



Students Gressed Out By School Water Fountains

by SAYRE QUEVEDO

December 6, 2011

New California rules are meant to get school kids to drink fewer sugary drinks and more water. But many students don't want to drink out of public water fountains.

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ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

From NPR News, it's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Robert Siegel.

LYNN NEARY, HOST:

And I'm Lynn Neary. A federal law passed last year requires schools to provide free drinking water at lunchtime. The effort is meant to promote health and fight obesity. Ideally, schools install hydration stations where students fill up reusable bottles with chilled filtered water.

But plenty of schools have to make due with old fashioned water fountains. Youth Radio's Sayre Quevedo reports that, at his high school where he graduated just last year, few students are lining up to drink.

SAYRE QUEVEDO, BYLINE: A couple months before California's new law came into effect, I asked my high school principal, Carmelo Sgarlato, what he knew about the mandate to offer free fresh water at lunch.

How aware of SB 1413 are you?

CARMELO SGARLATO: I am not – excuse me – I am not aware of the bill.

QUEVEDO: But even after I told him, Sgarlato said there are lots of other upgrades that would come before water at our school.

SGARLATO: Ventilation. Way more important in this building because we have no windows that really open. Repairing leaks to cut down on mold buildup. Those are two major areas that I would put money into before water.

QUEVEDO: Plus, according to both state and federal law, our lunch room water fountains put my school in compliance with the new water policies, but in the eyes of most students I spoke to, like my friend, Jessie Chen(ph), water fountains are nasty.

JESSIE CHEN: I wouldn't want to use it.

QUEVEDO: Why?

CHEN: Because it's pretty dirty. There's a - I don't know what's in there, but it's pretty bad.

QUEVEDO: And she's talking about the one working water fountain in the cafeteria, which is covered in stains and which you practically have to make out with to get a drink.

Throughout the school, there are signs above most fountains that tell us to run the water for 30 seconds before drinking and both the custodian and my principal told me janitors run the fountains every morning for 15 minutes to flush the pipes. Makes you wonder how fresh the water really is.

(SOUNDBITE OF KNOCKING)

QUEVEDO: I decided to find out.

DARLEEN FRANKLIN: Hi.

QUEVEDO: Hi. Hello.

FRANKLIN: Hey, come on in, guys.

QUEVEDO: That's Darleen Franklin, a researcher at San Francisco State University.

FRANKLIN: Of course, I expect contaminants. I expect microbes on there because so many students, I'm sure, probably put their mouth on there.

QUEVEDO: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: Oh, come on. Or their hands. You never know.

QUEVEDO: Franklin gives me a bunch of sterile containers, latex gloves and disinfectant wipes and shows me how to collect samples. So I got my two samples from this school and I'm getting some weird looks from people for talking into a microphone.

A week later, back in Darleen Franklin's lab, we run one last test. After a few minutes fiddling with the microscope, she and her lab partner, Kimberly Tsui, finally see something.

KIMBERLY TSUI: Oh, no, no. There they are. There they are.

FRANKLIN: Good, good.

TSUI: OK. Sorry.

FRANKLIN: It's OK.

TSUI: I'm all excited that this is the best part. You get to see them. I got them. They're beautiful.

QUEVEDO: Kind of beautiful if you're into that sort of thing, but more to the point, the little yellow blobs are mostly harmless. They're micrococcus colonies from the fountain in my school's hallway. It's a skin bacterium that can, under certain conditions, cause pitted feet. Gross, I know, but safe to drink at the levels we found. And, anyway, it's not just the bacteria students worry about.

ADEN OFFERMAN: I hear there's tons of lead in school's main water system, so I try to shy away from that.

QUEVEDO: In case this guy, Aden Offerman(ph), is onto something, we also tested my school's water for lead. All the samples were under the 20 parts per billion that would take it out of service under EPA guidelines. So at my school, at least, we're better off drinking from our rundown fountains than hitting the vending machines for quote, unquote, "juice drinks." But that's a hard sell, given student perceptions, like Esa DeFuscus(ph).

ESA DEFUSCOS: If I was very, very thirsty or felt dizzy, I would probably go and drink some, but I avoid it pretty much at all costs. Honestly, a lot of time at school, I'm thirsty and I don't drink water.

QUEVEDO: And kids aren't totally crazy to worry. Researchers have found elevated lead levels in school districts from Philadelphia to Seattle and with no federal policy requiring schools like mine to test their water, it's hard for thirsty kids to know whether the supply is safe.

So until water fountains, like elevators, get little plaques certifying they pass muster, plenty of students won't trust the free fresh water in their school cafeterias, policy or not.

For NPR News, I'm Sayre Quevedo.

NEARY: That story was produced by Youth Radio.

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