

CMS STATUS UPDATE:

Back to School!

This website is the primary source for updates on the January 31, 2025 incident at Covington Middle School. Updates will include details related to building maintenance and upgrades, and reopening procedures. After several weeks of virtual learning, Covington Middle School returned to in-person instruction on Tuesday, March 18, 2025. Teachers and staff returned to the building on Monday, March 17. There were no virtual classes for students on that day.



What Happened:

On January 31, 2025, students and teachers in the third-floor hallway at the front of the building reported a strong, unidentified odor. Several individuals in the same area also began feeling unwell.

After standard janitorial and maintenance procedures failed to determine the source, students and staff were moved across the street to the Community Center for further investigation. During this transfer, one official involved in the investigation became visibly ill, and EMS was called. While on-site, another staff member also sought medical attention. Students were then dismissed following standard procedures, and additional specialists were brought in to assess the situation.

Incident Evaluation:

A team of experts, including local fire and EMS, Roanoke Regional Hazmat, Virginia Department of Health (VDH), and Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), was called to investigate. On February 2, VDEM identified two mechanical issues in the first-floor kitchen:

- An inefficiently burning stove was removed, and the gas line was capped.
- An overhead exhaust fan operating below peak efficiency was repaired.

During this time, school leadership received unofficial reports of students and teachers seeking medical testing, with some showing elevated carboxyhemoglobin levels, an indicator of potential carbon monoxide exposure. Since carbon monoxide is odorless, it was unclear whether these health reports were linked to the third-floor odor and symptoms. Out of an abundance of caution, school leadership:

- Kept the building closed and shifted students to virtual learning.
- Engaged two independent companies to conduct full-building air quality and mechanical assessments.

Current Status:

After following expert testing and analysis from multiple state and local agencies and reviewing two detailed private engineering reports, prepared by ECS MidAtlantic, LLC and Facility Dynamics Engineering (FDE), the AHPs School Board confirmed their confidence that the building meets all necessary safety standards and approved the return to in-person instruction on March 18, 2025.

Through these efforts, AHPs leadership identified several additional opportunities to improve the building environment during this closure period, including:

- Repairing an older air handling unit (RTU-4) on the third floor
- Cleaning the boiler room to remove excess moisture
- Repainting the boys' locker room to more completely repair previous water damage
- Cleaning out radiators throughout the building
- Completing a full deep cleaning to refresh the full interior learning environment

The two most recent engineering reports are available below. All other building inspection and incident reports are available in the transparency archive.

At this time, AHPs has completed their primary investigative effort and teachers and students have returned to school. However, ongoing analysis will continue in order to ensure all learnings from this incident are captured and applied to future planning efforts and policy recommendations.

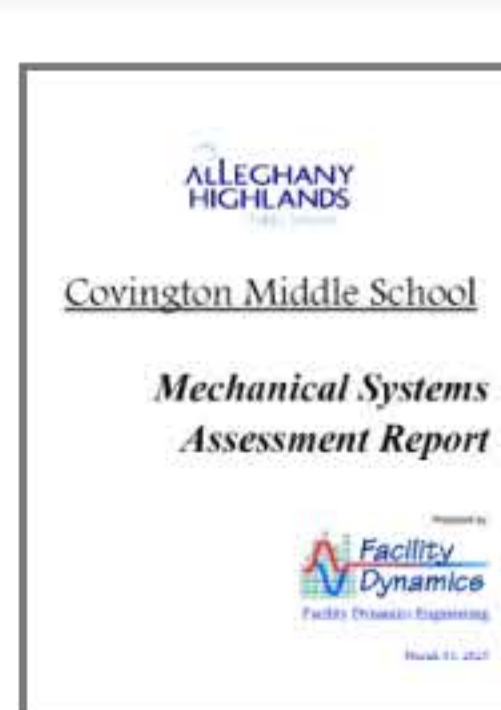
NEW REPORTS

Clearing the Way for Return to In-Person Instruction



Air Quality Report

ECS Mid-Atlantic, LLC (ECS) was hired to provide Allegheny Highlands School Board (AHSB) with Indoor Air Quality Testing Services performed at Covington Middle School located at 606 South Lexington Avenue in Covington, Virginia. This report summarizes their observations, analytical results, findings, and recommendations related to the work performed.



