

Exclusive! Key Middle School Interview with Gayle Fallon

Exclusive SMH Interview with
President of the Houston Federation of Teachers

For the Interview with Gayle Fallon, click [Read more](#), below.

A serious mold infestation at Key Middle School (KMS) sickened scores of teachers & students through October 2007

What this bold teacher union president did to help!

SMH Subscribers may read this exclusive interview (see below)

For more info re: union mold testing (with results) at Key Middle School click [here](#).

For photo gallery, click [here](#).

To read about the lawsuit just filed in federal court (12/07) by minority families (including several KMS parents) alleging discrimination against poor and minority students, click [here](#).

{naccess 0}

{/naccess}

{naccess 18,19,20,21,23,24,25}

SMH Interview with Gayle Fallon, Houston, TX

by Susan Brinchman, Director, Center for School Mold Help

Note: If you like this interview and want to see more like this, please help support us with a donation!

SB: We're speaking with Gayle Fallon, President of the Houston Federation of Teachers.
I would like to have you tell us a little about your background.

GF: Grew up in suburban Philadelphia, went to school in Wash DC, graduated with a political science degree from American University, went to work for the national security agency for ... a little better than two years...worked as a Vietnamese crypto-linguist ...we moved to Houston ...we've been in H for almost 40 years. When I came here I found out that a female with a degree here had two choices – teach or ... the question I got all the time was can you type? Since I couldn't type, it was a time of teacher shortage. So I came in through the state deficiency program and ...I taught. I ended up teaching 12 years before I went to work for the union, got a Masters in Ed Administration at Sam Houston State University. Started a doctorate in Ed Administration, with a minor in Industrial Engineering at Texas A&M, but the job got in the way because the job the hours on this job are pretty unpredictable. So those are a few degrees I didn't complete... I taught elementary, middle, high school, I taught one year disciplinary alternative, two years Special Ed.

SB: Well, that's quite a background! That's quite extensive.

GF: I have a lot of certificates in TX.

SB: We're speaking because recently there have been a series of incidents at

Key

Middle School

involving mold and health and safety issues. Can you describe what happened there?

GF: Yes, our teachers came back this year two weeks before the students. Which was unusual, but it had to do with a quirk in state law and rescheduling. So anyway, they came back early and we started getting calls at the end of the first week, telling us that people were getting sick over at Key. And we went to the administration, and said, look, we think you've got a sick building. At that time, we just thought it was just the annex. And we talked to The principal and she said, yes, she said we have had a lot of illness They said that they would take care of it right away ...that it didn't have to be a big public issue. That was a week before the kids got there. At the end of the next week, they pronounced the building safe, they hired a company that did some air quality tests and they said there is nothing wrong. They sent teachers and kids in.

The first day, we had a teacher go out on a stretcher. He passed out. We had ...by that Wed. we had two more teachers and a custodian go out in an ambulance but the district was still saying nothing was wrong with the building. But they were sending people in to clean it. Well, they sent them in that next Sat. They pretty much sent them in with a bucket of water and Chlorox. They were cleaning the air conditioning vents with the air conditioning blowing. So when the chlorox hit the mold and hit the air, we had seven custodians hospitalized. And for the next two weeks it was just a constant brawl between us and the district. I mean, we had people going out every day in an ambulance, just about. What we actually saw was as the week went on, more of them would go in. On one day, I think out of 52 teachers, there were 20 of them out. It ranged anywhere from allergic reactions, wheezing, to teachers who got incredibly dizzy ... we had two of them pass out.

I think what finally got the district's attention was that two parents came to get their kids and passed out in the cafeteria. And I brought the commissioner of ed over there one day to look at the building and to talk to the principal and he walked out and said, there is something dreadfully wrong with that building. His eyes were burning. What finally I think did it was just the sheer number of teachers who were being taken out for medical care. Plus a lot that wouldn't go out in an ambulance but went to their own doctors and came back with notes saying severe allergic reaction.

SB: Were the students also showing signs of illness?

GF: Yes. One of the things the district kept saying was well how come the kids aren't going out in ambulances? Well mainly because the parents were coming to pick them up. Most teachers don't have Mom come get them. But we saw, by the Monday of the week that they closed on Fri., the nurse had seen 264 students. By the time they closed it she had seen over 300. We talked to parents whose kids were showing symptoms of asthma who had never had a problem

before in their lives. Kids who were breaking out in allergic rashes, which we were also seeing among the teachers, who never had a history of allergy.

