



(Photo: Malibu Unites/Facebook)

TAKEPART FEATURES

The Toxic Schools of Malibu...and New York...and Lexington, Mass.,...and Maybe Your Town Too

Cancer-causing PCBs were widely used in building materials for decades. Whether anyone bothers to look for them at your kids' school, and what happens next, is mainly an accident of geography.

MAR 27, 2015



Los Angeles-based Kenneth Miller has written for *Time*, *Discover*, *Mother Jones*, *Rolling Stone*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, and many other publications.



Beyond the velvet rope at Malibu's Trancas Country Market, whose name and weathered wood exterior attempt to conceal the fact that it's a mini-mall, supermodel Cindy Crawford is hosting a fundraiser. She just walked in with her husband, restaurateur Rande Gerber. Evenings can get chilly along the California coast, and heat lamps cast a glow on Crawford and her guests as they nibble tiny portions of gluten-free pizza. The women display a dazzling variety of silks, sequins, and red-carpet bling, while the men are uniformed in boutique-label jeans and sleek sport coats. Waiters balance trays of bubbly, and high school kids peddle boxes of artisanal chocolate at \$100 a pop.

The media has been barred from the event, so a handful of reporters loiter outside as arrivals register their credit cards at the auction table (a day at a local spa: \$1,000; a week at a Jamaican villa: \$18,500), pose before a photo backdrop, and sweep fragrantly past.

Aside from Crawford and her husband, I don't recognize anyone *TMZ*-worthy. But that's not why I've come to this town known for its sunshine, beaches, celebrity residents, and aura of outdoorsy opulence. Tonight's benefit is for Malibu Unites—which, in an indication of its ambition, has since been renamed America Unites for Kids. The group is at the vanguard of a nascent movement to remove some nasty toxins from schools across the country. I'm hoping to meet one of the organization's leaders, a woman named Beth Lucas, whose fears for her son's safety helped spark an uprising in this normally tranquil community.

Lucas's son, like Crawford's, attended Malibu High School, which shares a campus with Malibu Middle School and Juan Cabrillo Elementary School on a palm-studded hillside overlooking the beach where they filmed *Baywatch*. As befits one of America's wealthiest small towns (pop. 12,645; per capita income \$95,615), the schools are known for their academic excellence and top-flight extracurriculars. Not everyone in Malibu is rich, to be sure, and for families unable or unwilling to pay for private education, these public institutions have long provided an attractive alternative.

Together, they serve about 1,400 students.

Over the past year and a half, though, dozens of parents have been yanking their kids from the three schools. Crawford and Gerber withdrew their 15-year-old son and 13-

year-old daughter. Actors Joshua Malina (*Scandal*, *The West Wing*), Ricky Schroder (*24*, *NYPD Blue*), and Anson Williams (*Happy Days*) did the same with their children. And the exodus is hardly limited to celebs: More than 40 families have fled. There have been protest rallies in the parking lot, shouting matches at school board meetings. A lawsuit was filed March 23.

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Beth Lucas now home schools her son, Christian, after he developed health problems his doctor believed might be related to toxic contamination at his school.

(Photo: Larry Hirshowitz)

What's roiling Malibu is a class of chemical compounds known as **polychlorinated biphenyls**. For decades, until the Environmental Protection Agency banned them in 1979, PCBs were widely used in paints, plastics, sealants, fluorescent light fixtures, and

countless other products. Extremely stable and persistent, they're still lurking in tens of thousands of buildings nationwide, including an estimated one-third of schools constructed between the early '50s and the late '70s.

Long-term exposure to PCBs is associated with a panoply of ills, including cancer, endocrine disorders, and reproductive troubles. The compounds have also been linked to cognitive and behavioral problems in children. "They affect almost every organ system in the body," says David O. Carpenter, MD, director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at SUNY Albany, who has led several studies of populations heavily exposed to PCBs. "These are very, very dangerous chemicals."

The question is what to do about them. A growing number of school districts, mostly in the Northeast, have been grappling with that dilemma since a Harvard researcher and a construction worker teamed up to search for them a decade ago. But the vast majority of U.S. schools have never even been inspected for PCBs, and the EPA has failed to set a consistent policy for how to proceed if the chemicals are found. Whether anyone bothers to look for the hazardous substances at your kids' school, and what happens next, is mainly an accident of geography.

