



Somerset tackling mold

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A \$2.9 million project is under way at Somerset Early Childhood Elementary to clean up mold that forced the new school to close three years after it opened.

More than 400 students and their teachers vacated the school at 19930 Touchstone St. in April after an indoor air quality report revealed construction flaws were causing extensive water damage and mold growth. A 2001 survey of teachers also found a high rate of building-related allergy symptoms.

"Unless it's totally certified that it's clean, it's healthy, kids and staff are not going to be going back there," said Dennis DuPriest, district spokesman.

Hoping to recoup the cost of the cleanup, the district has filed a lawsuit against the general contractor that did most of the building.

Unico abandoned the school construction site before the building was completed, said Gus Acevedo, the district's attorney.

The contractor's insurance company paid subcontractors to finish the school.

The school cost about \$3.9 million to build and opened in August 2000.

The lawsuit claims Unico Construction out of Laredo, "was negligent and grossly negligent in the design and construction of Somerset Early Childhood Center, which led to the subsequent contamination of the building by harmful molds, bacteria and fungi."

According to the report by Assured Indoor Air Quality of Dallas, "the roof leaks, the walls leak, the windows leak, the doors leak" and a flawed heating and air conditioning system contributed to high humidity.

Representatives of Unico could not be reached for comment.

Early Childhood students, in pre-kindergarten through first grade, have been attending classes at nearby Somerset Elementary School.

Penny Opperman said that during the two years her son attended Early Childhood, he had a "hacking cough." The cough subsided when he changed schools, she said.

Opperman, a substitute teacher in the district, said she's glad the school board voted to repair the building, particularly because Somerset Elementary is overcrowded.

"I think it's a waste to leave the building sitting over there," she said.

Assured Indoor Air Quality is leading the cleanup effort and will be replacing the roof and all interior walls, Acevedo said.

The school board voted earlier this month to take out a \$3 million loan to get the cleanup started while the district waited for the lawsuit to wind its way through the court system.

"This has to go forward," Trustee Michael James said.

Somerset School District officials hope to reopen the school in August.

A status report of the cleanup will be presented at the next board meeting at the Veterans Elementary library, 4135 Smith Road in Von Ormy, at 7 p.m. March 22.

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