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E.P.A. Rejects City Timeline on PCBs

By **MIREYA NAVARRO**

New York City's 10-year plan to identify and replace school-building light fixtures that are leaking toxic chemicals should be handled in a speedier and more comprehensive fashion, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) said Friday.

Federal officials initially praised the city for taking a step in the right direction when it announced its plan last month as part of a wider energy efficiency effort. But the E.P.A. is rejecting the city's timeline of 10 years and pushing for a shorter time frame, although how much shorter is still a subject of discussions with the city, said [Judith Enck](#), the agency's regional administrator in New York.

"Ten years is too long," Ms. Enck said in an interview Friday. "From our inspections, we've found that there's a problem with leaking light ballasts, and I'd be concerned with the problem lingering for a long period of time."

The issue of replacing old fluorescent light fixtures has become a pressing one for the city since a pilot study that began last year identified leaking lighting ballasts as a major source of high levels of the toxic chemical compounds known as PCBs in air samples taken from schools. Subsequent spot inspections of schools by the E.P.A. this year found that the problem appeared to be pervasive in the school system. The city could face civil penalties if it does not properly address the PCB contamination.

Under pressure from both federal officials and worried parents, city officials announced in February that they would allocate \$702 million to replace light fixtures in nearly 800 school buildings as part of a broader effort that would involve other energy efficiency upgrades. But the plan immediately drew criticism from school advocates who said that eliminating the PCB contamination was too urgent to wait a decade to complete.

On Friday, most members of the City Council added their voices to the criticism, calling a news conference and sending a letter to Ms. Enck asking her to insist that the lights be replaced within two years. The letter was signed by 41 of the 51 council members.

“This is something that has brought the Council together,” said **Julissa Ferreras**, a councilwoman from Corona, Queens. “This is a health hazard.”

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are probable human carcinogens widely used in building materials before a federal ban in the late 1970s. Health experts say that while the excessive PCB levels discovered in light fixtures and caulk around windows do not pose an immediate health risk, the likelihood that the chemicals could prove harmful increases the longer exposure persists.

Under the city’s plan, the first buildings to be addressed would be those with visually apparent leaks and the oldest elementary schools. Since January, the city’s Department of Education has asked custodians to inspect old light fixtures in their schools and report any leaks so that the lights are removed.

But Ms. Enck said, “We don’t think that’s robust enough.”

As an example, she said custodial staffs recently reported leaking ballasts at only 26 schools in a one-month period and missed Public School 306 in Brooklyn, where an E.P.A. spot inspection found that of 31 samples taken from classrooms, 25 had some of the highest PCB levels detected yet above the federal regulatory limit.

“That school didn’t appear on the list of schools that janitors reported as a problem,” Ms. Enck he said. “I’m not sure they’re looking closely enough.”

She said the city should “comprehensively look for leaking ballasts and if you find them, remove them right away.”

Barbara Morgan, a spokeswoman for the Department of Education, said the city was standing by its plan as “a fiscally responsible approach to addressing the issue of PCBs in our schools.”

“The plan can be accomplished without disrupting student learning,” she said in a statement. “And it will generate significant energy savings for the city and taxpayers in the long run.”