You might imagine that in eco-luxe Malibu—where even at the roadside seafood shacks, the parking lots brim with Teslas—PCBs would have been eradicated from classrooms long ago.

If that were the case, however, those celebs' kids would not be changing schools. Residents who can't afford to go private wouldn't be agonizing over sending their kids to a campus where five teachers have recently been diagnosed with a

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form of cancer that, in the general population, strikes one person in 10,000 per year. And Beth Lucas would not be homeschooling her son, Christian.



“If the system can’t fix a problem in Malibu, California,” says Hugh Kaufman, a senior

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policy analyst at the EPA, “the system is hopeless for places like Louisiana, Arkansas, or rural Ohio, where they don’t have money and they’re not necessarily as environmentally aware. And what I’m finding is that the system isn’t working in Malibu.”

Lucas, 52, is not one of the fancier Malibuites. A few days after the fundraiser, I visit her at home. A divorced full-time mother from Columbus, Ohio, the trim blond is wearing Ugg boots and a cotton sweater when she welcomes me into the modest ranch-style house, on a bluff above the sea, where she’s raising two kids on her own.

Christian, a fair-haired 16-year-old, joins us as Beth tells his story. At age seven, he was diagnosed with a medulloblastoma, a type of brain tumor that can begin growing before birth; surgery, chemo, and radiation therapy saved his life. Because his thyroid was damaged in the process, he would need daily doses of synthetic hormone to help regulate his metabolism. Like many cancer survivors, he would also be more vulnerable to new tumors. But by his teens, he was otherwise healthy.

Then, as an eighth grader at Malibu Middle School, Christian developed severe migraines, which often kept him bedridden for days. He began needing ever-increasing doses of hormone substitute. In ninth grade the PCB scandal broke. Beth learned the chemicals could cause migraines and thyroid disorders; she worried that

they might bring back Christian's cancer as well. Still, she wasn't ready to withdraw him—she hoped those in charge would move quickly to protect students from exposure and clean up the contamination. That's what had happened at some other schools she'd heard about, back East.

We shouldn't have to pull our kids out of school. It makes me angry.

BETH LUCAS, MOTHER OF TWO MALIBU STUDENTS

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By the start of 10th grade, however, Beth's anxiety had only grown. The school had done little in the way of cleanup. Christian's endocrinologist was unhappy, too. The presence of PCBs “is a potential health risk to children,” the doctor wrote to school officials. “For Christian, however, the risk is much greater... I strongly advise that he leave Malibu High School.”

Last September, Beth brought her boy home. Now enrolled in an online program, he's back to a low dose of thyroid hormone, and his headaches have vanished. “There are pros and cons,” he says of the new arrangement. “It's harder to hang out with people. On the pro side, there's no homework.”

Beth's concerns are political as well as practical. “We shouldn't have to pull our kids out of school,” she says. “It makes me angry that the district has put us in this position.”

Christian is far from the only student who has suffered health problems that may be traceable to PCBs on the Malibu campus. Many teachers have also been stricken. In at least 17 classrooms, PCB levels are above the federal limit. But whether ailments result from toxic exposure, let alone exposure to a particular toxin, is difficult to prove. Local school officials and the regional EPA insist that students, teachers, and parents have nothing to fret about.

EPA leadership in Washington is staying out of the fight. So what's happening in Malibu could easily happen in your town too.

PCBs were first synthesized in 1881. By the 1930s, they were turning up in everything

from electrical insulation to copy paper. For decades, their sole manufacturer in the U.S. was [Monsanto](#), which to a large extent built itself into a global powerhouse on the back of the product.

But as early as 1933, medical journals were reporting severe illness in some people who [worked with PCBs](#) and in family members who handled their clothing. The public paid little attention until 1968, when 14,000 Japanese who ate PCB-contaminated rice bran oil developed what came to be known as *yusho* disease. Along with chloracne—a disfiguring rash of cysts and pustules—victims suffered eye damage, nerve pain, weakened immune systems, and severe fatigue; many would never recover. Babies exposed in utero often developed deformed skulls. Tests of children who'd been exposed prenatally showed impaired reflexes, lower IQs, and higher rates of [ADHD](#).

