

Teachers fear fumes perilous in area where pupils made ill

By REGINA HICKL-SZABO

Teachers at Toronto's Perth Avenue Public School have been living in fear for weeks that they and their students could be inhaling poisonous fumes, says the school's acting principal.

"The bottom line is that we are concerned that there is something we're breathing in daily that could be cancer-causing or could cause respiratory disease problems," Donald Blue said in an interview yesterday.

Ontario's Environment Ministry is investigating six chemical companies which operate near the school in the heavily-industrialized Junction

Triangle area of the city to find out which of them, if any, dumped a foul-smelling substance into the sewer system or the atmosphere on Jan. 12.

"Since I have been here, there have been discussions in the staff room with teachers saying: 'Maybe I should transfer out' and 'I wonder if I should be here,'" Mr. Blue said.

Ministry inspector Barney Singh said his staff pin-pointed one firm which appears to have caused the noxious emission. But he refused to name it at a public meeting earlier this week, saying evidence against the firm is only circumstantial so far. A full report is expected in April.

Environment Minister Andrew Brandt said preliminary studies show the six firms pose no health problems to area residents. "The best evidence that I have is that there is not a problem," he told reporters before the weekly Cabinet meeting.

Several Grade 3 students from the west-end school, two teachers and a skating rink guard complained of severe headaches, dizziness and a burning sensation in their throats while skating at the neighboring rink on Jan. 12. Some also complained they lost their appetite and were vomiting.

The rink attendant said she continued to smell the same odor at the school the next day, Mr. Blue said. But by the time ministry officials arrived on the scene later that day, the odor was gone.

Municipal health officials say 60 people that they know of, most of them youngsters, were exposed to the same smell on that day.

About 14 were interviewed and the west-end health officials say they won't be releasing any findings until the Environment Ministry's investigation is finished.

Mavis Rampersaud, associate medical officer of health for the city's west end, said no one knows for sure yet what the substance was that was emitted on Jan. 12 or whether residents have any reason to be worried.

Her office hasn't given area schools any guidelines on what procedures to take in case of a repetition because different procedures would apply depending on the source and type of emission, she said.

Mr. Blue said he is counting on citizen groups and provincial and municipal environment officials to find out if the air is safe to breathe in the Junction Triangle. He worries, however, that "they may never get the evidence.

"It's hard to know what damage is being done. I'm starting to wonder if someone isn't breaking the (province's environment protection) rules. The problem is I don't know who's telling the truth, who's telling the whole truth and who isn't," he said.

Elke Hornsi, member of an area citizens' group, says she has talked to a Perth school teacher who is so concerned about the possible dangers that she is keeping a diary about smells around the school and her own personal health. The teacher has refused to speak publicly about her concerns.

A civic task force is already conducting an in-depth study on the health of Junction Triangle residents. Results are to be released within six weeks — around the same time the Environment Ministry is expected to come forward with its findings on the Jan. 12 waste emission.