

Parents claim sick school made 8-year-old girl ill

By JOHN CHASE
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Nearly a year ago, 8-year-old Helen Andrejevic suffered such a severe asthma attack she almost died.

On Monday, the parents of the former student at Johnson Elementary School in Warrenville filed a massive federal lawsuit claiming their daughter's sickness was the school's fault. It also demands the 9-year-old building be closed because it's a danger to both students and teachers.

Attorneys for the Andrejevics claim Johnson is a "sick school" filled with indoor air problems that have caused not only their daughter to become sick, but more than 100 teachers and students to come down with sinus infections, bronchitis, fatigue and allergies since 1995.

Even more alarming are claims the school board and administration knew for years about Johnson's problems, but refused to correct them and even tried to cover them up.

Tom Zimmerman, the family's lead attorney, retold one story about the district changing moldy ceiling tiles just before a state Department of Labor inspection as an example.

"They were trying to hide the problem," he said. "And even after that incident they continually tried to influence environmental reports so it didn't include certain damaging information."

The class-action suit against Wheaton Warrenville Unit District 200 administrators and school board members seeks \$83.6 million in damages for both the Andrejevics and the families of the 673 students enrolled there last school year. So far, Zimmerman said, no one else has joined the family in the suit.

"But we've talked to a number of parents who are very interested in joining us," he said.

District officials Monday denied the allegations and said Johnson will be open today for the first day of the school year. They stressed the building is safe.

"This is not a building, by any means, that has any extraordinary problems," said district executive director of facilities John Sluis. "I don't see this building as being exceptional in any way."

Nevertheless, Johnson has seen its share of unique problems.

Since Helen Andrejevic's plight became public, the district has spent \$600,000 fixing up Johnson, Sluis said.

Workers replaced carpeting with tile, readjusted ventilation units, lessened the number of chemicals used for cleaning, added pipe insula-

tion and improved drainage around the school's perimeter.

School officials hoped the work would solve Johnson's air problems, which developed after flood waters and pipe condensation formed mold along ceiling tiles and carpeting.

Indeed, it seemed to work. The number of complaints by teachers and pupils, who blamed the school's musty air for their illnesses, decreased after the work was done, school officials said.

But the Andrejevics, who have since moved to San Diego, said it was never enough.

"Helen could never go back there. They forced us to move," Helen's mother, Janna Andrejevic, said Monday from her home in California, where she says Helen's health has improved. "They are doing the bare minimum there. They aren't going after the real problem."

Janna Andrejevic said water from condensation on pipes in the school still seeps onto ceiling tiles and floors. In addition, she said, the building was constructed above a swamp.

"They have to close the school, tear open the walls and find out the source of the damn problem," she said.

The suit, which names school board members from 1993-97, former Supt. F. James Travis and other administrators, claims the school district prohibited Helen Andrejevic from obtaining her education. It also notes school officials tried to use Helen as a guinea pig by placing her in a room and seeing if she had a reaction.

District 200 attorney Lawrence Weiner said the suit was frivolous and said the Andrejevics have no legal standing.

"The fact that their daughter had an asthma attack in a public school doesn't mean we have to pay them \$83.6 million," he said.

Acting Superintendent Mary Curley said the district tried to work with the family last year and has taken as many steps to make Johnson safe for students.

But Janna Andrejevic said she never once heard an apology from the district and now doesn't care what they say.

"I could care less. We had our lives turned upside down there," she said. "I care about closing that school. That's what should — and will — be done."