In 1976, Congress passed the Toxic Substances Control Act, known as TSCA, whose regulations included a ban on the domestic manufacture of PCBs; after a three-year phase-out, their use would be permitted only in closed systems such as electrical transformers and vacuum pumps. Other countries soon followed suit. Nonetheless, by then traces could be found in the bodies of virtually every animal on Earth, passed up through the food chain. (To this day, U.S. chemical manufacturers don't have to prove safety before introducing a product to market, which is not how they do it [in Europe](#).) Now, most of us ingest a tiny amount with each meal. Cleanup efforts focused on the [obvious disaster areas](#)—sites where PCBs had been manufactured, dumped, or spilled in large quantities. Few experts gave much thought to the chemicals' lingering presence in buildings; it simply hadn't occurred to them.



Cindy Crawford speaks at a rally for Malibu Unites, which has since been renamed America Unites for Kids, at the Malibu Library on Aug. 12, 2014. (Photo: YouTube)

That began to change in the '90s, when European investigators found elevated levels of PCBs in air and dust in many structures, tracing them to window caulk and other sealants. In schools containing PCB caulk, the compounds also appeared at abnormally high levels in the blood of teachers and students. In 2003, Robert Herrick, a researcher at the Harvard School of Public Health, read a paper describing [Finland's](#) successful campaign to remove such caulk from most of the country's buildings. Curious about the extent of the problem in the U.S., Herrick called an old friend—George Weymouth, a construction-safety specialist for the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers who had spent three decades as a waterproofer.

In his earlier career, Weymouth had applied sealants to hundreds of Boston-area buildings, from split-levels to skyscrapers. Back then, PCB caulk was renowned for its workability and longevity. "It was a Cadillac material," he says. "The best stuff on the market." Now he regretted having helped make the stuff ubiquitous. So when Herrick asked him to dig out a few samples from some of the structures he'd worked on, Weymouth was happy to oblige. With a small knife, he cut slivers of caulk from the outside of 24 buildings. Thirteen samples tested positive for PCBs—and eight contained more than 50 parts per million, the level beyond which [TSCA](#) deems substances illegal. Several came from schools.

Herrick was alarmed. “If you’ve got buildings full of developing humans who are susceptible to these disruptive chemicals,” he says, “how can you not be persuaded that you need to reduce that source of exposure?” Finland didn’t hesitate; why was America continuing to expose its schoolkids to substances that could cause cognitive problems and cancer? But when he published his results in a scholarly journal in 2004, few outside the field of environmental health took much notice.

One exception was Daniel Lefkowitz, a podiatrist in Yorktown Heights, New York, who read about Herrick’s and Weymouth’s discoveries in a news item. Lefkowitz took caulk samples from his son’s elementary school and had them tested for PCBs. When they came back hot, he called the county health department and the EPA, resulting in the first PCB remediation in a U.S. school. Then he tracked down Weymouth, suggesting they do some sleuthing in New York City. Weymouth drove in from Boston, and the pair took caulk samples at several schools in the Bronx. Many tested high. Lefkowitz called a reporter at the *Daily News*, who went on to sample schools throughout the city. Some showed levels thousands of times above the TSCA cutoff. Bowing to a lawsuit by a Bronx mother and pressure from the EPA, municipal officials agreed to test every [New York City school](#) built during the era when the chemicals were used—about 800 in all.

In 2009, the EPA publicly addressed the issue of PCB caulk in buildings nationwide for the first time. If air levels remained high after ventilation systems and exposed surfaces were cleaned, the agency advised, “caulk and other known sources of PCBs... should be removed as soon as practicable.”

In cash-strapped school systems across the country, this pronouncement was studiously ignored. But in Lexington, Massachusetts, the eco-conscious Boston suburb where I grew up, town officials ordered inspections of all public buildings. Air tests in classrooms at my old grade school, Joseph Estabrook Elementary, were worrying; testing of building materials found PCB levels above 50 ppm.

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The district acted quickly, moving the youngest and most vulnerable students out of the most contaminated classrooms, sealing off tainted walls, and bringing in workers to remove whatever PCB sources they could. The school was cleaned and retested constantly, but eventually Lexington officials and EPA regional administrators decided it was a Sisyphean battle. PCBs can be absorbed into materials far from their original source, and over the long haul, eliminating such secondary sources can be ruinously expensive.

So Lexington built a new school. Construction was completed in February 2014, and Estabrook's 450 students relocated to the \$43 million facility. My old school became the first in the U.S. to be torn down because of PCB contamination.

