Elevated lead levels in more than 800 California schools, report finds

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More than 800 schools in California have lead-contaminated drinking water in excess of 5 parts per billion, according to a report released today by CALPIRG and Environment California.

The groups examined data in 32 states where PIRG is working on lead in schools' drinking water and ranked California fifth, with a grade of 'C+' — an improvement over the 'F' that California received in CALPIRG's 2017 report.

They gave the state points for its 2017 law, CA AB746 (17R), by Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego), which requires public schools constructed before 2010 to test for lead by July 2019, but criticized it for using a minimum level of 15 parts per billion to trigger parental notification.

CALPIRG also released an interactive map depicting the test results. Of the 55 percent of schools that have tested, one-third found lead levels above 5 parts per billion, which is the Food and Drug Administration standard that bottled water has to meet.

"I'm glad districts are starting to take this seriously since we passed our lead testing at school sites legislation," Gonzalez said in a statement. "But more work needs to be done to ensure all school drinking water is safe."

Groups pushing for a new fee on drinking water users and farmers to fund improvements in small and rural drinking water systems, as Gov. Gavin Newsom has proposed, said the report underscored the need for action. A proposal by Sen. Bill Monning (D-Carmel), CA SB200 (19R), to create the fund passed out of the Senate Environmental Quality Committee Wednesday. Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia (D-Coachella) is carrying the Assembly's counterpart, CA AB217 (19R).

"This alarming new report on the health risks threatening children right in their own schools is even more evidence that California must act now to deliver safe water throughout the state through the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund," Mike Claiborne, a senior attorney with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, said in a statement.