Pilot Water Quality program FAQs

What is the Pilot Water Quality Program?
The plan is to place 35 specially designed and engineered Drinking Water Stations (DWS) in six schools over the summer with a goal of reducing lead levels to as low as 1 part per billion (ppb). These drinking fixtures include state-of-the art filters that can make dramatic reductions in the lead content of drinking water. We will test the water on a weekly basis to ensure the DWS are working correctly. If the program proves successful, we will expand to more schools. We believe this will allow us to reduce lead levels while lowering costs to PPS.

How were the pilot schools chosen?
The district plans to include one high school, two middle schools and three elementary schools in the pilot study. The schools were selected based on having at least 15 drinking fixtures that still tested above 15 ppb for lead after their fixtures were replaced. Those schools are Arleta, Duniway, Jefferson, Llewellyn, Rigler and Robert Gray.

Why is the pilot program needed? Didn't we fix most of the drinking fixtures?
The traditional approach to reduce lead levels in water is to replace fixtures followed by replacing plumbing behind the wall if needed. Despite replace all PPS drinking fixtures in the dostrict, more than 500 fixtures continue to test at or above the state action level of 15 ppb. We believe there may be a less expensive and more effective approach to reduce lead levels, minimize costs and potentially maximize results. This pilot program would allow us to determine installation and maintenance costs while also confirming effectiveness to reduce lead levels.

How will the pilot program reduce lead levels to 1 ppb?
We are installing a limited number of strategically located custom engineered drinking water stations (DWS) in each pilot school. Each DWS will have one or two bubblers and a bottle filler to supply filtered water that is at or below 1 ppb for lead. To accomplish this, we have researched National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) certified filtering systems designed to reduce lead levels to an average of 1 ppb over a life cycle operating capacity of a minimum of 6,000 gallons.

How can we trust PPS that this will be safe?
Portland Public Schools Water Quality Team carefully and diligently researched the hundreds of options for possible filters to use in the new Drinking Water Stations. Through examination and testing, the 3M 6,000 gallon full flow filter (3MFF100) was selected.

During the summer of 2019 PPS installed several custom engineered DWS and this model of filter was placed on six fixtures in the Pilot Program selected schools and tested for 12 consecutive weeks, resulting in 72 overall tests. The results confirmed that the selected 3M filter would provide the performance the team was looking for in a long lasting, high quality filter. The 72 tests had a lead level average of less than 0.30 ppb (15 ppb is the Oregon Health Authority limit), with only 3 tests exceeding 1 ppb, the highest result being 3.88 ppb.

Once school starts weekly monitoring of lead levels will continue at least for the first month to confirm that the filters are performing as expected. Periodic monitoring will continue to the end of the 2019 calendar year. The test results will be made available online for everyone to see.

What are the lead levels in my school(s)?
The lead levels at faucets vary throughout each school but those with green signs are below the PPS and Oregon Health Authority action level of 15 ppb. This is the same level that the Environmental Protection Agency requires in homes. You can go online at pps.net/Page/5378 to see the levels for each faucet in a school. Scroll to your school & click on the 2017-2018 results.

Why didn't you use filters before?
PPS has used filters in the past. However, the filters were not properly selected and maintained. During the investigation of water fixtures in 2016, a total of 920 filters were discovered, yet no established maintenance program existed and many of the filters were not effective in reducing lead.

Will the pilot study save the district money?
If the pilot study is successful, the district may save the millions of dollars necessary to replace plumbing. At the same time, the lead levels could be much lower.

How often will the filters be changed?
This is one of the data points that will be determined during the pilot. At this point we believe that these filters will last between six months and one year.

How will PPS guarantee that the filters will be changed on time?
We will monitor each DWS to track lead levels until the filter needs to be changed. This will also provide an accurate estimate of annual maintenance costs.

How long does the pilot program run?
Currently the program is scheduled to take place from the summer 2019 to January of 2020. This will allow us to calculate annual maintenance costs. If Drinking Water Station performance is still acceptable at the end of this period, we will likely continue the program at the six schools. If this pilot project proves successful, we will look at expanding to all PPS schools.

When will you know if this is a success?
We will evaluate the results in January of 2020 and from there determine next steps.

How much will the pilot program cost?
The pilot is projected to cost $220,000. This is compared with $1.2 million to partially replace plumbing for the six schools. We estimate it would cost a little over $3 million to install DWS across the entire district.

What if I don't want my child to participate in this pilot program?
PPS will make a limited number of bottled water stations available. However, keep in mind that each DWS in the pilot will be performing as designed if the pilot project is active.

What happens to the regular drinking fixtures at the school?
The existing drinking fixtures will be disabled during the pilot program.

Do the students and staff need to do anything different to use the custom engineered drinking water stations?

We are recommending student and staff bring a water bottle. There will also be bubblers to drink from at the stations. A main difference is that there will be fewer places to get water in the school so having access to a refillable bottle will work best.

What is a safe level of lead in drinking water?
This is a question for our state and federal health authorities. Oregon Health Authority recently issued rules that specify that drinking water in schools must be below 15 ppb. PPS is in compliance with those standards but through this pilot program we believe that it may be technically and economically possible to reduce lead levels to as low as 1 part per billion (1 ppb) in schools across the district.

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