These days, I live just a few miles from Malibu, where the official response to the discovery of PCBs in its schools has been at the opposite end of the spectrum. That wide variance reflects the EPA's startling inconsistency when it comes to protecting kids and teachers from PCBs.

The facilities are surprisingly unglamorous. Malibu High School is a scattering of brick and concrete boxes that would look at home in any middle-class town. Aside from two additions built in 2003, the buildings are five decades old, and they're not particularly well preserved. To its west is Juan Cabrillo Elementary School, consisting of several cinderblock structures amid an asphalt yard. Behind the high school is Malibu Middle School, housed in a single-story structure (vintage 1963) known as Building E.

That's where the trouble began. In September 2013, a middle school English and theater teacher named Brigitte Leonard returned from summer vacation to find her classroom covered in dirt. Leonard, then 44, had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer a

few months before; after undergoing a distressing and painful thyroidectomy, she'd spent the summer getting radiation treatment. As she stared at the mess left by workers laying cable beneath the floor, a passing colleague called out, "Did they test to see if it was toxic?"

Leonard asked what she meant. The teacher reminded her of another excavation, in 2011, when crews trucked away some 1,200 cubic yards of dirt from the quad outside. At the time, school officials announced only that it was for a construction project; no further explanation was given. But a worker told the teacher that the real reason the dirt had to be removed was toxic contamination.

Leonard attended Juan Cabrillo Elementary and spent 15 years working at Malibu Middle School. "I've been on that campus almost all my life," she tells me over coffee at a nearby Starbucks. Since her teens, she had suffered from frequent respiratory illnesses and bouts of fatigue. She was diagnosed with benign thyroid nodules in her 30s. Then she began having debilitating migraines and blood-pressure spikes. Another teacher in Building E came down with thyroid cancer, leading Leonard to schedule the checkup that led to her own diagnosis. Could these ailments be connected to whatever poisons were in those truckloads of soil? And could some of those poisons still be on campus?

Leonard began quizzing other middle school teachers about their health. Of the 21 she asked, almost all reported problems. There was another case of thyroid cancer—the third diagnosis in seven months. One colleague said she'd been treated for bladder cancer two years earlier. Three more had thyroid dysfunction, seven had migraines, one had asthma, and one had unexplained rashes. The list went on. For several sufferers, symptoms abated during school vacations.

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Leonard and another teacher wrote a letter to district officials enumerating the illnesses and asking for environmental tests of suspected trouble spots. Someone leaked the letter to the media, along with official documents showing that the construction worker who spoke to Leonard's colleague was right: The quad had been contaminated with a host of toxins (some possibly left over from military testing in the area during World War II), including lead, arsenic, benzene, pesticides, and PCBs. The story broke during the first week of October 2013. Reporters swarmed the campus. The school board held a town meeting, where some 350 parents demanded answers. Beth Lucas asked the crowd how many of their children had migraines. She recalls that gasps could be heard when around 70 percent raised their hands.

A few of them went on to form a group called Malibu Parents for Healthy Schools. One founding member was Cassandra Wiseman, a writer and mother of three whose youngest son had suffered from breathing problems, fevers, and facial rashes in middle school—all of which disappeared in ninth grade, when he moved to the recently constructed high school building. She happened to have a friend at the EPA in Washington: Hugh Kaufman, the senior policy analyst—and the agency's resident gadfly. Kaufman helped write the TSCA rules in the '70s, and blew the whistle on agency missteps during cleanups ranging from Love Canal to the [Gulf oil spill of 2010](#). He became the parents' unofficial adviser, urging them to call for testing of the entire campus.

The board of the Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District (which also serves the much larger city of Santa Monica) initially seemed sympathetic. At the town meeting, Superintendent Sandra Lyon teared up while promising to address parents' concerns. All children in Building E were moved to classrooms at Juan Cabrillo or the high school. The school board created a community task force on the issue that included one teacher and several parents. The board hired an environmental consulting firm, the Phylmar Group, which began conducting air tests for PCBs in 10 randomly selected classrooms. The task force agreed that further action would be warranted in any room with air levels above 20 nanograms per cubic meter, a figure based on calculations of a one-in-one-million risk of cancer. (Air samples are measured in nanograms per cubic meter of air; "parts per million" refers to the amount in source

material.)



