



## **CMS Facts** Questions and Answers

This is a frequently asked question (FAQ) document regarding Covington Middle School and its evacuation on Jan. 31. This information will be updated to provide a centralized place to access the most recent information. We are doing everything to protect our children and staff. This information is to the best of our current knowledge.

This document has been updated frequently since its original posting on Feb. 1. Information is accurate at this time and the investigation is ongoing. As a reminder, words underlined in blue are hyperlinks. This is the seventeenth update and was published on Feb. 18.

Beginning with the sixth update, additional headings have been added and questions additionally organized for readability.

### **Information Specific to Jan. 31**

#### **What happened at CMS on Friday, Jan. 31?**

Students and staff were evacuated to the nearby Covington Recreation Center as a precaution after an odor was detected in the building. The evacuation was very orderly and students were supervised by AHPS staff while in the Recreation Center. The evacuation occurred at approximately 2:20 PM on the advice of Covington Public Works. The evacuation is described as precautionary because it was requested so that further investigation could occur. The Covington Fire Department immediately investigated and found no immediate concerns in the building.

#### **What information has AHPS released about Jan. 31?**

On Friday, Jan. 31, AHPS released an initial statement to the news media at approximately 3:20 p.m. The information was also available on AHPS' social media pages and the division website. A link to the news release is available here: [https://www.ahps.k12.va.us/news/district\\_headlines/statement\\_on\\_cms\\_precautionary\\_evacuation](https://www.ahps.k12.va.us/news/district_headlines/statement_on_cms_precautionary_evacuation)

On Saturday, Feb. 1, AHPS received a follow-up news release at approximately 12:25 a.m. The information was also available on AHPS' social media pages and the division website. A link to the news release is available here:

[https://www.ahps.k12.va.us/news/district\\_headlines/ahps\\_assessing\\_cms\\_after\\_evacuation](https://www.ahps.k12.va.us/news/district_headlines/ahps_assessing_cms_after_evacuation)

On Saturday, Feb. 1, at approximately 8 AM, parents and AHPS staff received an automated call that updated our thorough investigation at the school. Parents and staff also received texts and emails alerting them to the updated information.

A variety of [documents](#) are now available on our website that may help the public.

Please note that AHPS media releases are sent to a large variety of local and regional media outlets. This is a routine practice of AHPS.

## **Information About Specific Dates Other Than Jan. 31**

### **What happened on Oct. 4 at CMS and are families aware?**

The following message was provided to families on Oct. 4 from AHPS.

“A gas smell was reported at CMS near the family and consumer sciences lab. Staff quickly investigated and determined a stove was accidentally turned on. The stove is now turned off. The students and staff are safe. Thank you for your support.”

It has been again confirmed that the Family and Consumer Sciences stove was a gas stove and that this stove was removed from the school in the fall. Because the stove in the Family and Consumer Sciences area was not needed for instruction, the gas line to the stove was also “capped off.”

Please note that the message above from Oct. 4 is about an oven in the Family and Consumer Sciences classroom area and is unrelated to the Feb. 2 situation with the cafeteria oven. The oven in the Family and Consumer Sciences area was not used for instruction or cooking, had been accidentally turned on, was not malfunctioning, and was removed from the building in the fall because it was not needed. There is no indication that the oven was on for a long period of time. The fact that this classroom oven was turned on unexpectedly on Oct. 4 was rapidly noticed by staff and promptly addressed.

This issue was noticed promptly thanks to good safety routines developed by staff. We are very thankful our staff had the daily practice of checking the classroom equipment.

### **What happened on Oct. 7 in the Covington community?**

On Oct. 7, there was a train derailment near Covington. It has been widely reported in the news media that the train cars contained coal.

### **What happened on Oct. 9 at CMS and are families aware?**

The following message was provided to families on Oct. 9 from AHPS.

“Good afternoon, CMS Families. Due to the cold weather, a heating unit at CMS attempted to start, releasing a small amount of gas and causing a light smell in the auditorium. The unit is off and there is no emergency. Thank you.”

