

# Annual lead water testing in schools will become mandatory, minister says

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B.C. school districts won't be allowed to ignore annual watertesting reminders from government unless they can prove that lead in school drinking water isn't a health concern in their schools, says the education minister.

Mike Bernier said Tuesday that the province's 60 school districts will be expected to comply with new annual testing, which he first announced Saturday in a Vancouver Sun story that showed at least one-quarter of districts so far have reported higher-than-safe levels of lead in at least one water source.

"We expect all districts to test or provide details on what indications they have that testing is not needed such as age of facilities, local water conditions, advice from the local health authority," Bernier said in a statement.

The ministry sent out its first letter to school districts in February. That has prompted a flurry of testing by districts, some of which had rarely examined the safety of their drinking water.

Health experts say even small amounts of lead can cause behaviour and intellectual problems in children, while larger amounts can have serious and potentially permanent side-effects and even cause death.

Still, not every district took action on the government's first letter.

For example, the Nanaimo school district — which does not regularly test for lead in any of its schools on the municipal water system — appeared to do nothing in response to the government's letter. Bernier said "we will continue following up with those very few districts who have yet to report back" recent test results to the province.

The B.C. government will also develop a standardized way of gathering data from school districts, after The Sun's survey showed widespread confusion and misunderstanding by districts on the required frequency of testing and public reporting of results.

"We will compile the results — and we will develop standard questions so that information received from districts is consistent," said Bernier. "We will also establish a deadline for reports back to the ministry."

The Opposition NDP has called on government to increase funding for cash-strapped school districts so they can afford water quality testing. Bernier has rejected the suggestion.

A lead water test costs \$25.50 at Richmond-based Caro Analytical Services, and the province is not requiring districts to test every fountain, sink and tap in every school but rather a representative sample of its facility water sources.

"We provide the school districts with \$110 million in annual facilities grants, which is intended for maintaining schools, including this type of testing," said Bernier.