Recently an employee of the Duneland School Corporation was diagnosed with Legionella pneumonia. In search of a source of the bacterial exposure, the school corporation had water testing done. Preliminary results of the testing were released the night of 10/3/19, showing evidence of Legionella bacteria in water samples from the Chesterton Middle School and Westchester Intermediate School. Those schools and the adjacent administration offices were closed today.

Legionella is a bacteria that naturally resides in ground water sources. It can cause serious lung disease, a form of pneumonia, most often affecting the elderly, smokers, those with underlying lung disease or those who are immunocompromised. Young, otherwise healthy people are at very low risk of infection. Symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, headache and achiness. Legionella pneumonia, or Legionaire’s disease, is treated with antibiotics that area often prescribed for other community acquired pneumonias.

Legionella is most often caused by breathing in aerosolized water containing the bacteria. Cases happen more frequently after heavy rains. Bacteria can grow in decorative water fountains, hot tubs and air conditioning cooling systems. Rarely, the bacteria can grow in hot water heaters and be aerosolized in the shower. Most often cases are isolated. Cases are reportable to the health department so outbreaks can be identified and investigated. Currently there is no known outbreak situation at the Duneland School Corporation, and the school corporation’s decision to close the buildings today was made out of an abundance of caution.

The Porter County Health Department is working with the Duneland School Corporation and other agencies to ensure students of the district continue to have a safe environment in which to learn and avoid disruptions of educational activities. Again, Legionella is a rare cause of pneumonia seen mostly in the elderly, ill and immunocompromised. If you believe you may have contracted Legionella, please seek medical care.

Dr. Maria Stamp, M.D.  
Porter County Health Officer