On this date, there was also a gas leak in the vicinity of the Covington CVS pharmacy. We are aware that there may have been some confusion in the community because CVS and CMS are similar names.

### **Was there a natural gas leak on Jan. 14?**

There was a gas leak near but not inside of CMS on Jan. 14 caused by utility work nearby in the community. This information was shared widely through AHPS communications. Students were relocated because the leak occurred just before the typical school arrival time.

Additional information about the response on Jan. 14 is also available online via the school board [memo](#) associated with this event.

### **Was there a natural gas leak on Jan. 16?**

It was widely speculated that there was a natural gas leak at CMS on Thursday, Jan. 16. There was no gas leak. An odor was noticed in a broad area of the Allegheny Highlands and it originated from an industrial source. There was appropriate community follow-up from AHPS and Covington Emergency Management to ensure the odor had been assessed.

### **What happened on Oct. 16, 2023 at CMS?**

On Oct. 16, 2023, rumors that a student had a weapon at CMS resulted in a lockdown of the school. There was no weapon. [More information is available online.](#)

## Health Information

### **I have a loved one in the CMS community. How do I find out more about what I should do about their health?**

As always, seek medical care from qualified healthcare providers for any health situation or concern. Please consider, as appropriate, your primary care provider, emergency services, our regional poison center, and others based on your unique need.

As a citizen, you can always call poison control to help with emergencies and any questions about poison emergencies. The [Blue Ridge Poison Center](#) can be reached directly at 1-800-451-1428, is focused on our region, and may be reached at all times. Calls to poison centers are confidential and free. Poison centers give expert advice 24/7/365.

Online resources that may assist you include but are not limited to information on [carbon monoxide poisoning](#) and information on [norovirus](#). These links are from Johns Hopkins web pages. Additionally, the AHPS team has created a [document comparing these medical conditions](#). The sources used in creating this document are linked at the end of the document. Again, the AHPS team cannot provide the medical assessment and personal advice you can receive from a qualified provider.

### **What is carboxyhemoglobin?**

Carboxyhemoglobin is a compound formed in the blood by the binding of carbon monoxide to hemoglobin. It cannot absorb or transport oxygen. More information is available on a [specific document about carbon monoxide exposure and carboxyhemoglobin](#) provided to us by the Virginia Department of Health on Feb. 7.

Importantly, carboxyhemoglobin levels in individuals and environmental carbon monoxide levels in the atmosphere/air are two different concepts.

### **Where can I find general information on carbon monoxide exposure and carboxyhemoglobin?**

On Feb. 7, the Virginia Department of Health shared a [specific document about carbon monoxide exposure and carboxyhemoglobin](#) that is available on our website. On Feb.

12, the Roanoke City - Alleghany Health District released its [periodic newsletter](#) with a special focus on carbon monoxide. The newsletter includes a [helpful video](#).

**My child's carboxyhemoglobin level has been elevated the week of Feb. 3. Is this related to CMS?**

[Per the Virginia Department of Health on Feb. 7](#), the investigation of the CMS event on Jan. 31 has been completed. The findings of elevated carboxyhemoglobin levels that have been reported to the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts on and after Monday, Feb. 3, cannot be attributed to the Jan. 31 event. RCAHD is conducting an ongoing investigation of the more recent findings provided by local healthcare providers.

Please consult with your child's healthcare provider and/or Blue Ridge Poison Center, 1-800-451-1428, as needed. The poison control provides free and confidential advice 24/7/365.

**I gave health information to an independent person in the community. Has this information reached appropriate authorities?**

Individuals may certainly share their health information with any party they choose. AHPS cannot guarantee information shared with an independent individual in the community has reached any other organization.

**I want AHPS to release health records to the general public. Can AHPS do that?**

No. You may be interested in the work of the [Virginia Department of Health](#).

**Should carboxyhemoglobin testing centers be set up for students and staff?**

AHPS has been in frequent consultation with the Roanoke City - Alleghany Health District (RCAHD). Their organization is part of the Virginia Department of Health, and they have not recommended large-scale testing of asymptomatic individuals who are not experiencing symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.

