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Los Angeles Unified School District plumber Daniel Wills repairs and replaces one of hundreds of old fountains found to have high levels of lead—this one at John H Francis Polytechnic Senior High in Sun Valley. Photo by Nancy Pastor for CALmatters

# Drinking lead—why California may force all schools to test their water

By [Elizabeth Aguilera](#)  | Aug 15, 2017 | [HEALTH](#)

When a therapy dog refused to drink at a San Diego grade school, it was the first clue that something was wrong with the water.



Tests revealed why the pup turned up its nose—the presence of polyvinyl chloride, the polymer in PVC pipes that degrade over time. But further analysis found something else that had gone undetected by the dog, the teachers and students of the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, and the school district: elevated levels of lead.

Nor is this an isolated situation. Tests have turned up harmful levels of lead in water fountains and taps at other schools in San Diego and Los Angeles, where the district long ago decided to identify, flush and fix or seal hundreds of contaminated fountains. And in the wake of the much-publicized toxic lead contamination of water in Flint, Mich., a [Reuters](#) report revealed dozens of California neighborhoods in which tested children showed elevated levels of lead—a neurotoxin that causes developmental disorders and brain damage. No amount of lead in humans is considered safe.

The news has left California legislators anxious that children exposed to lead may go undiagnosed under the status quo. Doctors here typically refer children for lead testing only if the family says it lives in a home more than 40 years old with peeling paint, and is on low-income assistance programs. And although public schools can voluntarily test their water for lead—free under a new California Water Boards program—they are under no legal requirement to do so.

That's not enough for the sponsors of two bills the Legislature will decide on in the next month:

- [AB 1316](#), authored by Bill Quirk, D-Hayward, would have the state Public Health Department consider urging doctors to ask families more questions as they assess the risk of lead exposure. That could include inquiring about whether the family lives near a major highway or a former lead or steel smelter, and whether a child might be exposed by spending time in another home or building. Once those inquiries result in children being tested, the bill would require the state health department to report the data more promptly and thoroughly.



- [AB 746](#), authored by Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, D-San Diego, would require all school districts to test their water for lead and fix or cap any contaminated water source.



How widespread is the problem? The national Centers for Disease Control found that 5 percent of tested children in Flint had elevated lead levels. In California, the state Department of Public Health has found that 2 percent of tested children have elevated levels.

But there are hot spots of trouble. In Alameda County, eight zip codes showed rates higher than or equal to Flint. Zip codes within Los Angeles, Monterey and Humboldt counties also showed higher rates of childhood lead exposure. In one [Fresno](#) zip code, nearly 14 percent of the children tested had elevated levels of lead.

The state Public Health Department cautions that the numbers are not an accurate representation of all children because only those whom health



Photo from Pixnio

providers believe may be at risk are tested.

But its data is also old. The department says those percentages are based on [data](#) from 2012, the most recent year the state department says it has—despite the collection of 700,000

blood lead level test results sent in each year from labs statewide.

“The problem we have right now is we don’t know all the different sources of lead in the environment,” said Quirk, chair of the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials. “I hope it will lead to children who are higher risk being tested, because pediatricians will ask more questions and parents will ask more questions.”

Quirk’s bill originally sought to require that all young children get tested for lead by their health provider. But the insurance industry, the California Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatricians lobbied successfully to get that requirement removed. The medical association objected to taking away discretion from doctors and requiring costly tests even when a doctor determines there is no risk, spokeswoman Joanne Adams said in an email.

Already the state makes blood lead testing available to any child younger than 6 on Medi-Cal or other low-income state benefit programs. “Children considered at risk of lead exposure are required to be blood lead tested at 12 and 24 months,” the health department said in a written response to questions.

Currently about 80 percent of children on Medi-Cal are tested, Quirk acknowledged. But he points out that while most people believe low-income children living in old homes are primarily at risk, children can be exposed to lead in a variety of ways—from school water fountains to soil in playgrounds near major highways.



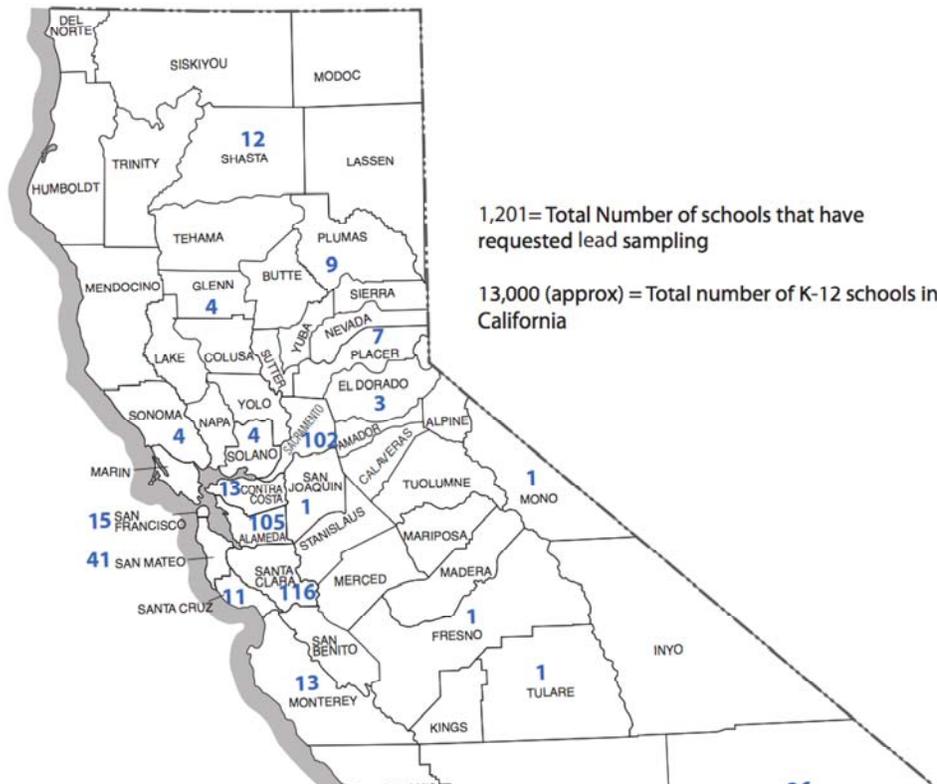
“I think that every parent should think about having their child tested, period,” Quirk said. “Just ask your pediatrician to order, then you’ll know if there’s a problem. I have a grandchild that just arrived and I’m going to ask my daughter to have her child tested.”

