School Drinking Water Safety
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To date, the U.S. does not collect national data on school tap water safety. This brief presents findings from two studies of school drinking water.

Snapshot of Findings: National Study
In the 12 states with available data on the lead content in school drinking water,

- 12% of all drinking water samples had a lead concentration at or above the state’s action level
- 44% of schools tested had at least one drinking water sample with lead at or above the state’s action level
- If the action level were 5 ppb (the FDA limit for lead in bottled water) a typical state would see more than twice as many schools with at least one tap above this threshold (a 128% increase)

Snapshot of Findings: California Study
California, in general, has less lead in school plumbing systems, yet,

- While only 3% of California schools had at least one sample over the state’s 15 ppb action level for lead, 16% of schools had at least one sample exceeding 5 ppb
- 16% of study schools received water from a utility that was in violation of federal Safe Drinking Water Act health standards for contaminants other than lead

What Else Do We Know?
Lacking nationwide data, simply looking at media reports from tap water testing reveals lead in school drinking water – and tap water safety in general – is a widespread problem:

Lead Action Levels

States vary in the amount of lead they consider allowable in school drinking water, ranging from 3 ppb to 20 ppb. Health organizations and U.S. agencies vary in the amount of lead they consider acceptable in drinking water, ranging from 1 ppb (American Academy of Pediatrics goal for school drinking water) to 5 ppb (FDA standard for bottled water in the U.S.) to 15 ppb (EPA action level for water utilities).

Health Implications of Findings

School drinking water can be a contributor to children’s lead ingestion. Lead is a toxin that can decrease IQ and increase behavioral problems. Studies estimate that even low levels of lead exposure decrease the overall IQ of the U.S. population. Drinking water is important for healthy hydration, including as a substitute for sugary drinks, but it must be safe to consume.

Equity Implications of Findings

Despite an uptick in awareness of and attention to the issue of lead in drinking water, states vary in how effectively they investigate school drinking water lead levels and most U.S. students attend public schools in states where not all taps are tested for lead. The national study found few consistent disparities in test results by demographic variables, but the California study found that rural schools were over 3 times less likely to have tested tap water for lead.

Typical Testing Programs May Underestimate the Extent of the Problem

Both studies revealed ways in which most testing programs minimize the number of affected taps. For example, schools that tested more taps had a disproportionately greater percentage of samples with elevated lead, and a lower action level would yield many more samples with unacceptable levels of lead.