Example of decaying caulk and paint with evidence of PCBs.

(Photo: EPA.gov)

But distrust set in quickly when parents and teachers learned that Phylmar’s managing principal, Mark Katchen, had served as an expert for the defense in a suit over a cancer cluster allegedly caused by oil wells on the campus of Beverly Hills High School. Suspicion intensified when Katchen raised the actionable level for airborne PCBs to 100 nanograms per cubic meter at an “emergency” task force meeting that only school officials attended. Air in the library and three classrooms (including Brigitte Leonard’s) had tested over 20 nanograms, but Superintendent Lyon posted a letter on the district website claiming that the test results “fall well below risk guidelines.” Activists howled. The very next day, tests from those rooms showed the caulk contained more than 50 ppm PCBs—the level at which TSCA requires the EPA to get involved.

Malibu was the first school in the Far West to test above the limit, and has been regarded as a test case for how other districts might react—or be forced to comply.

At first, it seemed the West Coast feds would be as tough as their colleagues in New York and Lexington had been. In November 2013, the EPA’s regional headquarters in San Francisco sent Lyon a letter outlining the requirements for a cleanup plan, which included removing sources of PCBs wherever they were found. But Katchen seemed to

go out of his way *not* to find more PCBs, often testing classrooms with the windows open—against EPA protocol. “You’re supposed to test with windows closed, because that’s the worst-case scenario,” Hugh Kaufman explains. And Katchen did no further tests of caulk or other potential sources. (He declined TakePart’s request for comment.)

Meanwhile, the school board mostly seemed intent on limiting public access and dialogue. The contamination issue was never placed on the agenda at a board meeting until March 2015; before then, parents could address the topic only during the comment period at the end of each session. In March 2014 the board brought in a new environmental consulting firm, Environ, whose method was to clean classrooms before testing, and then re-clean and re-test if air levels read high. That practice creates a false sense of safety, Kaufman argues, because air levels can rise again within days. When the company sent a remediation plan to the EPA in June, it was so vague the agency sent it back for revisions (though Environ, in a statement, said that “the framework of [its] approach is based on EPA best practices and research”).

Later that month, EPA Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld came to tour the campus. At a meeting with community members, someone asked him if the schools were safe. “No,” Blumenfeld answered. “Our goal is to do further air testing to make sure we can answer that question more accurately.” Any material found to exceed the TSCA limit of 50 ppm PCBs, he promised, would be removed.

Then he added something that shocked the activists: “Let’s be very clear. I’m not saying that we test all the caulk in all the classrooms.”

You’ve got little kids in classrooms, and they touch everything, so there were some serious concerns.

MARGARET COPPE, LEXINGTON, MASS. SCHOOL COMMITTEE

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Blumenfeld had hit on the central ambiguity of TSCA’s PCB regulations: If you find material that tests above 50 ppm, you have to get rid of it. But if you only *suspect* that a material exceeds the limit, the rules don’t say you have to test it. Critics call this an environmental version of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” It’s an incentive, they say, to do

nothing.

