

May 16, 2025

To Whom It May Concern,

Enclosed is a report from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) summarizing a February 2025 visit to Covington Middle School by VDOE staff members A.K. Vijay Ramnarain and Ann Belanger. The visit followed the school division's outreach to VDOE in early February following the January 31 incident.

The report, dated March 7, 2025, was received electronically by the school division on the evening of May 1, 2025. It provides an overview of conditions observed at the time, as well as commendations for the school's facilities management. We appreciate the VDOE's observations, documentation, and support.

As you review this information, please note that this was a rapidly evolving situation. In the approximately eleven weeks between the site visit and the division's receipt of the report, several additional actions were taken that improved our situational awareness. Among them:

- **Gas Safety:** The building has undergone repeated inspections, and no natural gas leaks have been detected.
- **Air Quality:** According to the March 3, 2025, air quality report by ECS, the odor reported on January 31 was most likely occupant-produced. Carbon monoxide was ruled out, as it is odorless. Additional testing revealed that enhanced ventilation could help mitigate future odor concerns. The AHPS School Board authorized HVAC system enhancements accordingly.
- **Boiler Room Improvements:** Surplus items have been removed, an upgraded backflow preventer was installed, and Consolidated Construction was engaged to assist with deep cleaning.
- **Ceiling Repairs:** Damaged ceiling tiles noted during these inspections have been replaced, and no active water intrusion was detected.

The Alleghany Highlands Public School Division remains committed to maintaining safe and healthy learning environments across our facilities and thanks the VDOE and countless other dedicated partners for their continued support in helping us achieve these important goals.



P.O. DRAWER 140, 100 CENTRAL CIRCLE  
LOW MOOR, VA 24457

If you have additional questions, please contact us at [ahpsinfo@ahps.k12.va.us](mailto:ahpsinfo@ahps.k12.va.us).

Sincerely,

Kimberly K. Halterman  
Superintendent  
Alleghany Highlands Public Schools

# Alleghany Highlands Public Schools Covington Middle School Facility Visit

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Site Visit: February 10, 2025

Report: March 7, 2025



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## **Survey Team**

A. K. (Vijay) Ramnarain  
Director, Support Services  
Virginia Department of Education

Ann Belanger  
Architectural Consultant  
Virginia Department of Education

## Foreword

The division superintendent of Alleghany Highlands Public Schools (AHPS), Ms. Kimberly Halterman, requested the assistance of the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in having a team of professional specialists survey the school after an incident resulting in an evacuation of Covington Middle School on January 31, 2025. The VDOE team visited AHPS on March 10, 2025, and met with the superintendent and staff to discuss the details of the evacuation and their concerns.

The superintendent asked the team to review the events leading up to the evacuation and steps the school division has taken since then to ensure the safety of the students and staff at Covington Middle School.

The team hopes that the results of this evaluation for AHPS as it moves forward in reopening the school. The team members express their sincere appreciation to Ms. Kimberly Halterman, Division Superintendent, Dr. Melinda Snead-Johnson, and the staff members of AHPS for their hospitality and cooperation that made our visit a positive and productive experience.

## Summary of Events at Covington Middle School

The VDOE survey team visited Alleghany Highlands Public School Division on February 10, 2025, at the invitation of Division Superintendent Ms. Kimberly Hellerman, to gain an objective view of the conditions of Covington Middle School and the events leading to the school being evacuated on January 31, 2025. The team met with the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and Maintenance Staff to discuss the previous two weeks' events. Then the team walked the school to observe the current existing conditions.

On Friday, January 31, 2025, Covington Middle School students and staff were evacuated to the Covington Recreation Center at 2:20 PM as a precautionary measure after an odor was detected in the building. After an extensive investigation by the maintenance staff of the school, they discovered that a natural gas oven in the cafeteria kitchen was malfunctioning, and the exhaust system was not working efficiently to adequately exhaust the carbon monoxide released. According to the school maintenance staff, this was the probable cause of the odor sensed by some school staff.

