



OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Parents ponder Pilgrim

As the school year begins

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Wicked Local Plymouth

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It's that bittersweet time of year when we savor the last precious days of summer, trying to somehow make them last, yet knowing they're about to come to an end. In a few short weeks, area parents will be packing backpacks and lunchboxes instead of beach bags, ceremoniously marking the beginning of another school year.

With the start of school, a slew of tedious paperwork will be brought home for parents to fill out and sign. In Plymouth, one of them will be a consent form authorizing the child's school to administer potassium iodide (KI) should a radiological event occur at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. In signing this consent form, parents are forced to face the possibility of a catastrophic crisis at Pilgrim. It is a risk that all residents of Plymouth (and beyond) are forced to accept as part of living in this wonderful area, in the shadow of an operating nuclear plant.

The Plymouth Public Schools – working closely with the Plymouth Office of Emergency Management (OEM) – is working tirelessly to mitigate risk and respond to any potential or actual radiological event that may occur during the school day. Although preparedness is an ongoing endeavor, steps to keep children safe during the academic year begin anew weeks before the first day of school.

According to Aaron Wallace, director of the Plymouth OEM, a population count of students is completed in August and school administrators meet to review planning materials, check that required safety plans are in place, and provide emergency awareness and responsiveness training.

Emergency preparedness requires practice and planning. To this end, the School Department typically schedules training with the Massachusetts Environmental Management Agency (MEMA) Radiological Emergency Preparedness (REP) trainers for staff each fall and spring. The trainers are arranged by Plymouth OEM and MEMA. School staff assigned duties at the Plymouth Emergency Operations Center (EOC) are provided separate trainings and orientation by Plymouth OEM and MEMA.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) REP program is congressionally mandated to observe and critique a series of exercises within a six-year cycle. REP functional exercises are required every two years for each Emergency Planning Zone (EPZ), including the Pilgrim EPZ. These exercises are observed and graded by the Department of Homeland Security,

FEMA and the commonwealth. All REP exercises require the support of Plymouth's public safety and service departments, including the Plymouth Public Schools.

At the core of the district's emergency plan is a standard operating procedure (SOP) – a series of directives which should be followed in the case of an emergency. Currently, the district is in the final phases of updating the SOP. Although the core concepts are essentially unchanged, the new SOP includes a significant number of updates. "We're taking almost a complete rewrite of the plan," Wallace said.

"It's very easy to use," Plymouth school Superintendent Dr. Gary Maestas, said of the updated SOP. "We want to be in a good position to respond."

Copies of this manual are in every classroom in every school within the district and include detailed directions for precautionary transfer of students, evacuation or sheltering of students, coordination of transportation resources for the transfer or evacuation of schools, and preparation of schools for use as public shelters in the event of an emergency situation at Pilgrim.

In the event of an emergency, the superintendent and the district's administrative staff would be notified of an incident at Pilgrim, and of the activation of the Plymouth EOC. Depending on the event causing an emergency classification, schools might be closed to err on the side of caution. If a transfer/evacuation of students were deemed necessary, arrangements would be made to transfer students to their parents/custodians and/or to a host facility (school) in Taunton. In the case of a precautionary transfer, elementary school students would typically be transferred first, followed by middle and high school students, as the town does not have enough buses to transfer all grade levels at once. In the case of a catastrophic event, student and bus counts would immediately be relayed to MEMA and buses contracted by MEMA would quickly be dispatched to help the district buses evacuate students.

"We're prepared in terms of evacuation and take it very seriously," Maestas said.

Although many residents have concerns regarding the safety of Pilgrim, these worries are intensified for parents of school-age children, as many parents work outside of town, making it more difficult to reach their children should an emergency occur. Concerned parents who would like more information about radiological emergency procedures are advised to contact the principal of their child's school, Maestas said. "If parents have concerns, they should typically contact the principal," explained Maestas, "but I am more than willing to talk to parents." Additionally, concerned parents can schedule an appointment with Aaron Wallace at the Plymouth EOC by calling 508-833-5801.

Heather Lightner is a new resident of Plymouth. She is registered nurse, freelance writer and volunteer for Cape Cod Bay Watch, an organization dedicated to protecting the species, habitats and health of Cape Cod Bay. More information regarding the town's REP plan can be found at www.mass.gov/eopss/docs/mema/nuclear/2013-pilgrim-nuclear-calendar.pdf.