

Wodonga students sent home after mould scare

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ABOUT 600 Wodonga students will stay home from class for the rest of the week after a mould scare at a city high school.

Wodonga Senior Secondary College principal Peter MacLean said any student not undertaking a year 12 subject had been told to stay home until Monday while a specialist consultant analysed furry, black mould found underneath the school.

About 350 students are expected to remain at school from today until Friday, while about 600 of their peers in years 10 and 11 will stay home.

Mr MacLean said it wasn't a decision made lightly.

"It's not ideal, but I felt I had no alternative, to be honest until I'm assured it's OK," he said.

"I know it's a disruption to families and kids.

"But I feel it was justified because, ultimately, my concern is for student and staff health and safety."

A staff member noticed condensation in a school fuse box about 2½ weeks ago, accompanied by a smell of damp in several rooms.

A leaking pipe and "extensive" mould coverage was soon discovered underneath the school, potentially affecting up to two-fifths of the total facility.

Mr MacLean quickly closed two wings, including the front office, the main computer lab and two classrooms, and alerted parents to the development.

"We've had a couple of calls seeking clarification," he said.

"But mostly, the parents have been terrific, and I'm really heartened to say the kids have been really positive.

"There has been no panic, they're quite calm.

"I believe they've been kept informed — we've been upfront with everything that's happened."

Mr MacLean said counselling had been offered to members of the school community distressed by the situation but no one had taken it up as yet.

The potential health effects of the mould won't be known until testing is complete but Mr MacLean said a general warning had been issued to staff and students.

"I received initial advice that anyone who had respiratory ailments, low immune systems or suffered from asthma may experience some irritation," he said.

Mr MacLean said he didn't believe anyone had reported such symptoms but advised those with concerns to seek medical advice.

"It's mid-winter — people get coughs and colds and all sorts of things," he said.

"I can't make a judgement as to if any one individual is or isn't suffering.

"All I say is if you think you could be, please consult your doctor."

The Victorian Department of Education has also been notified.

The department has provided two portable classrooms, which arrived yesterday, to help with the temporary reshuffle.

A mould specialist, understood to have been flown in from Perth, arrives today to undertake detailed testing of the school's carpets, floors, ceilings, desks and books.

Mr MacLean said he had been advised that much of the school — including sites of recent upgrades — would not be at risk.

But the consultant will still test those areas, including the library, VCE centre, and Galvin Hall, to be certain.

Mr MacLean said her findings would dictate what further action needed to be taken, as well as explaining how long the mould had been there and what effects it could have on staff and students.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE DRAFT VERSION OF THE LETTER SENT TO PARENTS YESTERDAY:

Due to ongoing testing and cleaning of the affected areas, we have made the following temporary arrangements for students:

Year 10 and 11 students will not be required at school for the remaining three school days of this week — with the exception of students doing Units 3/4 VCE and second year VET subjects.

Affected year 10 and 11 students are expected to continue their work from home.

Students will still be able to contact their teachers and access the school's online learning management system from home — if they have access to the internet — or failing this, from locations such as the Wodonga Library.

I apologise for this inconvenience, but ensuring we provide staff and students with a safe working environment is our key priority.

- Peter MacLean

