Gas leak sends Polk County students, faculty to hospital
Emergency vehicles line the street in response to an emergency in Polk County.

*mike dirks/times-news
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**Facts**

**At a glance**

Carbon monoxide, or CO, is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death. CO is found in combustion fumes, such as those produced by cars and trucks, small gasoline engines, stoves, lanterns, burning charcoal and wood, and gas ranges and heating systems. CO from these sources can build up in enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces. People and animals in these spaces can be poisoned by breathing it.

* Do have your heating system, water heater and any other gas, oil or coal burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician every year.
* Do install a battery-operated CO detector in your home and check or replace the battery when you change the time on your clocks each spring and fall. If the detector sounds leave your home immediately and call 911.
* Do seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed or nauseous.
* Don't use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove or other gasoline or charcoal-burning device inside your home, basement, or garage or near a window.
* Don't run a car or truck inside a garage attached to your house, even if you leave the door open.
* Don't burn anything in a stove or fireplace that isn't vented.
* Don't heat your house with a gas oven.

source: Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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The hospital had just practiced last week for a large-scale disaster. But this was no drill. An alternative high school in Columbus had been inundated with toxic carbon monoxide gas, sending 32 students and faculty to the hospital.

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Students get sick

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Shortly after starting class Monday, around 9:30, Warren smelled something. The other students noticed the smell as well, but everyone kept working.

“It was weird,” she said. “At first it started to stink, and then I got dizzy.”

Other students became nauseous and some felt faint. Realizing the situation was dire, the students started to exit the building. Warren walked outside and saw her friend fall onto the ground.

Ashley Worthington walked out of the school with her friend. She thought about going across the street to the Sheriff’s Office and alerting somebody about the emergency.

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“I turned around and everybody was passing out all around,” she said. Worthington said she had smelled the fumes, but assumed it was not a problem. Lows dropped to the low 30s early Monday, and the building was cold. The school decided to turn on the heat for the first time this year and warm the building.

“We just figured it was because the heat had been turned on,” Warren said. Emergency personnel arrived.

Police County Sheriff Chris Abril was one of the first at the scene. He assessed the situation and called for support. He looked around and there was a kid laying on the ground,” Abril said. “I parked the car and got out and more kids started passing out.” He attended to a couple of the youth on the ground and went inside the building. He saw several students and helped them outside into the fresh air.

Law enforcement from the Polk County Sheriff’s Office and Columbus Police Department arrived. Emergency personnel from Polk County EMS, Polk County Fire Department, Saluda Fire and Rescue, Sunny View Fire Department and Landrum Fire Department arrived.

Walker Street was blocked off and dozens of emergency and law enforcement personnel lined the streets. A news helicopter hovered over the scene and within minutes news media outlets from around the region had descended on Columbus.

The students who showed apparent signs of carbon monoxide poisoning were loaded into ambulances and transported to St. Luke’s. The rest of the students and faculty were placed on a bus and sent to the hospital for observation.

“We transported all the students to St. Luke’s Hospital whether they were feeling bad or not,” Polk County Schools Superintendent Bill Miller said.

Columbus Fire Chief Geoffrey Tennant said the students had been subjected to carbon monoxide poisoning for about an hour. Once the students were evacuated, firefighters opened doors and windows to air out the building. Emergency personnel took three carbon monoxide detectors and made sure all of the harmful gas was out of the building. The school did not have carbon monoxide detectors, and Miller said schools do not generally have them. Tennant, a county School Board member, said he would make sure the building had carbon monoxide detectors before students are allowed back in the building.

Patients arrived.

St. Luke’s Hospital was ready for the large group of students.

Assistant Director of Engineering Keith White called extra nurses and other staff to the hospital. It also contacted surrounding hospitals, making sure extra beds were available if needed.

Students were brought directly to the emergency room waiting area. Staff took down each patient’s name and did an initial evaluation. A few were rushed to the emergency room for treatment and others were placed in rooms for observation and treatment.

Dr. Lonnie Lassiter said the standard treatment for carbon monoxide poisoning is oxygen. The students and faculty were given oxygen and tested, making sure the carbon monoxide had left their systems.

“Their exposure was at the level that it did not need intervention,” he said.

When people are exposed to carbon monoxide, red blood cells are not able to take in oxygen, and they experience oxygen deprivation. Lassiter did not believe any student lost consciousness, but said many were sleepy and had nausea and headaches.

Lassiter said carbon monoxide poisoning is common this time of year. People turn on heaters for the first time and don’t realize pipes have broken or the system has malfunctioned.

“This is the type of poisoning we get in the United States,” Lassiter said.

A total of 32 people were treated, including five faculty members. By early Monday evening, only two students remained at the hospital and none were expected to stay overnight.

The school district contacted parents shortly after the emergency started. They began arriving within minutes and waited anxiously while their children received treatment.

Tonya Horton
nervously checked her watch while waiting for word about her son, Cody, 15. </p><p>“It's scared me to death,” she said. “I talked to him just before they (paramedics) brought him over here and his voice was kind of cracking and he said he had a headache.”</p><p>In an exchange of text messages with her daughter, Amber, Tasha Holt said her daughter's words of panic said it all. Holt said she talked to her daughter through text messages as the students were being evacuated from the school. No one from the school system notified her to tell her about what was happening at the school, she said.</p><p>Displaying the text message on her cell phone, Amber's message read: “There’s a carbon monoxide leak. Everyone is sick. My knees are shaking. I think Ashley's passed out. I'm scared.”</p><p>Amber walked out of the hospital a few hours later. She was scared during the incident but was pleased that everybody was safe.</p><p>What went wrong?</p><p>The school building, the old county library, has been vacant for years, according to Polk County Manager Ryan Whitson said. The county reddid the roof and relocated the Court Clerk's office into the building last year. The clerk's office occupied the building for around a year before the county sold the building to the school district last year. The district remodeled the interior for the Virtual Early College, which opened in August.</p><p>Miller said the cause of the poisoning is under investigation. He said it was unclear if it was “some kind of a gas leak or a furnace malfunction.” Miller was not sure the manufacturer of the furnace at the school but said it was a natural gas-fired boiler. The North Carolina Department of Labor, which inspect school furnaces, inspected the unit July 10 and found it “satisfactory.”</p><p>The school's insurance company also approved the system, according to Miller.</p><p>Tennant said it appeared the carbon monoxide got into the central heating system at the school.</p><p>“It appears there was a stoppage in the vent pipes,” Tennant said.</p><p>North Carolina Department of Labor spokeswoman Dolores Quesenberry said the department had learned about the incident Monday. The school district had called and informed the department. She said based on a phone conversation, it appeared the incident was caused by the ventilation system and not the boiler.</p><p>Quesenberry said the Boiler Safety Bureau is not opening an investigation into the incident but the Division of Occupational Safety and Health could investigate because of concerns about workplace safety.</p><p>Maintenance crews from the school district will investigate the incident and determine the cause, Miller said. The district plans to keep the Virtual Early College closed for a day or two so the heating system can be tested and run for an extended period of time.</p><p>“We want to make sure it is safe with the gas heater,” Miller said.</p><p>Reporters Mark Schumalan and Leigh Kelley contributed to this report. </p><p>Copyright 2015 BlueRidgeNow.com - All rights reserved. Restricted use only. 

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