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Expanding Funding for Mandatory PCB Testing and Remediation in Schools

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I. Executive summary

During the 1950-70s, Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs),a toxic, carcinogenic chemical, were implemented in thousands of schools across the country. The policy brief will examine how PCBs still impact students and schools today and possible mitigation efforts through policy.

II. Overview

Prior to 1979, PCBs were chemicals used as sealant and caulk inside school buildings. They were the most prominent material in windows, fluorescent lights, and floor tiles. While the EPA (Environmental protection agency) banned the use of PCBs in construction through the Toxic Substances Control Act, they still exist within many schools today. Without proper awareness of this chemical, long-term exposure can have adverse health effects on both children and adults in a contaminated school. The most common health problems experienced include cancer, liver toxicity, neurological impairments, and weakened reproductive systems.

A. Relevance

While many assume that there are few schools being impacted by this chemical, with its removal taking place over 75 years ago, around 12,960 to 25,920 schools in America are still contaminated with PCBs. Despite the ban set by the EPA in 1979, there was no universal testing requirement implemented through the legislation. Without proper awareness of the issue, schools were left untested, especially in underfunded or rural areas. Today, up to 14 million students suffer from PCB exposure when attending aging, outdated schools. These chemicals are classified by the World Health Organization as carcinogens and are linked to adverse neurological, reproductive, liver, and thyroid issues. This leaves students vulnerable at a young age to these dangerous and harmful chemicals. The addressing of PCBs requires proper policy change to finally end the presence of these toxic chemicals in all schools across America.

III. History

A. PCBs in history

PCBs first originated as electrical insulators due to their efficiency as heat conductors, while not conducting electricity. Throughout the 1900s, PCBs were heavily tested in rural communities residing near factories, showing elevated levels, yet companies chose not to release the data to protect their growing industry.

Then in the 1950s, the implementation of PCBs in schools came through building materials. Construction of new schools was built using materials saturated with PCBs, and older schools were remodeled as well during this period. While there were around 55,000 new schools constructed during this era, the number of schools remodeled with PCB-contaminated materials remains unknown.

B. Current Stances

PCBs were addressed through legislation in the 1970s, when the largest producer, Monsanto, stopped making PCBs in 1976. Yet, while the legislation banned further use of PCBs, there was no official requirement for all schools to get tested. This meant there were gaps in PCB mitigation, leading to many schools today contaminated with PCBs. Thus, further legislation is required to ensure that PCB contamination will be eradicated in schools around the U.S.

IV. Policy Problem

A. Stakeholders

1) The primary stakeholders in this PCB issue are K-12 students, because they are mostly directly in contact with the contamination in schools. Students who reside in low-income areas or underfunded school systems are more affected due to older, less renovated schools that have a higher risk of containing PCBs. Students also lack awareness as PCBs are often not discussed as a possible risk when attending an older school.
2) In addition to students being the largest stakeholders, school districts and local governments also have major risks associated with PCB contamination. They bear the legal consequences if there is major sustained harm to students due to a lack of PCB testing or remediation. Staff and teachers would also be exposed to PCB contamination if it is present, endangering their health along with students. In general, these systems are all at stake for whether these current PCB mitigation policies are effective at protecting the students in these public schools.

B. Risks of Indifference

The lack of awareness or effort can lead to lifelong adverse health effects for students and teachers alike. With each year that schools are left without any testing or mitigation, it increases the number of students being exposed to this harmful contaminant during the developmental stages of their lives. The early neurological risks associated with PCB exposure include attention deficiency, memory loss, and low IQ. This can lead to losses or adverse harm to their academic performance, lifetime earnings, and long-term health expenditures.

