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CHESTERFIELD

Midlothian High water fountain had 27 times more lead than safety limit, testing shows

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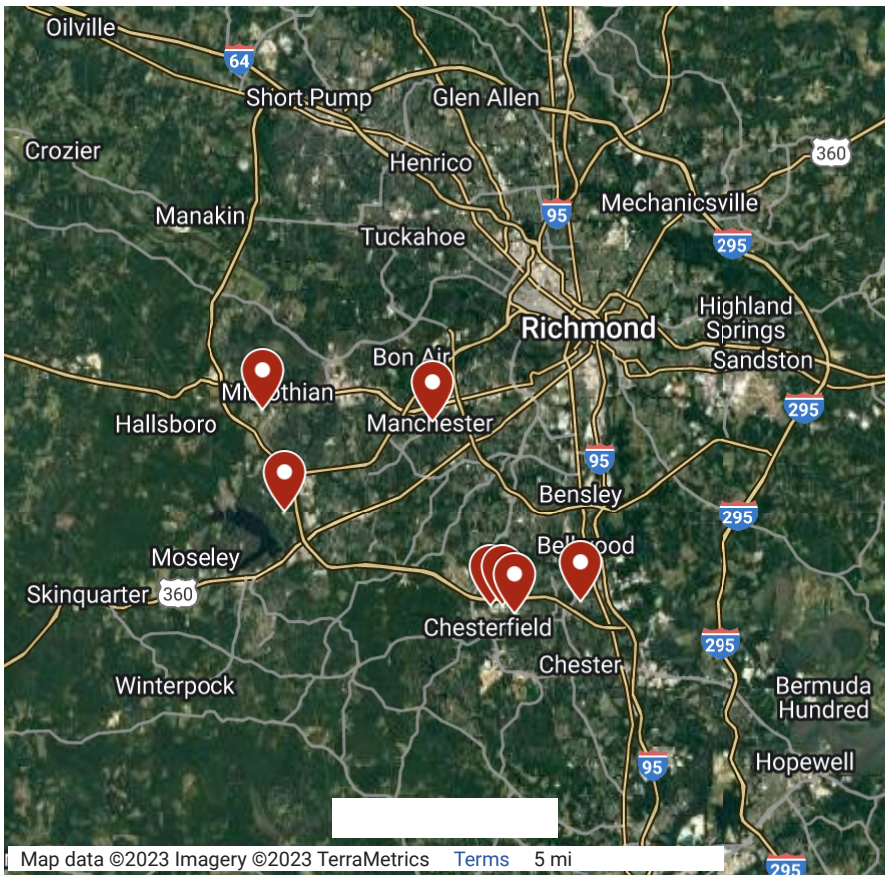
Results at seven Chesterfield sch



Every day for the past three years, Helen Trout has filled up her 17-ounce water bottle at a fountain near the cafeteria at Midlothian High School.

Then earlier this year, that water fountain in the small commons area stopped flowing. Testing for lead and copper flagged that water fountain for elevated levels of one or both of the substances.

“I thought the water tasted funny, but I thought, ‘Well, it’s the school, of course everything will be fine,’ ” Helen’s mother, Julia, recalled her daughter saying.

Not far away, a rarely used water fountain near the library in what Midlothian High Principal Shawn Abel called a “desolate hallway” at one point tested at 541 parts per billion for lead. That’s 27 times higher than the threshold that the state considers unacceptable.

In another sample, the fountain near the library tested at 47.2 parts per billion for lead, and was also flagged for high amounts of carbon. It was one of three water fountains at Midlothian High replaced because of high levels of lead or carbon.

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The state considers lead levels of 20 parts per billion or more to be unacceptable, but the Virginia Department of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency also stress that there is no safe level of lead in a person’s bloodstream.

By comparison, one of the highest samples taken from a Flint, Mich., home by Virginia Tech researchers came back at 158 parts per billion. Researchers who ran these tests during the Flint water crisis said the health effects of lead levels that high

“can include high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems, kidney damage and memory and neurological problems,” according to The Washington Post.
Julia Trout now wonders whether her 16-year-old’s abdominal pain and fatigue, two symptoms she has read are associated with lead, may be connected to that water fountain near the cafeteria. One of the water fountains near the cafeteria tested just above the state threshold, at 25.5 parts per billion.

“Just picturing her filling up a big water bottle that I sent with her to school every day just gave me pause,” Julia Trout said.

