

Joel Grover Investigation: 'Contaminated Water?'

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During the three-month investigation, KNBC's Joel Grover found that thousands of children could be drinking water with an unsafe amount of lead and that district officials have known about the problem for years, but didn't talk about it publicly until now.

The following is a transcript of Joel Grover's report as it aired on KNBC on April 24, 2008, at 11 p.m.

JOEL GROVER: It's 7:30 a.m. at Marvin Avenue Elementary, and the kids head right for the drinking fountains. What they don't know is that some of the water there has dangerous amounts of lead. KNBC found contaminated water at other schools too, and found some employees apparently falsifying records to make it look like the water is safe.

(Addressing school employee) It looks like you falsified them.

STEVE THOMA, PARENT: Why can't we have water for the kids that's safe?

GROVER: The investigation began when KNBC learned that parents like Steve Thoma were concerned about the water at Woodlake Elementary in Woodland Hills. His daughter says the teachers told the kids not to drink the water.

THOMA: I was shocked. I said, "What are you talking about, you can't drink the water?"

GROVER: Thoma and others pushed the district to test the water at Woodlake. One fountain was found to have more than seven times what the EPA says is a safe level of lead. So KNBC decided to test the water at other schools across the city. Samples from 30 elementary schools were collected and tested for lead at the same state certified lab used by the school district. The results were analyzed by nationally known industrial hygienist Brian Daly of Hygiene Tech International.

BRIAN DALY, INDUSTRIAL HYGIENIST: It is tainted water.

GROVER: The U.S. EPA says drinking water is unsafe if it has 15 parts per billion of lead or more. At Marvin Elementary, one fountain KNBC tested had 32 parts per billion. That's more than double the unsafe level of lead. Three of six fountains at Marvin tested above the safe level. At Gardener Elementary in Hollywood, one fountain tested in the kindergarten area had lead-laced water. And at Calvert Elementary in Woodland Hills, inside the nurse's office, KNBC tested the tap used to give kids water to take medications. It had more than two and a half times the acceptable amount of lead, levels that could have serious effects on children.

DALY: The effects of this water would be lower IQ, attention deficit, learning disabilities.

GROVER: **Nine out of 30 schools KNBC tested**, or 30 percent, had some fountains with unsafe levels of lead.

DAVID BREWER, LAUSD SUPERINTENDENT: The district is grateful to KNBC.

GROVER: Joel Grover asked Superintendent David Brewer to speak with him. After canceling a scheduled interview, Brewer instead called a news conference about the KNBC investigation.

BREWER: The safety and health of our kids is a priority.

GROVER: But an internal report KNBC obtained shows the district discovered 18 years ago it had at least 356 unsafe fountains, with water that failed to meet the government lead standard. The fountains were made with lead that was leaching into the water. Instead of replacing most of the aging fountains, the district started a "flushing policy" requiring school custodians to flush or run every fountain before school every morning for at least 30 seconds, to flush out lead that accumulated. The custodians are also required to complete a daily flushing log every day.

BREWER: Compliance with flushing policy reduces the levels of lead in the water to federal standards.

GROVER: During the past month, KNBC watched the fountains at five different schools, starting before sunrise. KNBC saw the custodians show up for work, and saw every one of them walk right by the fountains without ever flushing them. Two of them washed the basins of the fountains, but didn't flush them. KNBC saw kids drinking from those fountains all day. That was also the case at Reseda Elementary, where KNBC found a dangerous amount of lead in one fountain. On three separate days, KNBC saw the custodian pass fountains but never flush them. Those fountains were used all day. KNBC obtained the custodian's official flushing logs, and noticed he signed off that he flushed all the fountains on campus on the three days KNBC watched him, March 13, 26 and 27.

GROVER (TO CUSTODIAN): It appears you're falsifying these documents?

CUSTODIAN: No.

GROVER: The custodian also logged that he flushed the fountain on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Presidents Day, when school was closed.

Grover (to custodian): Were you here at school on Martin Luther King Day and Presidents Day?

CUSTODIAN: I don't think so.

GROVER: Then why did you fill out these records?

CUSTODIAN: I don't know.

GROVER: KNBC also obtained the custodian's flushing log on April 1, but it was already filled out through April 2. (Addressing custodian) We got these on April 1. They were already filled out for April 2. How do you explain that?

CUSTODIAN: I don't know.

GROVER: It was the same story at other schools, like Marvin Elementary, with those three dangerous fountains. The days KNBC watched the custodian, he didn't flush the fountains, but records show he signed his name that he did, leaving kids to drink water potentially tainted with lead. What did the superintendent think of KNBC's finding, that the flushing policy is often ignored?

BREWER: That possible failure by employees did not put any students in jeopardy.

GROVER: But according to Industrial Hygienist Brian Daly, drinking the water from unsafe fountains that aren't flushed could harm children.

DALY: These children, or a portion of these children, will have learning disabilities because of lead exposure.

GROVER: That's why parents, like Steve Thoma at Woodlake Elementary, are demanding the district take sweeping action to ensure the water is safe at all schools.

THOMA: No amount of lead is acceptable. So, we have to fix this problem and fix it now.

GROVER: So what does the school district have to say about what KNBC found?

BREWER: We will have our interview. I'm looking forward to it. And you'll be looking forward to it too.

[Click here for an EPA guide to understanding lead in water at schools.](#)

KNBC found higher than the EPA standard of lead at the following locations:

Alta Loma Elementary

Fountain located on the far side of the campus, across from the blacktop, parallel to handball courts. Lead Level 15

Calvert Elementary

Sink used for drinking water inside nurse's office. Lead Level 39

Gardener Elementary

Fountain in Kindergarten area, located at back of school. Lead Level 21

Marvin Avenue Elementary

Fountain located around the corner the front of gate. Lead Level 32

Fountain located behind a wall, dividing it from lunch tables and classrooms, tucked in a nook. Lead Level 22

Fountain located on far right side of campus, near boys and girls bathroom. Lead Level 19

Pacoima Elementary

Fountain located in the cafeteria area, by the wall near lunch tables. Lead Level 16

Reseda Elementary

Fountain Between boys and girls bathroom near main office. Lead level 21

San Pedro Elementary

Fountain located to the left of classroom 17. Lead Level 17

Saticoy Elementary

Fountain Located in front of playground blacktop. Lead Level 21

Woodlake Avenue Elementary

Fountain located on the east wall of building containing room 13, northwest of the administration building. Lead Level 32 (The school shut down this fountain in 9/07 after it tested to have an unsafe level of lead. KNBC found the fountain working again on 3/08 even though our test showed it still had a high level of lead.)