

**Editorial**

## All the facts needed

■ **Our view: Tests at high school prompt questions about what was in soil samples.**

The results of air samples at Southside High School provide a certain sense of relief. But with an asterisk.

Tests of the air by the New York State Department of Health found no harmful elements in samples taken May 22 and 23 inside the school, where at least 40 former and current students have developed cancer. But here's where the asterisk comes in: A department report recommended additional studies to find out why levels of Freon and chlorinated solvents were elevated in air that was sampled under, but not inside, the school.

In other words, there's an element of good news to the air-sample findings, but also a vacuum waiting to be filled by the results of soil tests. Until that second wave of information is available, parents, students and Southside staff members can only be partially reassured.

At a May 2 public meeting at Southside, health department and school district officials said preliminary tests at the school, opened in 1979, indicated no danger in the soil or air. But officials agreed to conduct more tests to assure an alarmed public that the school was safe for their children.

The clean-air conclusion released by the Health Department Monday took a major step toward bolstering those preliminary findings and allaying concerns about the school's safety.

However, parents of Southside students or graduates with cancer have continued to express skepticism, even after the air tests found no health-threatening levels of contaminants.

It's small wonder that they still harbor anxiety, especially when the Health Department would not reveal what contaminants were found in the soil that had prompted another round of air samples taken on July 20.

Maybe the department is saving that for discussion at a public meeting, as yet unscheduled, for later this month. In the meantime the community is left guessing what those contaminants were, and that instinctively causes doubt and distrust. Instead, state health officials should be forthright and open with what they have found, as residents begged them to do at a May 2 public meeting at Southside.

Obviously there was enough concern by the department after soil tests that caused officials to go back and continue sampling the air. The public deserves to know what that was.

It was plainly evident at the May 2 Southside meeting that residents and parents are worried about the reliability of this investigation.

One way to alleviate those concerns is to release information regularly and completely.

Saying the air is clean is comforting, but then acknowledging that something was found to prompt more tests only fuels cynicism about the government's willingness to disclose its finding in a timely and detailed manner.

Nothing would make people happier than to find out that Southside is safe. The testing is supposed to confirm that.

But one of the jobs of health officials is to build trust in their findings.

The best way to do that is with full and timely disclosure.

There's still time to accomplish that before this month's meeting, and the first step by the state is to tell this community what was in the soil that triggered them to want to test the air again.

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