Building System Inspection

Facility Dynamics Engineering (FDE) was hired to evaluate Covington Middle School's building mechanical systems with a focus on performance, safety, and efficiency. The safety and efficiency aspect of this investigation focused primarily on the air side of the building's mechanical systems. This report summarizes their observations, results, findings, and recommendations.

Incident Timeline

Covington Middle School receives a report of an unusual smell on the third floor of the school. Simultaneously, a few students and teachers report not feeling well.

When the source of the smell could not be identified, students, teachers, and staff were moved across the street to the community center to allow for a more complete evaluation.

That staff member and one other were treated on the scene. One person was transported to the hospital for further evaluation.

After the students and teachers were removed from the school, a variety of state and local response resources offered assistance with the building assessment and began arriving that afternoon. These community partners worked late into the night.

AHPs released an update via a press release at 12:30 AM indicating appropriate follow-up investigations would continue through the weekend. AHPs staff would continue to check the building with the assistance of appropriate authorities.

Saturday afternoon, AHPs staff learned that VDEM and the Roanoke Hazmat team also planned to return on Sunday for additional testing.

On Sunday, VDEM reported that they had identified two possibly related issues. They both involved mechanical equipment malfunctions in the cafeteria kitchen on the first-floor of the building.

A decision was made to immediately remove the stove and cap the corresponding gas line. This was completed the same day.

At this point, VDEM closed their investigation.

School was closed.

Several teachers and CMS community family members attended and spoke out clearly about their safety concerns during public comment.

Tuesday, Feb 4, 2025

When it became apparent that the additional air quality and building system inspection would take more time than originally anticipated, AHPs made the decision to move students to a virtual learning environment to limit learning loss.

Students and teachers transitioned to virtual classroom settings but continued to meet synchronously for each supervised class.

Tuesday, Feb 11, 2025 - Tuesday, Mar 17, 2025

Two private engineering firms were hired by AHPs to conduct an air quality study as well as a facilities equipment analysis.

The School Board also directed School Administration to implement all ancillary maintenance and upgrade recommendations as advised by the various subject matter experts as quickly as was responsibly feasible.

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

An unknown odor was reported on the third floor of Covington Middle School. The description of this odor was consistent with the odor detected on January 31st, 2025.

Following an investigation by AHPs Staff, as well as the Covington Police Chief and Emergency Manager, it was determined the odor did not require an evacuation.

Teachers were allowed to move classes to another location in the building to help students concentrate on coursework.

Parents were provided an update via robocall that morning.

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Friday, January 31, 2025

CMS investigated the situation using standard response procedures. Initial response was led by our custodial and maintenance staff.

During this relocation of students and teachers, one of the staff members who had been helping to investigate the source of the smell became ill and an ambulance was called.

Students were dismissed using standard procedures.

As of late Friday night, the source of the odor had not been identified. There were no indications of a natural gas leak. Several checks were completed with the assistance of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Roanoke Valley Regional Hazardous Materials Team. There were no concerns with the boiler system and no concerns for sewer backup.

Saturday, February 1, 2025

On Saturday, staff ran building systems in an attempt to recreate conditions from the previous day and planned to test again on Sunday.

School system leadership learned through continued community reports that additional parents and teachers were seeking medical support and carboxyhemoglobin testing.

Sunday, Feb 2, 2025

An older stove was reported to be burning inefficiently upon start up, and an exhaust fan had a loose belt resulting in less-than-optimal air flow.

The belt for the exhaust fan was also repaired.

However, because the location of the malfunctioning equipment was relatively far from the third-floor reports that triggered the original investigation, school leaders decided to act out of an abundance of caution and investigate further. The Virginia Department of Health endorsed this decision.

Monday, Feb 3, 2025

A school board meeting was held Monday Feb. 3, 2025 at the Middle School to provide an opportunity for the public to see inside the building for themselves.

The School Board met in a special work session and made the decision to keep the schools closed until an independent air quality and building systems engineering assessment could be completed.

Wednesday, Feb 5, 2025

Parents were notified that afternoon.

Monday, Feb 10, 2025

Students, teachers, and staff transition to virtual learning.

The school board met in special session Wed. March 11 to consider the final air quality and building systems reports. In this meeting, they directed staff to announce the reopening of Covington Middle School the next week with a teacher workday scheduled for Monday March 17th and student return on a regular schedule March 18, 2025.

Students return to in person instruction at Covington Middle School.

Monday, March 31, 2025

The odor reportedly returned, but disappeared quickly. No further actions were deemed necessary. An email update was sent to parents that evening.