She plans to get her daughter tested at her next doctor’s appointment. She feels the school system did a good job of communicating with letters home to parents, but wondered if the schools will do lead testing for students since some may not have access to a doctor. School officials said that decision would be up to the health department, which did not respond Friday to a request for comment.

The water fountain used by Trout was one of 137 fountains, sinks or other sources of water flagged for lead levels following testing by an outside company at Chesterfield schools. Of those, nine were water fountains spread across seven schools.

At Swift Creek Middle, a fountain came back at 44 parts per billion; one at Bellwood Elementary tested at 25.3 parts per billion; one at Providence Middle had 29.2 parts per billion; a rarely used water fountain in the L.C. Bird High small commons tested at 21 parts per billion; and one in a Gates Elementary early-childhood education classroom tested in November at 34 parts per billion. The water fountain at Salem Middle School produced water that had lead levels of 56.5 parts per billion.

In letters home to parents, the principals wrote that the fountains were taken offline, replaced and equipped with filters.

The 2017-18 testing in Chesterfield went beyond requirements from a state law passed last year. The law required local school boards to develop and execute a plan to test drinking water in schools, with priority given to schools built in or before 1986. Sen. Jeremy McPike, D-Prince William, introduced the bill that required the testing.

He made the push after realizing he could not confirm that public systems in the city of Alexandria, where he works as the director of general services, did not have high levels of lead.
He suspected they didn't. The results, he said, were alarming. Some of the tests came back in the range of "several hundred parts per billion," he said.

This past year, instead of just taking a sample, Chesterfield tested all water outlets in the 47 Chesterfield schools that were built before 1988. The samples included water sources that were typically used and those that weren't, such as science sinks, custodial sinks and restroom sinks.

"This goes well beyond minimum standards to ensure that we create a safe learning environment that protects our student, teacher and staff health," School Board Chair John Erbach said in an email.

The results are still rolling in. School officials have received 3,882 results for all 47 schools from "high priority drinking water sources" such as water fountains, kitchen sinks used for food preparation and kitchenette sinks. But officials project that approximately 5,500 results will eventually come in. They are waiting for results of other water sources such as custodial sinks, restroom and science sinks from 19 of the 47 schools.

Even before the state law passed, Chesterfield and some Richmond region schools tested voluntarily. Some school systems were prompted to do that because of the water crisis in Flint, Mich.

In 2016, Chesterfield did a random sampling from schools built prior to 1988, which generally included testing from four water fountains spread throughout the building and a sample from the water service connection. All the samples from the water fountains were less than the state threshold. In response to a question of what school officials believe was the cause for the different results this year, schools spokesman Shawn Smith cited the different sample sizes between the two years.

Other school systems in the Richmond region are now either in the process of testing for lead or have completed testing.

In response to questions about recent testing, Richmond schools spokeswoman Kenita Bowers sent a frequently-asked-question sheet she said was passed out earlier this year.

The FAQ sheet said one water cooler at four schools — J.L. Francis Elementary, Southampton Elementary, Ginter Park Elementary and George Mason Elementary — were tested and that all samples returned levels well below 20 parts per billion. She said officials who could answer follow-up questions about the results were not available for interviews last week.

At Ginter Park and George Mason elementary schools in Richmond last summer, water fountains were shut down after preliminary reports of water testing showed high, but still legal, levels of lead.

Henrico County schools spokesman Andy Jenks said two water samples have required remediation by the school division, but neither was a water fountain.

“One was a sink faucet in a science prep room at Rolfe Middle School, and the other was a computer server room sink at Montrose Elementary School,” Jenks said in an email. “The faucet at Rolfe’s science prep room was replaced, and additional testing was performed with passing results. The sink in Montrose’s server room was removed altogether. These sinks are not typically accessed by students.”

Henrico’s school system is sampling and testing potable water sources in all its schools. It is in the first year of a three-year testing plan. Schools are being tested based on their construction dates going from oldest to newest.

Hanover’s school system has not yet received results from this year’s testing.

Chesterfield school officials said they now want the recently passed law to be expanded. Instead of just samples from schools, county officials think all water sources from the schools should be tested. Testing all the sources in schools built in 1987 or prior cost Chesterfield $120,000. Testing all sources in all Chesterfield schools would increase that tab by $43,000, Smith said.

“If these issues can be found even in a few locations in Chesterfield County, then we believe it should be required to have all sources tested across the state,” says a Chesterfield letter sent home to parents.

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