In response to this incident, the maintenance staff removed the defective gas fired oven and capped the gas supply line.

Agencies responding to this incident included the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), Virginia Department of Health, the gas utility company, Covington and Alleghany County emergency managers and teams and AHPS staff. After a complete walk through of the building and an investigation into the cause of the leak and remedial action taken by the school division, VDEM and local first responders declared Covington Middle School free of carbon monoxide and natural gas.

Since then, the school division installed numerous carbon monoxide detectors throughout the school during the week of February 3, 2025.

On February 7, the Virginia Department of Health announced that elevated levels of carboxyhemoglobin reported in the community on and after February 3, 2025, cannot be attributed to the January 31st incident at Covington Middle School.

The school superintendent informed the VDOE team that they are preparing a Request for Proposal (RFP) to hire consultants to conduct an environmental study and indoor air quality study (IAQ) of the Covington Middle School building.

During the visit, the VDOE team was informed that in order to provide continuous student learning, the Covington Middle School will switch to a virtual schedule while building evaluations are ongoing.

After the team’s site visit, the Virginia Department of Health, on February 20, 2025, released the following update:

*While the original investigation at Covington Middle School was closed on 2.1.25, the wider investigation of elevated carboxyhemoglobin levels in the area is an ongoing, evolving situation.*

*A source for carbon monoxide exposure at Covington Middle School was identified during the original investigation, thus closing that specific investigation.*

- *Fewer than 10 reports occurred within the window for possible exposures (1.31.25 - 2.2.25) related to the Covington Middle School event.*
- *There were no hospitalizations related to this event or to reports received since then.*

## Summary of Previous Events at Covington Middle School and Covington City, VA

On October 4, 2024, a gas smell was reported in Room 114, the family and consumer sciences lab. It was determined that a gas stove was accidentally left turned on. The stove was turned off and removed from the lab.

On October 9, 2024, a heating unit at Covington Middle School started and released a small amount of gas causing an odor in the auditorium. The unit was turned off. Also on this date, there was a gas leak at the adjacent Covington CVS pharmacy.

On January 14, 2025, there was a gas leak near Covington Middle School caused by utility work. Students were relocated because the leak occurred before school arrival time.

On January 16, 2025, an odor was reported in a large area of Alleghany Highlands, and the county determined that it originated from an industrial source.

## Covington Middle School

Covington Middle School is located in the town of Covington. The following commercial and industrial businesses are located nearby:

- Paper Mill
- Redi-Mix Concrete Plant
- Automotive Repair and car sales
- Garden Center and Nursery
- Public recycling center drop off
- Several construction companies

## Covington Middle School Existing HVAC Systems

Covington Middle School HVAC is comprised of the following systems:

- Two Boiler Rooms with gas fired hot water boilers
- Rooftop units (RTUs) at the Auditorium
- Air Handling Unit (AHU) to provide fresh air and ventilation
- Variable Refrigerant Flow (VRF) systems in classrooms
- Filters are replaced every six (6) months (January/June)

## Team Visit Observations

The team walked through the entire school building reviewing existing conditions. The building was generally clean, and the maintenance staff is working to adequately maintain the school.

Below are the team's visit observations:

- The newly installed carbon monoxide detectors are clearly visible. While this is commendable, the school should be aware that the detectors are also accessible to students and should be checked frequently to ensure that they are not tampered with or removed.
- There were roof/mechanical system leaks in a few classrooms and corridors. The maintenance staff was aware of this situation and was working to fix the leaks.
- A couple of classrooms had windows that were left open with classroom fans running.
- The two boiler rooms were missing carbon monoxide detectors. According to the maintenance director these were installed, and he was concerned. He went and brought one detector and installed it in the main boiler room. He said that he would follow up and install one in the second boiler room as well.
- There was a faint smell of natural gas in the second boiler room sensed by the VDOE team and one school maintenance staff person. This was pointed out to the school maintenance staff who said that they would investigate the source of the smell and take remedial actions.
- The two boiler rooms were also being used as storage areas for broken furniture and odd materials. This presents a fire and possible emergency egress hazard.
- The second boiler room had water leaks and there was standing water on the floor. According to the maintenance staff water was leaking from the adjacent crawl space. Water infiltration could potentially damage equipment and possibly create mold issues. Additionally, there was piping insulation located in standing water on the floor.
- The corridor leading from the upper floor to the basement boiler rooms was stacked with custodial and other supplies which is a potential violation of the building and fire codes.

