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Schools: Asbestos

Paul Rowen: To ask the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families what training is provided to teachers on asbestos management and safety; and what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of such provision. [318514]

Ms Diana R. Johnson [*holding answer 24 February 2010*]: We have made a commitment to improve the training provided to head teachers and school business managers on asbestos management, and Partnerships for Schools will be working with HSE to produce training materials. These will be signposted in courses run by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services for new head teachers and school business managers. This work will assist them to understand and implement their role in relation to asbestos management during building work, repairs, maintenance and day-to-day operation of schools.

It is not the role of classroom teachers to monitor, manage or to be accountable for the presence of asbestos in schools. Responsibility for this resides with local authorities and/or governing bodies in ensuring that schools are safe for pupils and staff. Consequently, initial teacher training does not address this topic. While there are Qualified Teacher Status standards relating to health and safety issues and the establishment of safe learning environments, training in relation to these standards will be teaching and learning focused, and not related to issues concerning the construction of the building in which that learning takes place.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100302/text/100302w0040.htm#10030317003199>

Comment on the answer is on the next page

Comment

It is welcomed that training will take place for new headteachers and business managers. However the measures can only be considered as a basic first step, for the lack of training and asbestos awareness amongst headteachers and building managers in post are not addressed and neither is training for governors, teachers and support staff. Of considerable concern is that the Minister does not consider that classroom teachers need to be trained in asbestos awareness.

This shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the necessity for all staff in schools to be aware of the location and dangers of asbestos and the measures to be taken to prevent either themselves or the children disturbing or damaging it. The recent survey of their members by the teaching union Voice demonstrated a lack of training and asbestos awareness amongst school staff, with more than half receiving no training and almost three quarters not being told where asbestos is in their schools or what condition it is in.¹ This is despite the fact that they are the very people who are in the classrooms, gyms and halls and are likely to hang Christmas decorations from an asbestos insulating board ceiling grid, hit the gym AIB tiles with poles to release the shuttle cocks or cut AIB into artistic shapes to brighten the classroom. Also if the staff are not aware of where the asbestos is, how dangerous it is or how to prevent damaging it, then they cannot ensure that the children don't disturb it. This lack of awareness amongst the staff has allowed the children to use an asbestos clad column as a goal post, slam doors with asbestos door surrounds and break up AIB tiles when on litter duty.

The type of training of the people who have to manage the asbestos and those who occupy the buildings will be different and has to be tailored to their need. It is frankly facetious to state that the training of teachers *"is teaching and learning focused and not related to issues concerning the construction of the building in which the learning takes place."* There are many teachers and support staff who have died, and are presently dying of mesothelioma who would not have been exposed to asbestos in their schools had they been taught about the dangers of asbestos, where it was in their schools and what measures they should take to avoid disturbing it. If such deaths are to be prevented in the future then it is essential that teachers and support staff are trained in the fundamentals of asbestos awareness.

Not only is the failure to train teachers and support staff potentially dangerous, it is also contrary to the regulations and is breaking the law. The regulations state that:

*"Every employer shall ensure that adequate information, instruction and training is given to those of his employees- who are or who are liable to be exposed to asbestos...."*²

It is known that teachers and support staff have disturbed asbestos and have been exposed, and it is known that unless they are trained they are liable to be exposed in the future. By law the employer is therefore required to give adequate information, instruction and training to the teachers and support staff so that such exposures to both them and the children can be prevented. It is criminal not to do so.

Michael Lees
3rd March 2010

¹ See annex 4 at [this link to a report on asbestos management](#) in schools

² Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006 Regulation 10 Information, instruction and training.