Additionally, testing gaps based on school district funding enable long-term injustice. This indifference leaves underfunded schools at risk of facing expensive fines or legal consequences if students are detrimentally impacted by this lack of testing or mitigation.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

PCB exposure not only harms the students being directly exposed, it also leaves families and communities vulnerable to these drastic effects. It is imperative that non-partisan action be considered to protect children from toxic PCB exposure that is significant to the overall public health. Several non-partisan rationales can be considered:

1) Protecting students' health can have long-term economic benefits. Neurological impairment from PCB exposure can have detrimental effects on a child's ability to be productive in society. They are likely to be deficient in their lifetime earnings and rely on government-funded assistance programs to address the health issues they developed in adolescence. Prevention for these adverse health effects are much more cost-effective than later remediation.

2) Federal action will address the systemic inequities that have occurred between wealthy and under-resourced school districts. Providing equitable funding to schools that lack access to PCB testing can bridge these gaps that have developed over decades. Children should not be compromised based on a situation that they can't even control, which makes it a necessary issue for both the local and federal government to address.

V. Tried Policy

The major piece of legislation passed to address PCBs at the federal level is the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976. The EPA is required by the TSCA to regulate and address any usage of PCBs and in response, the EPA has banned any PCB manufacturing and required proper disposal of existing PCBs. However, the TSCA only prevented further production of PCBs and the application of them in school, but it didn't contain any federal mandate to require all schools to undergo proper PCB testing or mitigation. This often leaves the task at hand for schools to solve rather than providing sufficient assistance.

There have been successful efforts in some states for effectively eradicating PCBs in aging schools. For example, Vermont has taken eradication efforts by working with the EPA to promote testing for schools. One issue to note is that this was voluntary assistance by the state government without proper legislation being passed. This will most likely be ineffective at a national level as there will need to be a mandate to ensure proper and equitable application of funding and testing.

VI. Policy Options

Mandatory Federal PCB Testing Protocol for Schools

The most fundamental gap in the current policy framework is the absence of a federal requirement for schools to test for PCBs. Without baseline data, remediation cannot be prioritised, funded, or evaluated. I recommend that Congress enact legislation requiring all public school buildings constructed or significantly renovated before 1980 to conduct standardised PCB air quality and materials testing within a defined. Testing protocols should be standardised by the EPA and administered under the oversight of the agency's Office of Children's Health Protection. Results should be reported to state environmental agencies and disclosed to parents and school communities. Schools that test above defined action levels should be required to develop remediation plans. Oversight of compliance could be administered through the existing EPA enforcement infrastructure, reducing the need for new administrative departments. This option is implementable within existing regulatory frameworks and has relatively low costs at the federal level. The primary cost is testing, which can be phased and prioritised by building age and risk profile.

Dedicated Federal Remediation Fund for Low-Income Districts

Testing without funded remediation is an incomplete solution. Identifying PCB contamination and then leaving schools without the means to address it would cause harm, creating anxiety among parents and communities without a pathway to resolution. I therefore recommend the establishment of a dedicated federal grant program for PCB remediation in school buildings.

Critically, this fund should be distributed on an equity-weighted basis, prioritising school districts below defined income thresholds that lack the local fiscal capacity to self-fund remediation. This addresses the economic injustice of the problem directly. Wealthier districts that can already afford to act voluntarily should not receive the same federal subsidy as under-resourced districts that cannot.

While this will cost an estimated appropriation of 30 million, it is necessary to take measurable action.

VII. Conclusions

In this brief, I have examined the scope of PCB contamination in school buildings, its disproportionate impact on children in low-income and minority communities, the limitations of existing policy, and distinct policy options for federal action. Of these options, the most immediately impactful and implementable is a mandatory federal PCB testing protocol for pre-1980 school buildings, supplemented by a dedicated remediation fund weighted toward under-resourced districts.

PCBs are a known neurotoxicant and carcinogen and their presence in school buildings is a documented and measurable harm. The population most affected are students and is also the one least able to advocate for its own protection. The structural inequities of school funding in the United States ensure that, without federal intervention, the schools most likely to have PCB contamination are least likely to have the resources to address it.

We have a long way to go before every child attends a public school in a building free of toxic chemical contamination. However, by focussing on evidence-based policy, equitable resource distribution, and transparent disclosure, these barriers can be systematically dismantled.

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