

Ms. Lanelle Wiggins
US EPA
Office of Policy (1803A)
1200 Penn Ave NW
Washington, DC
20460

November 22, 2022
Via e-mail

Dear Ms. Wiggins:

Thank you for outreach to us regarding the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rule changes on water quality and dangerous pollutants. We welcome a chance to educate you about the concerns of our member schools.

You may have read our prior comments to the agency about our concerns on September 20, 2022. We write today to reiterate those and to underscore our position.

As you may know, the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS), represents over 600 private schools in Wisconsin. They are all non-profit entities. Our member schools account for 100,000 students across grades K-12. We are a member of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), which represents schools nationwide and which notified us of your work.

Like many states, we have robust rural communities that utilize private schools every day for education and community events. Because of this, many private K-12 schools are on private wells and would qualify as a public water system because they daily serve over 25 people. We are aware of rural public schools that would also qualify as public water systems. These schools, public or private, are located miles from municipal water sources so connections are impossible. We are encouraging private schools to access municipal sources, if at all possible, as the opportunity presents it itself, through road work or new construction.

Let there be no doubt: WCRIS supports private school students, staff and visitors' access to safe and clean drinking water. We fully support the mitigation of harmful contaminants and chemicals. We welcome this opportunity to help

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Association of Christian
Schools International

Christian Schools
International

Diocese of Green Bay

Diocese of LaCrosse

Diocese of Madison

Diocese of Superior

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
North Wisconsin District

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
South Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Association
of Independent Schools

Wisconsin Conference
of Seventh Day Adventists

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Northern Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Western Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
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shape clean water rules that can be *actually* implemented and followed by private K-12 schools.

The proposed rules and changes are good in their intention to create safe drinking water. Yet, we are concerned that private K-12 schools would be totally unable to comply with these regulations using existing staff and knowledge.

Our school leaders are trained to operate schools, not comply with rules and regulations around drinking water. This is not because school leaders do not care; but rather because they lack the necessary knowledge and technical training about water treatment.

Making private K-12 schools subject to clean water rules creates too much deep complexity for a school's daily operations. Our principals will have to learn rules around water contamination, fundamentals of water quality, and water management. This is something that can not be taught overnight. Nor taught as a side endeavor. Nor on a consulting basis. Outside, private expertise is too costly to hire. The expenses can not be recouped through tuition. It's an unrealistic and impractical expectation.

WCRIS supports the goals of the EPA. But we can not support unrealistic burdens placed on schools.

Instead, we suggest that the agency transfer compliance to the local municipality, or to the state's department of natural resources. This would allow experts, who have a deep understanding of water quality, to manage the water system of schools. The appropriate expertise exists at these levels of government.

This solution removes the burden of full compliance from private K-12 schools, and it ensures that the water systems of schools are monitored by experts. If it's clean water we genuinely seek, this is how our society can actually accomplish the goal.

Finally, the EPA should also be mindful of compliance by Amish and Mennonite schools nationwide. There are many Amish and Mennonite schools in Wisconsin. These schools pose an even greater challenge to the lead mitigation strategy you propose. They are located throughout the nation.

While Amish and Mennonite schools are NOT members of our Association or CAPE, our passing experience with them has taught us lessons that we can share with you, without speaking for or on behalf of their communities. We know of no group that does speak for them, to which we could refer you to contact.

Amish schools are located within closed communities whose beliefs separate them from the outside, modern world. Amish communities do not have access to email or electronic notifications of new government rules. We have found that they require notices via U.S. mail, and possibly in-person follow-up when inquiries go unresponded. Sometimes, you can obtain a phone number for a community phone. But, it will inevitably be answered by a stranger, who will have to locate the person whom you seek. You may or may not get a callback. Wait times can exceed a month.

As a matter of equity, we expect EPA regulations to treat all schools on private wells - whether public, private or otherworldly - to be equally regulated so that all children, regardless of their circumstances, are protected. The costs should not be onerous.

Please do not hesitate to contact WCRIS if you have any questions or need additional information about K-12 private schools and their capacity to meet your proposed regulations.

Sincerely,



Sharon L. Schmeling
Executive Director

Cc: Michael Schuttloffel, Executive Director - CAPE, via e-mail