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Live Oak schools in asbestos criminal probe

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SACRAMENTO — Live Oak school district is part of a criminal investigation against a state Education Department inspector accused of failing to report asbestos safety violations in schools throughout the state, according to state officials.

Live Oak has not been reinspected since the investigation came to light, so state officials do not yet know if the district is genuinely free of asbestos problems.

In addition to allegedly failing to report

the asbestos problems, Education Department employee Charles Puentes is accused of encouraging some districts to prepare backdated reports falsely showing their schools were properly inspected.

The accusations and a resulting Environmental Protection Agency criminal probe were announced to lawmakers Tuesday by California Auditor General Thomas Hayes.

Hayes, in his report citing an EPA study, said some 77 percent of 156 surveyed school districts have not complied with federal asbestos safety regulations.

The result, he said, is that pupils, parents and teachers "were not notified that asbestos was found in their schools (and) they could not take precautions to limit their exposure to asbestos."

Inhalation of asbestos fibers has been linked to cancer and other lung diseases. Asbestos was widely used in insulation during the 1960s and 1970s.

Puentes was contracted by the federal EPA to inspect 61 of the 156 school districts for compliance with asbestos regulations. Live Oak was one of those 61 districts.

Hayes said his staff checked Puentes'

work at 22 districts and found that 20 of them had problems.

Upon Puentes' recommendation, four districts had even fraudulently prepared and backdated paperwork to falsely show asbestos regulation compliance, Hayes said.

But Hayes said that because of the "high incidence" of problems with Puentes' inspections, all involved districts may be re-inspected, but that will be an EPA decision. EPA officials could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Many school officials were caught off

guard by the report, Hayes said, and many were unaware of the investigation and problem.

Live Oak district board President Barney Bricmont said the district took care of its asbestos inspections and was unaware of any problems or investigation dealing with Puentes. He said the district's business manager, Dale Thurston, would know dates and details of Live Oak's investigation. But Thurston was out of town and could not be reached Wednesday.

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