RCAHD is currently investigating any new reports (reports received since Sunday, Feb. 2) and working with the most impacted healthcare facility to determine potential explanations for these findings. They have shared that since the school has been closed since Friday, Jan. 31, new reports of carbon monoxide exposure are unlikely to be connected to the investigation at the middle school. This information is also included in a [Feb. 20 update](#) from the Virginia Department of Health.

## **Can poison control help?**

The [Blue Ridge Poison Center](#) can be reached directly at 1-800-451-1428, is focused on our region, and may be reached at all times. Poison control centers including the Blue Ridge Poison Center work with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Virginia Department of Health as needed. However, poison control centers mostly interact directly with individual patients, physicians, and nurses. Anyone can call them at any time.

From any location in the US and at any time, individuals can also call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222. Calls to this number may be routed to a variety of poison centers in the country.

Calls to poison centers are confidential and free. Experts at poison centers give expert advice 24/7/365.

Importantly, please be reminded AHPS cannot provide specific health advice that should be provided by another source. Please contact your healthcare provider if you need individual assessment and/or advice. It is best for persons who have questions about carbon monoxide exposure to contact either their local poison center or a healthcare professional.

## **I am learning more about carbon monoxide and want to better understand how to keep my home safe as well. What resources are available?**

A [helpful video](#) from the Spokane Fire Department was located by local health authorities and broadly shared in the region. It may help you. Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQgzeSxbTzs>

The [Blue Ridge Poison Center](#) can be reached directly at 1-800-451-1428, is focused on our region, and may be reached at all times 24/7/365. They can help with direct questions you may have about your particular situation.

## **Continuity of Learning**

**Does CMS have a plan for the continuity of learning (virtual learning)?**

Yes. More information is available in a [separate document](#) online that has also been shared with families and staff. The plan involves virtual learning. On any weather closure days that may occur, CMS will continue virtual instruction to help make up for instructional time missed to date.

Please note that the initial letter describing this continuity of learning plan indicates that the school will be physically closed at least two weeks with possible weeklong extensions. This letter is [available online](#). We have added an additional question below for extra clarity on this point.

### **How long will CMS students learn virtually?**

While we appreciate that multiple parties have not found circumstances in the building that would cause the closure of schools, we are responding to the community by taking extra precautions including the completion of an environmental study.

Please note that the initial letter describing this continuity of learning plan indicates that the school will be physically closed at least two weeks with possible weeklong extensions. This letter is [available online](#).

### **Can CMS students receive meals?**

Yes. Detailed information is available in a [separate document](#) online. Given recent inclement weather, interested individuals should also check for any available updates via AHPS communications regarding food pick up.

### **I know a CMS student who may benefit from tutoring. What resources are available from AHPS?**

While additional resources are likely to become available, one such resource is our existing relationship with Varsity Tutors. Information about Varsity Tutors was shared widely through local media outlets in Jan. 2024, and this resource remains available. More information is available through our related [Varsity Tutors press release](#).

Because Varsity Tutors provides services to a variety of school systems and individuals, it is important to [review the press release](#) and use the existing relationship between AHPS and Varsity Tutors to access services through our arrangement.

### **I would like my child to speak with a school counselor. Is this possible?**

Certainly. CMS counselors are available through Jeter-Watson Elementary School during the school day. Please call 540-965-1410 to make arrangements for your child to speak with a counselor as appropriate.

If your child attends another AHPS school, please call that school office and ask to speak with a counselor.

## How to Help

### **I know some information that may be helpful. How do I share it with AHPS?**

AHPS has a dedicated email address currently in use for this purpose. It is [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us). This is an efficient way to share information at any hour or on any day. AHPS leaders are monitoring this email collaboratively so that the most accurate information can be shared. As always, please do not use email to share emergency information.

## Available Documentation

### **Is there a report from an agency or company that I can review?**

AHPS is working with appropriate authorities including the Covington Emergency Manager, the Alleghany County Emergency Manager, the Virginia Department of Health, and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. We are collaborating so that we have the best possible information from a variety of professional backgrounds. The most up-to-date information we have from these experts is available on our [website](#).

