

IT'S WINTER, and 51,000 unflued gas heaters in NSW schools are hard at work keeping classrooms warm and, quite possibly, making our children sick.

Last week, the State Government moved to suppress the results of a study it commissioned in 2009 to find out whether even supposedly safe, low-emission heaters are affecting the health of schoolchildren through the release of dangerous fumes, including nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and formaldehyde.

Unflued gas heaters are banned in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT, and opposed by groups such as the Asthma Foundation of NSW, but for years the Department of Education and Training (DET) has asserted that there is no scientific evidence proving they pose a health hazard if they are used in rooms with adequate cross-ventilation.

However, the DET directive to keep windows and doors open is regarded by many as impractical and counterproductive.

"In Armidale, the amount of ventilation required to disperse the pollutants may make classrooms feel cold, especially for students sitting near the openings," Armidale Dumaresq Greens councillor Dorothy Robinson said.

"It's also a waste of energy."

Dr Robinson called for the NSW Government to make the report from the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research available immediately.

"Why act as if they have something to hide?" she asked.

New England MP Richard Torbay echoed this sentiment.

"I think it's clear that the heaters should have been flued to start with," he said.

"The fact that the report has not been released only underlines the concerns that people have that it may contain adverse health findings."

The initial motion calling for the findings to be released was put by Greens education spokesman John Kaye earlier this month, and

a transcript of the subsequent discussion is available on the NSW Legislative council website.

Dr Kaye described the Woolcock Institute as 'one of the nation's leading institutes for studying the impact of air quality on respiratory health' and provided the following overview of the study, which is the first large-scale investigation into flued and unflued low-emission gas heating in NSW schools:

'Last winter, the winter of 2009, approximately 20 public schools in colder climate areas within NSW participated in the study.

'Classrooms within those schools were fitted with both flued - that is, the exhaust gases were ducted away from the classroom - and standard issue, so-called low-NOx unflued gas heaters.

'While heating in these rooms was supplied with one or other of the appliances, neither the teachers nor the students knew which one was being used.

'The air quality in the room, including the oxides

of nitrogen and carbon, and the ozone levels and formaldehyde were monitored, and the respiratory functions and other indicators of approximately 400 students were measured and recorded'.

Draft findings from the study were presented to the NSW Education Department in March, indicating 'health effect but not major health dangers', but director-general Michael Coutts-Trotter and Premier Kristina Keneally have refused to release the report until results have been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

The process of reviewing and publishing the paper in an academic journal may take months to complete.

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article on May 21, Dr Kaye claimed the Government was 'hiding behind spurious arguments to keep the Woolcock report secret'.

"They are only interested in controlling the time when the findings are released to suit their political convenience," he said.

In the interim, the DET has

put on hold the installation of 2500 new unflued gas heaters, and says any Building the Education Revolution projects affected will now use more expensive alternatives, such as flued heating or air-conditioning.

Mr Torbay said the Woolcock report was of particular concern to people in New England and he would be seeking to have it made public as soon as possible.

"If the report is good enough to give to government it ought to be good enough to give to the community," he said.

He added that he intended to put some questions on the notice paper in Parliament about the release date of the report and would be seeking detailed information about the heating systems used in local schools.

"I'd like to know, around the Northern Tablelands, what is the current status in terms of how many, and what is the standard, what the circumstances are and what is being done about it," he said.