SB: Was this a new problem this year? With that school?

GF: Not really. That school had had problems but no one knew what it was. It had a great principal. And the teachers tended to come to work sick. But we had a couple of teachers who were beginning to exhibit some really extreme ... some really extreme medical condition going on. We had one coach who was for years in what was listed, when we got the tests back, as the worst room in the building. He got to the point where... when he went to that school, he had no voice. For the past two and a half years, he can't talk above a whisper. And he's gone through massive tests trying to find out what's wrong. The one thing that they have come back and said, when he went to the pulmonologist, is this condition is caused by mold. He may never get his whole voice back The man is almost totally disabled.

SB: Now, You had a lot of investigations subsequent to the district. You had members of Congress, you had the EPA was consulted, and the CDC, NIOSH, what were all those people saying?

GF: what had happened was initially when the district said it was fine we called for the city. Well, the city came in and they hedged a little. One of the things they told us was if it was the cafeteria we could close them down – all we can do is “suggest”. It exceeded their authority. They said they didn't like the conditions in the building ... but they wouldn't come out and say it ought to be closed. They were very concerned that it was a potential breeding ground for legionnaires disease which We were very nervous about that. We did not make a public issue of that. We wanted to get that tested first. WE were fortunate in that it wasn't the case. Bu they saw a lot of dripping water around the air conditioning units. They were concerned that they hedged... We talked to Sheila Jackson Lee, because it was her Congressional District. Sheila brought NIOSH and the CDC in. She also walked the building with the local politicians including the state rep who got sick when he was in the building. What ended up happening was before the CDC got there ... the school district went in nights and weekends.. ...they had round the clock crews in there, starting to scrub the building down. They did remove the kids but they removed them saying well we don't know what's wrong but we don't think it is any big deal however, we are being cautious. Well that was after 11 nights of battering them on the evening news. It finally got to the point where the community was up in arms, the parents were angry. And to this day, they have not admitted they have a problem, even though they are in there doing massive mold remediation. But they had that building totally scrubbed down by the time the CDC got there. Now a lot of that mold has grown back. And the one thing that Dr. Burton, of the CDC said, was they had it scrubbed down but they missed some spots. They were able to look at some of it. Well what had happened - one of my staff - when we realized they were scrubbing it down... which we kind of looked at - it was like scrubbing up the blood before the police get to a crime scene...

SB: Right

GF: But we had ... my staff rep went in and take samples in most of the rooms. She took the tape lifts, she took the bulk samples and sent them off to the lab, to Mouldworks in OR, that y'all suggested to her, and they got us back a report that pretty much did a room-by-room breakdown, and we turned that over to the CDC. Now that crossed with when they did their preliminary report. What they said in their preliminary report was that the building had been cleaned up and there wasn't a whole lot they could tell. Which is true. But when we talked to Dr. Burton she said that she was going to very carefully take into account what we sent her, because it showed a more accurate picture than what she had gotten being there.

SMH NOTE: TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OR ORDER THESE MOULDWORKS TEST KITS,
[CLICK HERE.](#)

SB: May I ask, did you find that surprising, that the CDC was not able to test and that the teachers were able to test and send it to a lab...?

Not really, because by the time she came in that building had been scrubbed and even though they hadn't done anything in the way of permanent mold remediation, you had to really look to find a piece of mold. I mean, they had crews in there...a friend of mine lives in the neighborhood and she said she drove by the school at 3 in the morning and there were crews in there working to clean it up. They were painting over it, they were doing everything they could to conceal the mold before the CDC got down there. So, actually, we hadn't mailed the mold off yet, and my staff rep showed it to her when we met with her and said, do you want this? And she said, I don't want to break the chain of custody. I want it to be clean. Send it to the lab. Don't give it to me. And so that's what we did. And then we sent her the lab report. We just got a report back on the water out of the air conditioning chiller.. She also held a meeting at Key with all the stakeholders, forcing the district to bring us which was the last thing they wanted at that point. But when we met with her one of the things she was very quick to say, when they were defending their little air quality tests, and she just kind of braced them, and said, there are no national standards on an air quality test so it really doesn't prove anything. And you know, at that point, they kind of shut up about their air quality test. But yes, so far, they have not been difficult to deal with.

SB: That's the district?

