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Feds to foot \$11.7M bill for school WTC cleanup

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The Board of Education won't be stuck with a nearly \$12 million bill to clean potentially hazardous World Trade Center dust from downtown schools, officials said yesterday.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency told school officials yesterday that it would reimburse \$11.7 million spent in cleanup and environmental testing since Sept. 11. The agency said it would eventually also cover \$5 million spent to clean schools in buildings leased by the Board of Ed.

Brad Gair, federal recovery officer for the World Trade Center disaster, told city and school officials the news in an hour-long conference call yesterday.

Gair told the Daily News in April that most of the cleanup costs would be covered, but the agency has been blasted for appearing to drag its feet and being insensitive to city schoolchildren.

The board is still pushing for \$103 million to make up for lost instruction time since Sept. 11, an expense FEMA has said it is not authorized to cover, and \$40 million for mental health services for still-traumatized students.

"We made real progress today in getting this decision from FEMA, but the remaining costs to the system still need to be met for the sake of New York's school kids," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan), a FEMA critic.

The feds also announced that those living near Ground Zero who are fearful of

potentially asbestos-laden dust in their homes can call a toll-free number to order a free cleanup.

The Environmental Protection Agency agreed last month to create the unprecedented home-cleaning program after it was besieged by complaints from people living near Ground Zero who were scared to breathe the air in their homes.

The feds will pay to clean the apartments of tenants and homeowners south of Canal St., where most of the potentially dangerous dust from the twin towers collapse settled.

The cleaning can be requested by calling (877) 796-5471 or going to www.epa.gov/wtc.

The hotline will be staffed to take cleaning and testing requests 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends.

Money for vacuums

People who want to handle the cleaning themselves can get as much as \$300 from FEMA to buy a high-powered vacuum with special HEPA filters.

Professional cleaning costs about \$1.50 per square foot, and the tab can quadruple if asbestos is detected.

Those who register for the fed-managed cleanup can track their requests and learn the results of testing and cleanup on the Web or through the hotline.

The cleaning is expected to begin in July.

Critics of the program insist cleanup should be mandatory and entire buildings — not individual apartments — should be scrubbed.

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