Schools: Water is safe for children

Most plumbing systems were upgraded through Measure K, district administrator says.

By Max Zimbert
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GLENDALE — Drinking water at schools within the Glendale Unified School District is safe.

Though an Associated Press report last month uncovered unsafe levels of lead, pesticides and dozens of other toxins in public and private schools, local schools haven’t had a problem.

“It’s a general problem all over the country and depends on whether you’re taking the water from wells or from the city itself,” said Massoud Pirbazari, an engineering professor and the environmental engineering program director at USC.

Metropolitan Water District, which supplies 70% of Glendale’s water supply, is one of the better utilities in the country, Pirbazari said. The remaining 30% comes from groundwater within city limits.

“If schools are taking water from the system, there should be no problem,” he said. “But when it comes to somebody’s home or school, it’s difficult to regulate because there’s old plumbing and so on.”

Like any business or residence in the city, Glendale public schools get their drinking water from Glendale Water & Power, said Daniel Askenaizer, the water quality manager at Glendale Water & Power.

New and upgraded plumbing systems were installed at many school sites through Measure K, a $186-million bond approved by voters in 1997, said Scott Price, Glendale Unified’s business services administrator.

“Is it all done? In the last 10 years, we haven’t replaced everything,” he said. “But if there are any trouble spots or if we have any questions or issues, we replace it. I wish we had the funds to replace everything, but we don’t.”

The AP report found contamination to be most apparent at schools that operate their own wells, but there are no similar schools within the Glendale district. Campuses in the Crescenta Valley draw their water from Crescenta Valley Water District, which mixes about 60% groundwater with about 40% that’s purchased from Foothill Municipal Water District. Foothill, in turn, gets its water from Metropolitan.

Water providers in Glendale and the Crescenta Valley said they were unaware of any private school that derives water from a private well.

From 1998 to 2008, 100 school districts and 2,250 schools breached federal drinking water standards. California led the nation in the most violations at 612, followed by Ohio with 451 and Maine with 417, according to the AP.
Schools that draw water from public utilities also showed contamination, especially in older buildings or in schools with lead-soldered pipes, the AP reported.

The district brought in a state-certified private environmental water testing company in May 2008 to test school water supplies and received a clean bill of health.

“Usually, when we don’t hear of any problems, we’re usually going along OK, but as soon as someone reports something, we get someone out there immediately and test,” Price said.

Hiring an outside company is among the most proactive measures that schools, businesses and homeowners can take, and it is relatively inexpensive, Pirbazari said.

“Especially nowadays, it’s tough to redo plumbing,” he said.

In the event of a severe problem, district officials said they would bring in bottled water.

The most frequently cited contaminant was coliform bacteria, followed by lead and copper, arsenic and nitrates, the AP reported.

Lead and copper can be problematic for buildings or schools with an older plumbing system. Children or adults with impaired immune systems can be more vulnerable to disease from contaminated water, authorities said.

“Children’s immune systems are not fully formed so they may be more susceptible to virus,” Pirbazari said.

City regulators test water on varying schedules, depending on which mineral or contaminant is targeted. Glendale Water & Power released its most recent quarterly report last summer and highlighted the level of chromium 6, which remains below state and federal guidelines.

Groundwater and surface water are vulnerable to contamination, but officials said there are measures to ensure safety before it reaches the tap.

“Surface water is susceptible to runoff, so potentially it can pick up contaminants from runoff as it travels hundreds of miles, but it’s treated and tested before it leaves the [Metropolitan Water District] plants,” Askenaizer said. “Groundwater can be vulnerable to a different kind of contamination . . . [but] we have a treatment plant with aeration and carbon to take those chemicals out before it goes into our system.”

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