GF: No (laughing) the district has been horrible. The CDC has been.... But I want to see what the final report looks like and we don't have that yet. They do have the report that we had. What we did do also was the principal let us call a faculty meeting and we gave all of the reports that we had which were often a room-by-room, to the teachers, and said look, we

are not going to tell you that every disease listed is something that you are going to get because everyone's different in their reactions but if you are having problems hold this report and take it to your doctor so he knows what you were exposed to.

SB: That's right.

GF: Which is a whole lot more than the district did for them.

SB: Yes.

How are the sick teachers or kids doing now, now that they have been out of the building for I don't know how many weeks its been out of the building ... maybe a month?

GF: Physically, most of them are better. The coach with that voice is not. And he has been told he probably won't be. I have a couple of them that have found they of course have an increased sensitivity to mold. One of them said he is almost like one of those canaries that you send into a mine. He can smell it before anyone else and he reacts to it immediately and had never had a reaction before. So they are left with that, definitely.

SB: Now, what is the district response like, currently? What are they saying about that school and whether the people are back into it – or not?

GF: Well what they are saying publicly and what we are hearing privately, are two separate things. What they are saying publicly is we think we'll have it ready after Christmas. What we are hearing privately is no way in hell are we going to have anyone back in that school until next year.

Now, we said Sheila Jackson Lee called a press conference now. They just pulled the lockers out of it this week, this Monday. And my staff rep went over and got pictures. And she said it was just about as disgusting as you would figure

the lockers in that building would have been. There was just mold growing up the walls and she said it was really bad.

The district's only response to me, was, your staff rep can't keep going in that building. You know, She has no right. She can't keep doing it. I went, well, obviously, she can and did. Would you like to see the pictures? Which is one of the things that has blocked some of them in some of their arguments. Their first argument was it was minor mold. Well we gave the press a CD Rom with about 80 pictures that had been taken in the building. At the point that they tried to question how my staff rep collected the mold, we had had someone go with her and video it so we could always show it was collected properly. And when they opened their mouth on that, it was, would you like to see the video, cause we would be more than happy to release it to anyone in the media who want it also. They kind of backed down. It was kind of like a checkmate, constantly. But they have yet to admit there is a problem. The first thing they said was that it was just the union and we were using as an organizing drive. Well, first of all, I think just about every teacher in that building is a member, and second, we don't organize off health and safety as far as scare tactics. That is just not how I do business. Then of course they said the teachers were faking and that they were just using this as an excuse to get out of work. Now keep in mind the district has approved 90 workers comp claims on a staff of 130. And my guess is they will probably have some more come in. I mean, they have had a very sick faculty. The predominant mold that they found in the building was one that results in allergy symptoms. But the one that the CDC responded to, when I was going over the report and I said something about the stachybotrys. The reaction was where and how much. And I said well, in two rooms but in one it was very close to the Air Conditioning system. And they said that's not good.

SB: So the CDC was actually admitting that stachybotrys was a problem?

GF: Oh yes, they said, of the molds that were listed, that was the single-most dangerous. And the other thing they had told the district was ... The district kept trying to say nothing was there, as little as they left for the CDC to look at, the CDC didn't let them off the hook. They just kept saying there is something wrong in that building. And that, uh, The best they could find...While the district could clean up the mold, the reason that the CDC came out and said "damp building syndrome" is because the conditions that caused the mold couldn't get ... I mean they were still there. We had a very bad air conditioning system in that building.

SB: Yes, I was going to ask what are the conditions that you can name that were in the building, that were of concern – you mentioned there was mold behind the lockers...and some water...like where..

GF: Yes, there was some water. Well, the dampness was coming out of the AC units. It was literally dripping out. One of the problems was this was a building that when they bought the ac units, they bought some rebuilt ones, several years ago, and all of them gave us trouble. Here is a building that was supposed to have three chillers that was functioning on one at the start of the year. They finally got a second one functioning, they never brought it up to three. They locked the building up in the summer, for the most part, which is why the Annex was even worse because that was totally shut off and they shut the air off. Living in

Houston
is like living in downtown

Calcutta

in the summer. It is 90 percent humidity and 100 degrees outside. Plus it rained all summer in

Houston

, so they had perfect conditions for a problem.

SB: Was there any visible standing water or leaks from the roof?

GF: Yes, there were visible leaks. There were definitely visible leaks. Initially, they had buckets under some air conditioning units catching the water.