Please note that the Virginia Department of Health and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management are agencies that are independent of AHPS. Superintendent staff have made frequent contact with these agencies throughout their investigations. The agencies have shared their expertise freely with the AHPS team. Everyone involved is committed to providing accurate information, and we provide information we know to be accurate at the time of its publication.

The Virginia Department of Health released a [statement on Feb. 20](#) that is very helpful to review.

AHPS is working with a large variety of experts to determine any adjustments that may be advisable.



The Department of Health is working with local healthcare providers, including laboratory managers, Blue Ridge Poison Control (BRPC), the state toxicologist, the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and others to systematically investigate possible factors related to the recent cluster of reports.

The ongoing, evolving investigation is likely to take several weeks. Activities include:

- An ongoing preliminary investigation pertaining to lab quality assurance.
- Individual case investigations are currently underway to determine other potential sources for carbon monoxide in the community. Patient privacy will continue to be protected.
- Regular discussions with BRPC, DEQ and others to better understand this evolving situation.
- As the investigation continues, residents are encouraged to survey their personal living space to eliminate any sources of carbon monoxide (see *below*) and install carbon monoxide detectors in their residences.

### **Has any other group released a public statement about this situation?**

The Covington Division of Police provided Facebook updates on Jan. 31 at 3:11 PM. An additional Covington public safety media release was sent to local outlets on Feb. 1 at 4:44 PM. As a courtesy, this [release](#) is also shared on our website.

Please also note that the Virginia Department of Emergency Management has reviewed our [letter](#) released on Feb. 2 and informed this communication at our request.

As of Feb. 5, a variety of information from sources independent of AHPS is also included on the [AHPS website](#). Please note that much of this information was received mid-day Feb. 5.

On Feb. 7, the Virginia Department of Health announced that elevated levels of carboxyhemoglobin reported on and after Feb. 3 cannot be attributed to Jan. 31 at CMS. This information is included in this [statement available on our website](#).

On Feb. 20, the Virginia Department of Health also released an [additional statement](#).

### **Do AHPS employees have this information that AHPS has released?**

Yes. Employees have received emails to keep them informed. In addition, employees receive automated calls and texts as part of our communications. The calls and texts direct them to our webpage and social media pages where more information is available.

AHPS employees have been reminded to also monitor AHPS communications. Additionally, the CMS faculty and staff received a presentation from the Virginia Department of Health on Feb. 11.

### **Has the Alleghany Highlands School Board been briefed?**

Yes. The superintendent and staff are keeping school board members apprised through various forms of communication appropriate to school division policies and practices. AHPS is actively implementing its crisis plan that was [approved by the Alleghany Highlands School Board](#) on Aug. 19.

To find out more about our school board meetings, please visit our [website](#). At the school board's Aug. 19 meeting, the board was briefed on updates to the website to provide additional information about how to navigate it. We know there is a lot of information on our website and encourage you to call 540-863-1800 during regular office hours if you have a related question.

### **Is the Virginia Department of Education aware?**

Yes. Superintendent-level staff have shared information with appropriate Virginia Department of Education staff.

## **Building-Related Questions**

### **I've noticed that some division and school leaders are spending time in CMS. Is this safe?**

Yes. Both division and school leaders are cooperating with the ongoing investigation. This means that sometimes, we are needed in the building to support the work of the individuals who are helping, and sometimes, we are continuing our work in support of the school division elsewhere to ensure their investigation can proceed appropriately. We are acting per their requests.

### **Are there appropriate fire exits at CMS?**

Yes. CMS has multiple staircases from all floors that provide pathways to exit the building as part of the fire exit plan. There are also evacuation chairs for anyone with a physical disability or injury if needed. The school, like all AHPS schools, practices fire drills.

Fire exits are required to remain free from clutter and debris at all times. The fire marshal requires records of these fire drills as well as safety inspection sheets that include information on buildings and required items that must be checked monthly.

### **Is there any construction at CMS that might have created any concern?**

There is no active construction at CMS. There has also been no painting since the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year.

