor at room temperatures. The floors and items that have been in contact with them emit mercury vapor indefinitely. Although there is not an exhaustive list of the manufacturers who used PMA as a catalyst, the floors in question are:

- rubber-like and water-resistant
- usually one-piece and poured in place but sometimes pieced
- can be smooth, stippled, or mesh-like
- may have been covered by another floor

Exposure to mercury vapor may be worse if floors are damaged or deteriorated or located in hot rooms with poor ventilation or a lack of air-conditioning. However, you should be aware that:

- not every polyurethane floor used mercury as a catalyst
- the mercury content of this type of flooring varies
- not every floor which used mercury as a catalyst is a source of mercury vapor

Investigations by DOH and other agencies have generally found mercury vapor levels in spaces with undisturbed polyurethane flooring in good condition are low, and below levels used for health comparisons, but levels can temporarily increase during floor renovations and removal.

Although New York State does not have a standard for mercury exposure, the Department of Health recommends that schools which have this type of polyurethane flooring assess the mercury exposure potential by following [guidance developed by the State of Minnesota](#).

The Minnesota guidance suggests that the flooring should be tested for total mercury content. If it is above the target level (20 ppm), the school should perform an indoor air screening that evaluates both the mercury release by the flooring as well as the room ventilation. If necessary, more in-depth air testing could be carried out. If the additional tests are performed, they should be done using the NIOSH method 6009 (modified).

Professionals familiar with these standards should be consulted for this process. Laboratories performing the floor testing or National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) air method should be certified by the New York State Environmental Laboratory Approval Program (ELAP). To find a currently certified laboratory, one should contact ELAP at (518) 485-5570 or ELAP@health.ny.gov. NYS DOH will continue to work with SED to determine if more specific guidance would be helpful to assist schools and their environmental consultants evaluate this potential source of airborne mercury.

While the existence of this type of flooring has been known for many years, the Department would like current information to better assess the scope of the issue. Districts and BOCES are requested to perform an inventory to determine whether there are rubber-like polyurethane floors installed in your district that are of an age noted above, including the condition of the flooring, and submit data to the Department at the following link: [School District and BOCES Flooring Survey Link](#). Leaders of nonpublic schools, charter schools, and the state supported schools for the blind and deaf can use this link for a survey designed for their purposes. [Charter, nonpublic, state-supported and state-approved school survey](#). Once data is collected, the Department, together with DOH, anticipates providing guidance based on the results of this inventory effort.

[More information about mercury](#) can be found on the [Department of Health's website](#).

If you have additional questions, you can reach out to the Department's Office of Facilities Planning at (518) 474-3906 or your BOCES health and safety office.