



Dozens of schools have had to close their doors because of mold levels that may have been making students sick. (ABCNEWS.com)

## Moldy Schools

Are Your Kids Getting Sick at School?

By [Michele Norris](#)



**S T. C H A R L E S, I I I., A p r i l 1 8** — On any given school day in this northern Illinois town, you can find students hanging out at the mall. But they're not skipping school.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

[Invisible Health Threat](#)

They're actually banned from school because St. Charles' high school, like hundreds of other schools around the country, is infested with toxic mold — millions of tiny spores that, when inhaled, can trigger a range of allergic reactions.

Allergist Dr. John Santilli says symptoms include pounding headaches, a fever and chills. And doctors say children are most at risk because their lungs are still developing.

"We have a huge public health problem that really has to be investigated," says Santilli.

The reason mold growth has reached dangerous levels in so many schools comes down to poor maintenance. Schools have failed to fix leaky roofs or have taken too much time to fix water damage caused by floods. Building maintenance has been scaled back due to budget cuts.

"They have to choose between hiring teachers and buying new textbooks for maintaining the buildings," says Clem Mejia, superintendent of the Kane County Regional school district.

### Invisible Health Threat

Although St. Charles High School looks perfectly safe, an invisible threat confirms what many in this community long suspected: The building may have been making students sick.

"I'd get migraines all the time," recalls student Ashley Hard, 17. "I was dizzy; I fainted a few times in school."

Hard was a top student and talented athlete. Now respiratory problems have forced her to give up sports and miss so much school that she failed two classes.

"I'm a single parent and she's been very sick," says her mother, Marsha Hard, amid tears. "I think what upsets me the most is that I'd talk to the school and no one would listen to me."

Health problems associated with toxic mold have prompted dozens of schools to close their doors, forcing students to miss weeks of class.

"There are no standards for molds," says one St. Charles parent, Cathy Villwock, whose son developed respiratory problems. "We have regulatory guidelines set for lead, asbestos and radon. Now if we had any of the above, we would have been closed down."

But because there aren't regulatory guidelines on these molds, the school wasn't shut down when it was first detected.

"We're angry, especially when you are battling this for years and years. This just didn't appear yesterday," she says. "This is a national crisis in our public schools."

And it's a crisis with a big price tag. Cleanup can cost millions, as schools remove ceiling tiles and rip out walls — battling a menace that you can't always see. ■