SB: How about in the ceiling? Ceiling leaks?

GF: And the other thing that you could see that they didn't miss, that I made a point of pointing it out to them, was that when you walked through the building and looked at the lockers you could see the rust forming on the outside of them. And that doesn't happen without considerable moisture in the building. I mean it was all over all over the lockers and these were not all that old. They had been freshly refurbished and repainted and yet the paint was beginning to peel. And it was obvious, there were times you would walk into the auditorium and it was so damp it was slippery.

SB: Wow. How old is this building?

GF: 1955.

SB: Were these windows able to be opened or was it a sealed building?

GF: You can open the windows, but they don't. They are pretty well sealed. The idea is in an emergency, the air goes out, and you have people in the building, you can open it. The problem is they weren't dealing with people in the building.

SB: It looks like the local union really was supportive of the teachers in a way that we have not seen before, anywhere...

GF: That kind of surprises me. Actually the national union, the AFT was very supportive, they had some people come in to help us, people to work with my staff rep, to make sure we knew what we were looking for they came in they walked the building with us and served as a resource because we knew a lot less about mold than we know about it now. I mean, At this point, I know more about it than I ever wanted to.

SB: Yes, I understand that one! The AFT, I know, is quite up on school hazards, they have been doing some surveys and I see a lot on their website about it. I haven't seen it happen locally that they have been as helpful and perhaps that is because if someone's problems are being solved they're not contacting us. You know it could be that.

GF: That could be. It would surprise me if the AFT locals weren't being aggressive about it, because the AFT locals are pretty aggressive about representing their members. I don't know about the NEA. I have never had a lot of respect there.

SB: We have had a lot of complaints from teachers nationally that they seem to be handling the problem themselves. And so, it is standing out, and you did have such an extreme amount of illness that, you know, it wasn't just one or two.

GF: God, I have never seen anything like it.

SB: Yes, they were dropping like flies it sounds like.

GF: Yes, they really were. And I will admit, the more I went into the building, it got to the point where I couldn't stay in there long without.... I mean the AFT even sent down masks for all the teachers in the building. And they began wearing them. Rather than the little cheap ones, but the ones that actually filter out. And I got to the point where I would wear it going in.

SB: So you actually felt something when you were in the building.

GF: Yes, my eyes would burn when I went in there and I'd feel like I was fighting to breathe.

SB: Now are there other buildings in this

Houston

Independent

School District

that are also damp like this building, do you think?

GF: Yes, sure, this is not an isolated building.

SB: Are there any disparities, are there areas in

Houston

that have nice schools and areas that have buildings like this?

GF: Well, I mean our real problems are our older buildings. Now, those tend to be closer to our inner city. When you move a little bit further out into the West Side

, the schools are newer because the communities are newer. But then again, there are some very buildings that are very well-maintained. There are some high schools... two blocks down from me,

Lamar

High School

had its 70th anniversary, and that building is fine.

SB: What do you want people to know about – what can teachers know about buildings, what do you know now that would help avoid this situation in the future? What do you think about that? So you don't end up with another sick building?

GF: One of the things we found – we started to have a problem at another school. All I had to do was look at the administration and say, do you want to do

Key

Middle School

all over again? And suddenly, they were out there fixing it. So there was some learning curve. They have yet to apologize to the teachers for saying they were faking. What we are seeking for them is ongoing medical.

SB: And is there any sign that there is ongoing illness in any of the students?

GF: Yes, talking to the parents, there are allergy problems that they have not had before.

SB: What happened to the contents of the building at

Key

Middle School

?

GF: What they did is they sanitized most of it. There was a lot they weren't allowed to take. They could take a box of possessions and then they sanitized them. The problem was they jacked around so long they went ahead and put them in a school where they are very crowded now. There was a supply problem. They wouldn't let them bring textbooks. They pretty much wouldn't let them bring anything, other than one box of personal possessions. So you know, for people who were trying to say there wasn't a problem, they certainly seemed to find one. I mean because they are being cautious with what they are taking out of the building.

SB: Are they taking anything made of paper out of the building?

GF: No, they are not taking anything made of paper out of the building. You know, that is probably a good thing.

SB: Yes, I agree.

End of Part 1

SMH NOTE: TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE MOULDWORKS TEST KITS SUCCESSFULLY USED BY THIS TEACHERS' UNION

CLICK HERE.[{/njaccess}](#)