

Asbestos

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The EPA and state official "have not talked to us about any of this," Bricmont said. "I know as far as we're concerned, we followed all the rules and regulations the state gave us, and we had all of our asbestos taken care of."

Of the accusations against Puentes, Bricmont said, "I don't know if he did something on his own, something wrong with our paperwork. But if he did, we would join the state in its investigation."

Puentes, who has been on administrative leave from his \$48,000-a-year job since June 29, declined to discuss the case and referred all questions to his attorneys, who could not be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, the Associated Press quoted Thomas Connelly, a special agent with the EPA, as saying the agency is conducting a criminal investigation. He declined to discuss what charges might be brought against Puentes.

State schools superintendent Bill Honig's office and Hayes said they have been unable to determine a motive for the allegedly improper inspections. "I don't think there's any gain from it," Hayes said.

"Everybody's the loser: the school kids, the taxpayers and the state Department of Education."

Under federal law, school districts were required by 1983 to inspect all schools for the presence of deteriorating asbestos insulation, known as "friable" asbestos, that was releasing fibers into the air.

In checks conducted by its own inspectors at 156 school districts in California, the EPA found that 77 percent of the districts were in violation of the federal regulations.

"In one high school, we found more than 25 areas where seriously damaged or deteriorated pipe insulation was present. In most of these areas, the friable material was located in gym hallways and exercise areas where students frequently gather," Hayes' report said. Hayes said the insulation was found in Eureka High School.

The EPA has taken administrative action against three districts that failed the second inspections, the report said. Hayes identified them as North Sacramento Elementary, Rocklin Unified and Lowell Union in Los Angeles County. An EPA spokesman said he did not know what the action was.