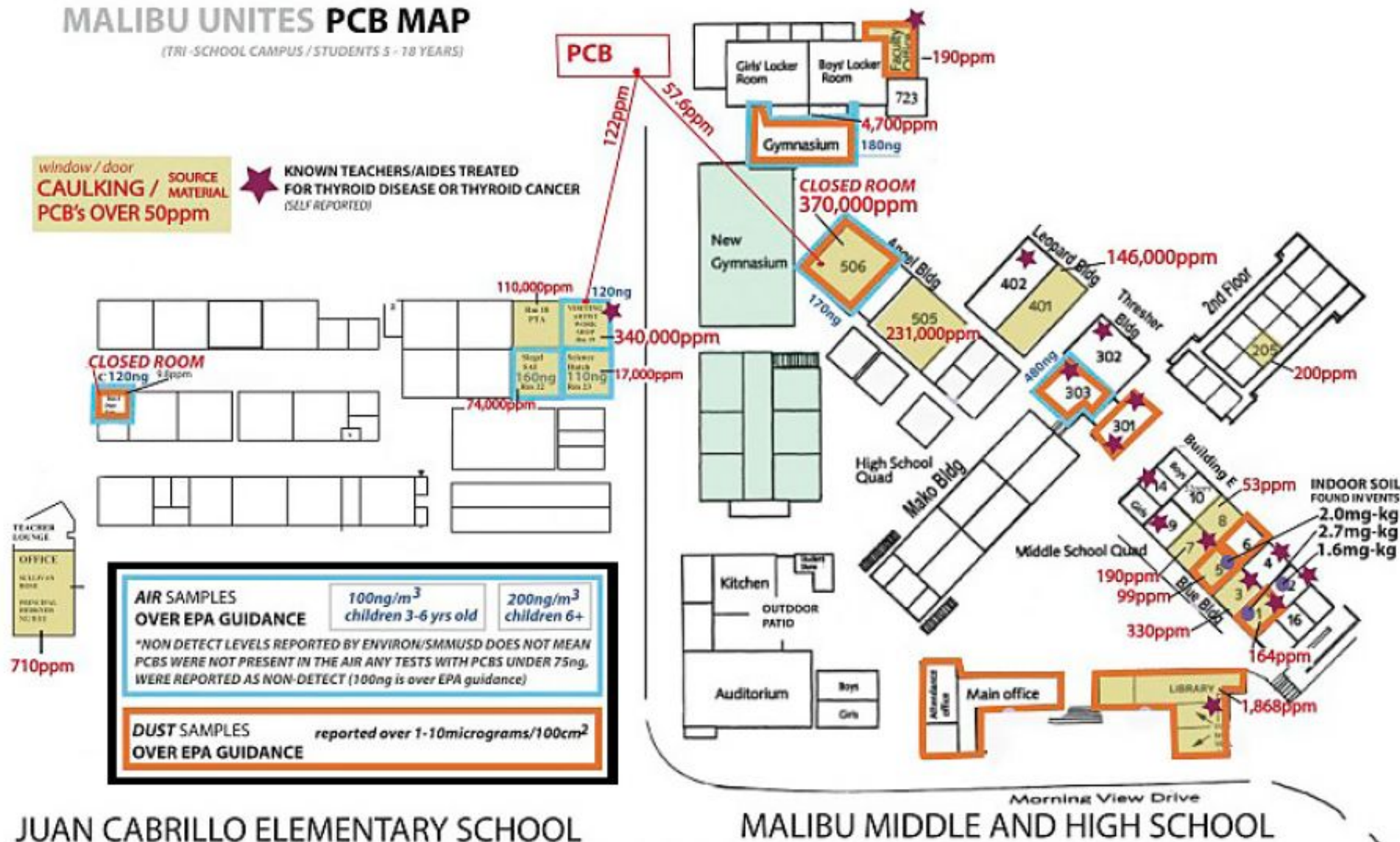
The activists decided to take matters into their own hands—literally. They collected caulk and dirt samples from all around the campus, delivering them to an independent environmental consultant who tested them in an EPA-certified lab. The first results showed levels above 50 ppm in three of the four classrooms tested. One of the worst spots was a room at Juan Cabrillo Elementary that the district had never tested—and to which it had moved students from the middle school, purportedly for their safety.

In a statement, Superintendent Lyon lambasted her opponents for bringing their findings to the media before presenting them to the district. The samples were gathered “surreptitiously,” she complained, and “released in a manner that was most certainly designed to incite concerns.”

The public-relations fight continued to escalate. On Aug. 19, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a D.C.-based legal-advocacy organization that had signed up nearly half the faculty at the three schools, and Malibu Unites, which had absorbed Malibu Parents for Healthy Schools, filed a notice of intent to sue the school board and the EPA for failure to comply with TSCA. That same day, Cindy Crawford announced on *The Today Show* that she was pulling her children. “I don’t feel 100 percent safe,” she said. “I look 10 years down the line. What if, God forbid, my kid had a problem? How could I live with myself?” She offered to pay for testing at all the district’s schools.

MALIBU UNITES PCB MAP

(TRI-SCHOOL CAMPUS / STUDENTS 5 - 18 YEARS)



The group fighting the Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District over its handling of PCB contamination in some school buildings produced this map, which it says shows the correlation between incidents of illness among teachers and high levels of PCBs in some classrooms. (Map: Courtesy MalibuUnites.org)

But the district wasn't interested. Lyon issued a statement declaring that "using federal EPA standards, our schools are safe for students and employees." The EPA backed her up, saying the district's latest plan, which involved removing caulk only in the four classrooms that Katchen had tested, and taking periodic air and dust samples, "addresses the human exposure pathways of greatest concern, namely air, dust and soil." Unless further problems emerged, the agency added, "EPA does not recommend additional testing of caulk."

