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More lead cleanups in Miami

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MIAMI, Okla. - Even though classes in the Miami School District have been dismissed for spring break, elementary-school teacher Linda Tunnell has been a regular on the playground.

Tunnell is keeping a watchful eye on the second round of lead-cleanup work being done on school playgrounds and any other school property where chat is visible.

Tunnell and Jacque Buzzard, both teachers at Nichols Elementary School, pushed for the retesting of some areas on the playgrounds at Nichols and Washington schools. Employees of CH2M Hill, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Tar Creek contractor, had cleaned up areas of lead-contaminated soil last summer, but the teachers said the cleanup had not been thorough enough.

They asked David Lovelace, a retired environmental engineer and consultant, to retest some areas. His samples showed "hot spots" that did not meet EPA standards.

"Things are getting done right this time," Tunnell said Tuesday. "I notice they're getting to a lot of areas that weren't touched the first time around, and they're replacing the dirt with good soil, not clay like they used the first time."

In this week's work, large areas of playgrounds and other school property where surface chat is visible - regardless of lead content - are being dug up, replaced with clean dirt and sodded.

Last year, Lovelace took his findings to the Miami Board of Education. Board members, school administrators, Buzzard, Tunnell and Lovelace met with representatives of the EPA and the Hill company. Lovelace said the testing procedure used by the Hill employees was faulty, but EPA project administrator Mike McAteer said his agency was confident in the company's work. He said any remaining lead spots did not pose a significant danger to children using the playgrounds.

A local environmental group, the L.E.A.D. Agency Inc., had its own consultant review Lovelace's work and findings. The consultant agreed that there appeared to be flaws in the testing procedure used by Hill employees.

Miami Superintendent Bill Stephens then asked the EPA to return and conduct a more thorough cleanup. While it did not admit to any discrepancies in the original work, the EPA agreed to return.

Tunnell said she has noticed that some of the areas being cleaned are outside the fenced playground at Washington School but are accessible to neighborhood children who play in the area.

"Being sure the kids are safe is all we wanted from the beginning," she said.

City Manager Michael Spurgeon told the City Council this week that the EPA also is planning to work on some public-access areas in the city this summer.

More than a year ago, the agency tested some public parks and alleyways where chat had been used, and high lead content was found. Miami is not officially a part of the Tar Creek Superfund site, but the federal agency agreed to do cleanup work as personnel were available.

Spurgeon said Tuesday that the EPA has told him it will have a more detailed schedule for work in Miami sometime in April.

"I know they tested about 11 sites and found seven or eight that had the high lead content," he said.