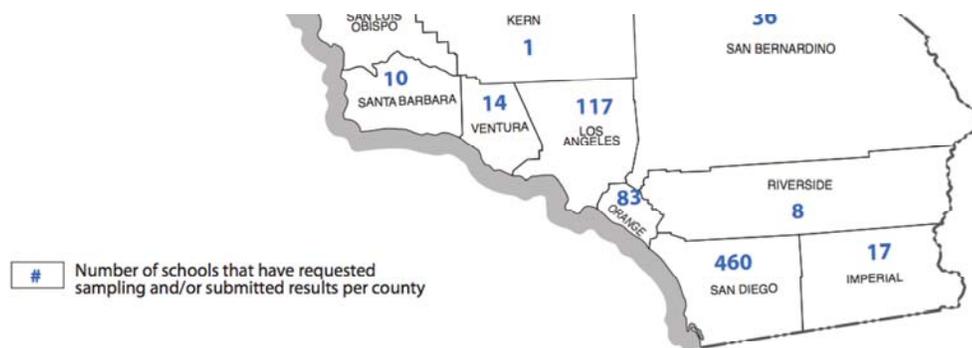
The Gonzalez Fletcher bill would require school districts to test for lead at least once a year or once every three years depending on when the buildings were constructed. If tests find that lead is higher than the state and federal threshold of 15 parts per billion, the school district would then have to notify parents and shut down the contaminated water source until it can be fixed.

Despite the Water Boards’ free testing offer, Gonzalez Fletcher said less than 10 percent of schools have taken advantage of the program. As of last month, about 1,000 of California’s 13,000 schools had requested testing, according to the California Water Boards.



### Number of School Requests as of July 21, 2017 Lead Sampling in California Schools





July 21, 2017 State Water Board -SWRCB.DDW/AM

“You can’t have water with anything testing above the limits that are drinkable and not follow through and fix for the solution,” she said. “We want to ensure that when you find lead, water is shut off and parents are notified so they can have their kids tested.”



San Diego Unified has implemented the strongest policy in the state. Its board decided in late July to set its threshold for remediation at 5 parts per billion, well below the state and federal standard of 15.

“We said the state action level was too high and so we thought we should have a more aggressive standard,” said district spokesman Andrew Sharp. “We wanted to be able to say ‘look when kids go back to school in the fall if there was a positive test for lead on your campus you should know we will have fixed that fountain or kids won’t be drinking from that fountain.’”

Water sampling at San Diego public schools has [revealed](#) three campuses with at least one water source above 15 parts per billion, and another 33 sites with water that showed levels between 5 and 15 parts per billion.

The district is working to fix or close fountains found with elevated levels, Sharp said, and intends to sample every drinking water source at its schools in the next three to five years. In the meantime, it’s begun a one-minute daily flushing at all of its schools—with staff running water through the pipes to reduce lead levels.

Flushing has been going on for years in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which in 2009 began testing more than 60,000 drinking fountains for lead.

Because the district lacked the money to replace or fix contaminated fountains back then, at any school where at least one fountain or faucet was found to have more than 15 parts per billion of lead, staff were required to [flush](#) every drinking source for 30 seconds every morning, said Mark Hovatter, chief facilities executive for the district. Once flushed, the fountains usually tested below the threshold allowed for lead. Those that did not were shut down.

He said the district chose to “err on the side of safety” for the children despite taking “a lot of heat during the drought for our flushing.”



In 2015 the district finally approved nearly \$20 million to end the flushing by repairing or closing drinking fountains that tested high for lead. Hovatter said all the district’s fountains will be fixed by the end of next year and two-thirds of its schools have been cleared to stop flushing already.

As for other California districts? Even if both pending bills become law, some advocates still consider that insufficient.

The public interest group CALPIRG was the driving force behind an ill-fated bill by Quirk and Assemblywoman Blanca Rubio, D-Baldwin Park, that would have required every district to install filters and adopt a 1 part-per-billion standard. The bill died in an Assembly committee even after the standard was raised to 15 parts per billion, said Jason Pfeifle, public health advocate for the organization.

“If a school finds a positive lead test or finds that a drinking fountain has elevated levels of lead,” Pfeifle said, “then it’s already too late and children have already been exposed.”