Yet more health problems were coming to light. Malibu Unites tracked down two more teachers with thyroid cancer (one a retiree who'd been diagnosed two years earlier) and three alumni from the classes of 2002 and 2003. Another dozen teachers with noncancerous thyroid problems had also stepped forward. Independent tests showed elevated PCB levels in four more rooms. The group published a map of the

school, showing the PCB levels in every room that had been tested, with red stars marking all known cases of thyroid disease. The stars closely tracked the highest numbers.

As the evidence trickled in, Malibu Unites and PEER began to gain some ground. Shortly before Christmas, the EPA bulked up its requirements slightly—the district would now have to remove all caulk known to contain PCBs over 50 ppm, including in the independently tested rooms. But no further sources were to be tested, and the activists remained unsatisfied. “Federal law requires a full investigation and removal of PCBs when they’re found on campus,” says Malibu Unites President Jennifer deNicola, an actor and a mother of two—an interpretation so different from the district’s that it seems to underline the law’s lack of clarity. “Children in each classroom deserve the same level of safety from exposure.”

Responding to a request for comment, Superintendent Lyon’s office emailed this statement: “The Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District is committed to ensuring the safety of our schools, students, and staff, and has worked at the direction of EPA, the lead government agency with jurisdiction over these issues, to meet EPA’s standards and requirements.” The regional EPA office, for its part, cited a letter it sent to Lyon in October: “The District has demonstrated that conditions at the school presently meet EPA national guidelines to protect public health from PCBs in schools.”

According to documents obtained by PEER, the district has spent about \$4 million on environmental consultants, legal fees, and incidental expenses that included a \$9,000-a-month condo rented for Environ engineers. Aside from another 20 cubic yards of soil (removed by order of the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, not the district or the EPA), no materials containing PCBs have yet been remediated.

The battle over PCBs in Malibu’s schools hasn’t settled Brigitte Leonard’s question: What’s behind the cancers and other ailments plaguing teachers and students? That may be impossible to know. Migraines, rashes, and asthma can have many triggers, and it’s notoriously difficult to prove the existence of a cancer cluster—let alone what caused it. Other toxins, or coincidence, could be responsible for Malibu’s apparent outbreak. The correlation between thyroid problems and high levels of PCBs in several classrooms is suggestive but hardly conclusive.

Still, TSCA regulations are not based on the principle that a material containing PCBs

above 50 ppm will invariably make someone sick. They're based on that age-old principle, "Better safe than sorry."

In Lexington, no one has done an epidemiological survey showing an upsurge of illness among former students at Estabrook Elementary. Yet the town tore down the school anyway. In part, that stems from a certain risk averseness among town officials: "You've got little kids in classrooms, and they touch everything, and they probably don't wash their hands before they eat, so there were some serious concerns," says school committee member Margaret Coppe. But, she adds, "the fact that EPA gave us a deadline didn't hurt."

So why doesn't EPA headquarters in Washington clarify the rules about PCBs in schools and compel regional offices to enforce them in a rigorous way? Malibu parents have appealed directly to Administrator Gina McCarthy and cc'd her and other top EPA officials on emails to regional authorities. There has been no reply.



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Hugh Kaufman, the veteran whistle-blower, offers some insights. In many EPA regions, he explains, there's a long tradition of playing ball with local politicians. When it comes to PCBs, Washington has little stomach for changing that dynamic. "They don't want to open up a Pandora's box," he says. Intervening in a high-profile case like Malibu's could set a precedent for schools across the country. Resistance from less environmentally oriented communities—not to mention a Congress controlled by a party that's openly at war with the EPA—would be formidable, as would the bureaucratic and budgetary challenges for the agency.

Another reason for foot dragging might have to do with the corporation that gave America PCBs. "Monsanto is very plugged into political forces in both parties," Kaufman notes.

Growing pressure from parents at PCB-contaminated schools might prompt the EPA to change its calculations. Meanwhile, a few school districts are betting that litigation against Monsanto could force the company to pay for removal of the toxins. Lexington is spearheading a class-action suit based on the financial burden of having to clean up a chemical that Monsanto allegedly knew was hazardous as far back as the '40s. Monsanto denies having known any such thing. But a handful of other Massachusetts towns have joined the suit, and PCB-afflicted districts in other states are contemplating similar measures.

