

Wee Waa High School – Independent Health Study

Why was a public health study necessary?

Since early 2020, the NSW Department of Education has received health and safety notifications from Wee Waa High School regarding some of their staff, students, and visitors reporting a range of symptoms including rashes and itchy skin, sore eyes, headaches, breathing difficulties and fatigue. As a result of these notifications the Department commissioned Environmental Risk Sciences (EnRiskS), a human health and environmental risk assessment team, to undertake an independent health study.

Who conducted the health study?

The investigation was conducted by EnRiskS and Dr Tony Brown from the University of Sydney. The report outlines the investigation process, results and recommendations for the department when considering the new build of the school.

How did they investigate these issues?

To understand what could be causing these health symptoms and what could be done to address them, the team interviewed staff, students, and visitors of Wee Waa High School. They reviewed photos, internal department documents, air quality test reports conducted by an occupational hygienist, weather reports/ impact to ground and surface water, and gathered background information on the high school and the town of Wee Waa. The EnRiskS team also sought patient consent to review medical records.

What were the results of the health study?

The health study revealed that several factors may have contributed to the reported health symptoms. Factors include:

- Wee Waa's location on a flood plain for the Namoi River
- The impacts of the levee bank built around the town and slow water drainage,
- Significant rain events,
- Poor ventilation,
- Excess stormwater and plumbing issues at the school

These factors created an environment for periodic mould growth which can cause allergic reactions in some people who are sensitive to mould.

The health study also noted how the department responded to the reported health concerns when mould was discovered.

- Staff and students were initially moved to different classrooms and some were able to work/learn from home
- Staff were supported to take time off to recover if necessary
- The high school cohort was relocated to the Wee Waa Public School site in November 2020 using temporary, demountable classrooms
- A commitment was made to build a new high school in a new location close to the public school and in consultation with the local community.

What were the recommendations?

To minimise the chance of this situation recurring, this report recommended the new high school be constructed using every appropriate measure to control moisture and dampness including using specialised moisture control, anti-fungal building materials with a focus on ventilation and air quality.

The report also noted that the school grounds need to be designed and managed to minimise the potential of water pooling onsite. Any plumbing issues should be fixed as soon as possible and evaporative air conditioning units should not be installed.