## Recommendations

The team recommends that Alleghany Highlands Public Schools and the division superintendent explore the following:

- Hire a consultant for an in-depth environmental study at Covington Middle School and follow through with any recommendations made,
- Hire a consultant for an indoor air quality (IAQ) study,
- Have AHPS staff closely monitor the carbon monoxide detectors recently installed in the school,
- Create a floor plan showing the location of all carbon monoxide detectors in Covington Middle School and add it to the school system's safety documents,
- Install a central carbon monoxide monitoring system that connects to existing building alert systems (such as fire alarms), and
- Consider having a Back-to-School night with a panel discussion before reopening the school and include experts from the following organizations as panel members:
  - Department of Public Works
  - Virginia Department of Health
  - Organic Chemist
  - Pathologist
  - Pulmonologist
  - Poison control
  - First responders

## Commendations

The team commends:

- the Alleghany Highlands Public School Board and the division superintendent and staff for their prompt response to the incident that occurred at the Covington Middle School on January 31, 2025,
- the building was generally clean, and the maintenance staff is working to adequately maintain the school,
- the prompt installation of carbon monoxide detectors throughout the school,
- the school board's initiative to provide virtual instruction to Covington Middle School students while building investigations are ongoing,
- the superintendent and the school board's outreach efforts to the parents and community, and their engagement with various organizations in assisting with the investigation into the January 31, 2025, incident,
- the initiative to place a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document on the AHPS website providing up to date information to the community, and
- the cooperation, support and assistance to the team of Ms. Kimberly Halterman, Division Superintendent, Dr. Melinda Snead-Johnson, Assistant Superintendent, the Director and the maintenance staff members in conducting this survey.

## Code References for Carbon Monoxide Detector Requirements

13VAC5-63-240. - Virginia Construction Code  
Chapter 9 Fire protection systems.

915.3 Group E. Classrooms in Group E occupancies located in a building containing a fuel-burning appliance or in a building that has an attached garage or small engine or vehicle shop shall be equipped with single-station carbon monoxide alarms. The carbon monoxide alarms shall be listed as complying with UL 2034 and be installed and maintained in accordance with NFPA 720 and the manufacturer's instructions. An open parking garage, as defined in Chapter 2, or an enclosed parking garage ventilated in accordance with Section 404 of the IMC shall not be considered an attached garage.

Exception: Classrooms that do not themselves contain a fuel-burning appliance or have an attached garage but are located in a building with a fuel-burning appliance or an attached garage, need not be equipped with single-station carbon monoxide alarms provided that:

1. The classroom is located more than 100 feet from the fuel burning appliance or attached garage or located more than one story above or below any story which contains a fuel-burning appliance or attached garage; and
2. The classroom is not connected by duct work or ventilation shafts to any room containing a fuel-burning appliance.

### ***Code of Virginia § 22.1-138.2.***

#### **Certain public school buildings; carbon monoxide detectors.**

Each public school building that was built before 2015 and that houses any classroom for students shall be equipped with at least one carbon monoxide detector.

2021, Sp. Sess. I, c. 165.

## Appendix A



Figure 2 Malfunctioning Hood in Kitchen



Figure 1 Capped Gas Line in Kitchen



Figure 3 Carbon Monoxide Detector in Cafeteria



Figure 5 Removed Gas Stove in Room 114



Figure 4 Stained Ceiling Tiles from Water Leak in Classroom



Figure 6 Boiler Room #1



Figure 7 Boiler Room #2 – Image 1



Figure 8 Boiler Room #2 – Image 2



Figure 9 Boiler Room #2 – Image 3