In Malibu, the district is taking a different path. “They’re just covering their eyes and hoping this will go away,” says deNicola, who withdrew her daughter last fall.

Beth Lucas’s daughter, Amanda, 13, remains at Malibu Middle School. “I’m worried about her being there, but she very much wants to be with her peers,” Beth says, gazing out her window at the glittering Pacific. “I pray a lot.”

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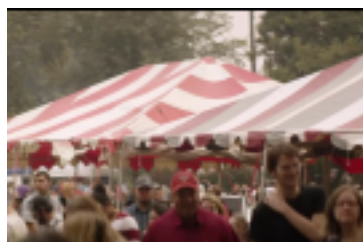
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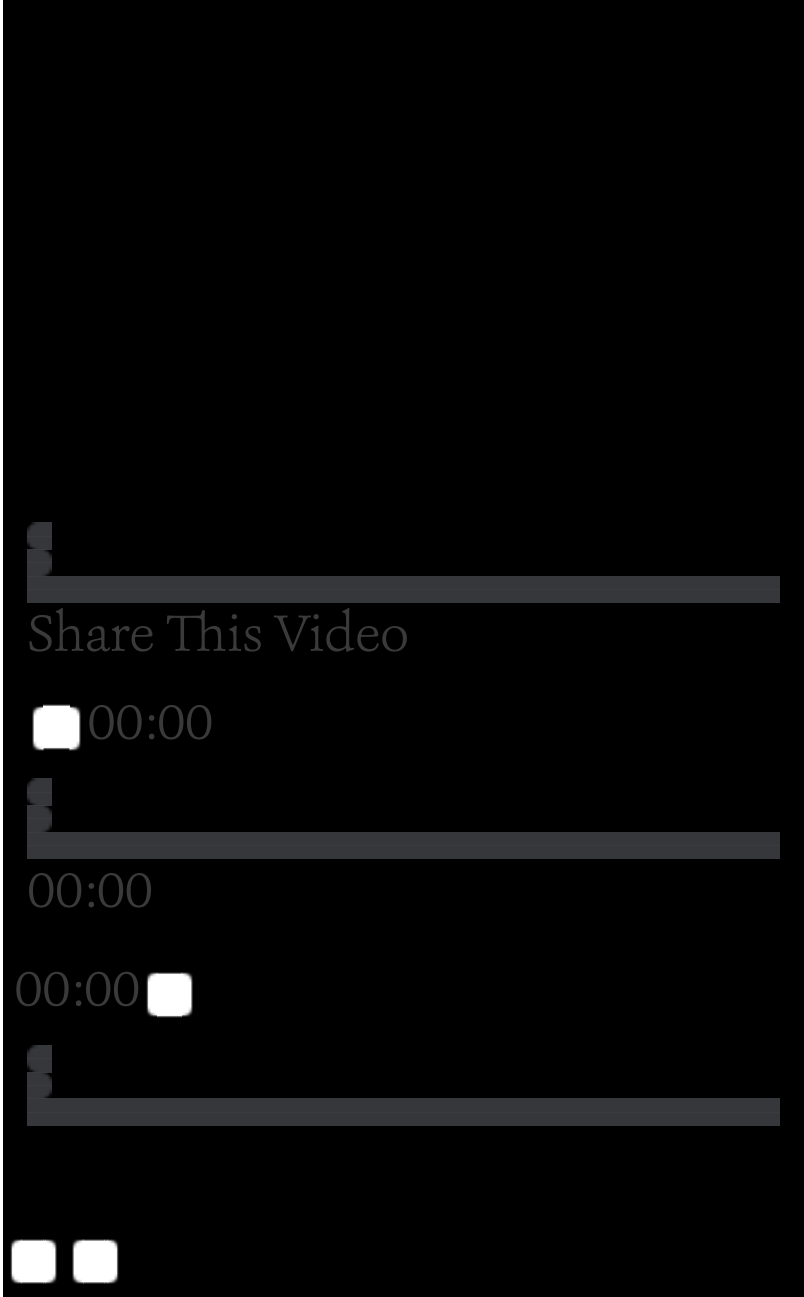


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