

Milwaukee Public Schools Lead Crisis

In **January 2025**, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) became the center of a major public health crisis after a student at **Golda Meir Lower Campus** tested positive for elevated blood lead levels. The Milwaukee Health Department traced the exposure directly to conditions inside the school building. This discovery triggered an emergency response that city and district leaders described as unprecedented for Milwaukee and rare nationally.

Following the initial case, health officials expanded inspections to other MPS buildings. Investigators found **lead dust and deteriorating paint** in multiple schools, particularly those built before **1978**, when lead-based paint was banned. Media coverage throughout the winter and spring showed peeling, chipping, and cracking paint across classrooms, hallways, and common areas. The findings revealed years of deferred maintenance rather than an isolated incident.

As testing continued, students at **six schools** were temporarily relocated to allow for cleaning and stabilization. Parents expressed fear and anger, while educators and education support professionals reported confusion and concern about working conditions and long-term health risks.

By summer 2025, MPS leadership determined that any school built before 1978 had the potential for lead exposure. Out of approximately **158 schools**, about **101 buildings** met that criteria. Once schools closed for the summer, the district launched a district-wide lead paint stabilization and cleaning effort.

The first phase focused on the oldest buildings, many constructed before 1950. In some schools, nearly every painted surface required remediation. After repainting, buildings underwent extensive cleaning and **analytic wipe testing**, with the Milwaukee Health Department requiring lead dust levels below **10 parts per billion** before a school could reopen. District officials noted that this standard was extremely difficult to meet.

By the **first week of the school year**, roughly **50 schools** had passed clearance and reopened. The second phase addressed schools built between **1950 and 1978**, where lead-based paint was less common but still present. This work was largely completed during evenings and weekends and cleared by **late November**, with **Congress Elementary School** being the final site completed just before Thanksgiving.

In **late 2025**, health officials announced a major milestone: **99 high-priority MPS buildings** had received clearance following lead paint stabilization, ahead of a December 31 deadline. The work required the cleaning and repainting of approximately **2,700 classrooms**.

The cost of the project far exceeded early estimates. Initial projections of **\$25 million** ultimately grew to approximately **\$43–45 million**, funded through the district's construction and deferred maintenance fund rather than its general operating budget.

Superintendent **Brenda Cassellius** publicly apologized for the conditions uncovered during the crisis and committed to preventing a similar situation in the future. MPS announced several changes, including the hiring of **39 additional custodial staff** and **four new operations managers**, expanded training for facilities staff, and increased school board oversight through regular reporting on building conditions.