### **Does CMS have an occupancy certificate?**

[Yes](#), and the certificate itself is posted on our website. The cumulative occupancy of the building, most recently updated by a qualified building official in 2024, is currently 1370. CMS currently has approximately 593 students. On any given day, CMS also has staff and visitors. We do not approach this occupancy limit.

### **Are other AHPS buildings safe?**

Safety is our top priority. Our buildings are safe and secure. The fact that a supervisor of safety and security was hired last fall demonstrates that the safety and well-being of our students and staff is a top priority.

Again, you may email any specific questions or concerns to [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us). This email is available in multiple AHPS communications, and it is being used to centralize communications and help us determine the types of information that may be needed in this FAQ document.

You may also refer specific questions about specific buildings to school principals or call 540-863-1800 for assistance in doing so. Please note that school principals do not typically have detailed information about mechanical systems. Questions of this nature should be referred to the central office.

If you have some form of emergency, please make sure to contact the most appropriate authority immediately. Do not use email for an emergency.

## **Is there a dead bird inside CMS that may be causing a smell?**

The AHPS maintenance and custodial team were recently directed to complete a double check for any bird that may have entered the building per student reports. This work included looking behind bookshelves and similar actions. No dead bird has been found.

CMS, like all AHPS schools, receives regular checks from a qualified exterminator.

## **What new protocols will be in place to prevent concerns for carbon monoxide?**

AHPS is working with a large variety of experts to determine any adjustments that may be advisable.

## **Is carbon monoxide related to sewer issues, either inside the building or in the community?**

Per a [statement received from the Virginia Department of Health released on Feb. 20](#), carbon monoxide is produced when materials burn. It is not typical for carbon monoxide exposures to be related to sewers. For more information, please use the [link](#).

## **Additional Questions**

### **Why is so much communication about CMS web-based?**

AHPS is committed to clear communication, and it is important to our community that there be centralized information that can be broadly referenced. As a reminder, the [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us) email is available for questions that may need to be asked by individuals and may require a personalized response.

AHPS created a dedicated call-in line on Feb. 2 for questions from individuals. That phone line received very little response despite advertisement through AHPS communications.

### **How are AHPS school evacuation decisions made?**

AHPS school evacuation decisions are made in accordance with an approved crisis plan that all employees must follow. For safety reasons, this plan cannot be public.

On Jan. 31, AHPS cooperated with a request from Covington Public Works so that the building could be more thoroughly checked for any concerns.

AHPS is actively implementing its crisis plan that was [approved by the Alleghany Highlands School Board](#) on Aug. 19.

**I am thinking about the situation on Oct. 16, 2023, and I wonder how school lockdown and shelter-in-place decisions are made. Can you tell me?**

AHPS developed a [Fact Sheet to help explain the difference in lockdown and shelter in place](#). This Fact Sheet has been shared previously through AHPS communications.

Our [information about Oct. 16, 2023](#), is available online.

Information about how the Alleghany Highlands School Board certifies the school division's crisis plans is available in this FAQ document.

### **How are AHPS school closure decisions made?**

For [weather](#) and [illness](#), general practices for deciding about the need to close, delay, or otherwise alter school schedules have been available on the AHPS website and shared through AHPS communications repeatedly.

AHPS works with local law enforcement, the National Weather Service and the AHPS team to assess potential hazards as appropriate.

### **Will AHPS interim reports be sent home as scheduled on Feb. 13?**

As of Feb. 10, school is remote for all of AHPS due to inclement weather through Feb. 13. In general, AHPS will distribute interim reports on the second day students return in person. If a different plan is developed for CMS, we will update CMS families through routine communications channels.

As always, families with questions about their child's progress can contact their child's school at any time.

CMS parents should also use the ParentPortal feature within PowerSchool to monitor student progress. Any parent with questions can reach out to the school or to [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us).

**I have a specific concern and need to follow up. How do I share it with AHPS?**

AHPS has a dedicated email address currently in use for this purpose. It is [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us). This is an efficient way to share information at any hour or on any day. AHPS leaders are monitoring this email collaboratively so that the most accurate information can be shared.

If you have already emailed an AHPS staff member, you may receive a response from the [AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:AHPSinfo@ahps.k12.va.us) account.