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Stockton School checked for mold

By: Linda Seida , Staff Writer

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The service, provided by a Princeton area man and his dog, is provided free to schools.

Stockton Elementary was the first school to take advantage of a free mold-detection service offered to educators in the tri-state area.

Oreo, a 1-year-old Labrador mix who has been trained and certified to detect mold, recently traveled the halls of the historic

elementary school with her handler, Jason Earle, who is the head of Lab Results LLC in Princeton.

Predictably, the oldest school in the state, which is also the smallest, had a few hidden problems. By using a noninvasive method — only his canine sniffer — Oreo easily ferreted out the sites of some water damage that led to the growth of mold, which health experts say could ultimately affect the health of students and staff alike.

A noninvasive method, such as his mold-detecting dog, means a cost-effective method, Mr. Earle pointed out. He also said dogs like Oreo are the most accurate method available for detecting hidden mold. They've been used in Europe to find hidden mold for about 25 years, he said. For 300 years before that, they helped find truffles, which are nothing more than "glorified mushrooms," Mr. Earle said.



Jason Earle and Oreo check schools for mold for free.

Staff photo by Robyn C. Stein



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Oreo, who was rescued from a shelter, received more than 600 hours of training at the Florida Canine Academy. There are fewer than two dozen certified mold-detecting dogs like her in the country.

"I encourage other schools to take advantage of it," said Suzanne Ivans, chief school administrator, of the free service. "It gives you an opportunity to make sure your building isn't being compromised by any mold."

She added, "I wasn't expecting a whole lot, but you hear a lot of horror stories. Our building is so old."

The school was built in 1832 and serves grades kindergarten through six.

"Finding mold is apparently tricky. It's hidden in areas that you don't just want to rip out," Ms. Ivans said.

Oreo detected an area on the school's lower floor where water is able to seep through a doorway. The carpet there will be replaced, Ms. Ivans said.

Oreo also discovered a leak in one of the toilets and a seal that needs to be replaced in another toilet. Those two items will be fixed, too. In addition, the dog discovered a spot on a basement window that could be rotted and in need of replacement, Ms. Ivans said.

Mold and related toxins are triggers for asthma, allergies, skin rashes, headaches and sinus problems, among other health concerns. In addition, some molds produce mycotoxins. These substances, which can be inhaled, ingested or absorbed through the skin, can affect the immune system, the digestive system, the respiratory system and the central nervous system, according to the New Jersey Department of Health's mold advisory bulletin.

For more information on mold's health effects, see the bulletin at <http://www.nj.gov/health/eoh/tsrp/moldbulletin.pdf>.

"It took about 90 minutes. Our school is pretty small," Ms. Ivans said of the time she spent with Oreo and her handler last month.

The elementary school consists of four classrooms, an administrative area, two bathrooms upstairs and one bathroom on the lower level.

Lab Results still is offering the service free of charge to schools in New Jersey, New York City and the Philadelphia metro area, according to Mr. Earle. For information, call (800) 630-9047 or e-mail info@LabResultsLLC.com.

More information can be found on the firm's Web site — www.LabResultsLLC.com.

Why is the company doing this for schools? For one thing, Mr. Earle said, it's his way to help children, especially those who have health problems as he did as a youth.

"I grew up as an asthmatic in a moldy home, not knowing anything about the risks or dangers," said Mr. Earle, 27. "Being a kid is difficult enough to begin with. Going to school is difficult. Being a kid and going to school is really difficult."

Add health problems to the mix, and a child might have some real problems.

"You feel stupid, and it hurts your self-esteem," he said. "Defending a kid's self-esteem is one of the most important things you can do. You open up their possible potential."

"That's something that I'd like to pursue more aggressively," he said of his work with schools. All it costs him is "time and some dog food."

He wouldn't say how much it would cost if schools had to pay



for Oreo's service.

"Every job is different," he said.

He placed the cost for Oreo to detect mold at "an average home" at \$595.

When the workday is over, Oreo goes home with Mr. Earle.

"She's absolutely the best thing that's ever happened to me," he said. "She sleeps on my bed. She's my best friend. She's my partner. She's sweet and soft and funny."

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