

Bronx New School closed because of years-old toxic chemicals that made students sick

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Willie Anderson/News

Tests at the Bronx New School revealed unsafe levels of several toxic chemicals, including one possible carcinogen.

The air at a [North Bronx](#) school may have been contaminated by dangerous chemicals for as long as 20 years.

Officials closed the [Bronx New School](#) at 3200 Jerome Ave. after repeated air monitoring tests since January revealed unsafe levels of several toxic chemicals, especially trichloroethylene (TCE), which is a possible carcinogen.

At an emotional meeting before several hundred parents of the school last night [Dennis Walcott](#) announced that the new location will be at a former Catholic school, [Saint Martin of Tours](#) more than two miles away.

Walcott called this "a highly unusual situation" and promised to do everything possible to facilitate a transition to the new location. Several angry parents told Walcott that children have been complaining of headaches, nausea and other illnesses for years. A thorough investigation of possible health effects on teachers and students is called for, something that Walcott did not commit to do.

Still unanswered is why the contamination was not discovered sooner.

This week, I asked [Walter Hang](#) of [Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting Inc.](#), to do a quick hazardous waste profile of the school's site and the blocks around it.

Hang's firm compiles such information from scores of state and federal environmental monitoring agencies. It then issues site-specific reports for businesses and local governments that want to guard against potential dangers before buying a property.

Within 24 hours, Toxics Targeting produced for me a 241-page report on the Bronx New School, also known as Public School 51.

The two-story building was a factory and industrial warehouse for more than 70 years before the old Board of Education leased and renovated it back in 1991.

One of the building's previous occupants was [Nessen Lamps Inc.](#) In 1987, Hang found, Nessen reported to the state's Department of Environmental Conservation generating 130 gallons of "spent halogenated solvents used in degreasing." Solvents like TCE.

The previous year, Nessen reported generating 218 gallons of "halogenated solvents."

In other words, the very toxic chemical that school officials suddenly discovered at more than 10 times safety levels in the building's air had been used at that site back in the 1980s.

Nessen wasn't the only neighborhood company that reported using such solvents. So did a city water pumping station across the street, and the Transit Authority's Jerome Ave. train yard, which is less than 500 feet from the school.

If it only takes a few hours to identify these potential chemical dangers, why did it take education officials 20 years to even check the air?

The agency, after all, was paying top dollar to rent the building from its owners, the Rinzler Family Partnership.

Last year, the DOE paid \$506,000 in rent for the 18,500 square-foot building. That works out to nearly \$28 per square foot, an astonishing rate for a [Bronx](#) factory. Plus, the DOE paid for all renovations and utilities, and its lease absolved the landlord from paying any property taxes.

[Bradley Rinzler](#), the firm's executive vice president, did not return calls for comment.

There's no excuse, given the site's industrial history, for the DOE's failure to even check the air until now.

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