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# Tackling health hazards at school

*Parents, communities, and environmental organizations campaign to eliminate environmental toxics at school*

Throughout California, campaigns against environmental health hazards at school have made many schools safer and led to the passage of important laws protecting children's health. But in many communities, parent groups are still battling problems from pesticide use to freeway pollution to contamination that was in the soil when the school was built. Environmental hazards seem to be most common in schools that serve children of color. But some problems, like the use of dangerous pesticides, affect schools in many neighborhoods.

Here are stories from four current efforts to combat environmental hazards within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

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"Start organizing the parents."

—MELODIE DOVE,  
LEAD ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZER, CONCERNED CITIZENS OF SOUTH CENTRAL L.A.



**SOUTH CENTRAL: SCHOOL BUILT BY A DUMP**

Jefferson Middle School, due to open in July 1997, was desperately needed to relieve school overcrowding in South Central Los Angeles. But after a series of community protests leading up to a big rally July 1, the LAUSD agreed to keep the school vacant for a year.

The problem? Reports revealed that the school had been built on land containing cancer-causing chemicals from a neighboring chromium-plating plant, underground storage tanks from an old gas station, and possible contamination from a World War II munitions plant.

When the school was under construction, says Melodie Dove, lead environmental organizer for Concerned Citizens of South Central, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) notified nearby homeowners that their own property might be contaminated. Older residents remembered the gas station and the munitions plant on the site. "If [the school district] had told the community they were building a school, we could have given them information," says Dove. Instead the LAUSD assured the community that the school, which opened in 1998, was safe. But DTSC reports showed that toxic chemicals remained—and that the school district's tests and remedies were inadequate.

This year, after a series of battles between community residents and the LAUSD, Dove says the district has finally hired Environmental Health and Safety Director Angelo Bellomo, who has been "really great working with us." The district has pledged to remove contaminated soil and install a new "vapor extraction system" to remove toxic fumes. Then the district will conduct more tests and report the results to the community.

Meanwhile Concerned Citizens and other community groups had been waging a long battle over toxic contamination at the proposed Belmont High School, being built on a former oil field. Now construction has stopped, and Dove predicts the school will never open. Concerned Citizens also worked with state legislators on a bill, passed in 2000, that requires school districts to get DTSC approval of sites where they plan to build schools. "That was our greatest victory," Dove says.

To help with its campaign for safety at Jefferson Middle School, Concerned Citizens recruited environmental experts, city council members, state legislators, and especially community residents, many of whom were already participating in the organization's network of block clubs, youth programs, and community development projects. Without a well-established organization, what can concerned parents do about toxics at their children's school?

"Start organizing the parents," Dove says. She points to the success of parents at Suva Elementary. A nearby chromium-plating factory was suspected of causing the school's high rate of cancer in children and miscarriages in adults. Parents organized and eventually, with the help of Communities for a Better Environment, sued. They won a settlement in which the company agreed never to do chrome-plating at that site. ■

## BOYLE HEIGHTS: A SCHOOL BY THE FREEWAY

Next door to the Soto Street School in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights district is a tri-level freeway exchange where the Santa Monica, Santa Ana, and Interstate 5 freeways come together. The school has no auditorium or cafeteria, so students meet and eat outside. Walls of portable classrooms vibrate when trucks go by and do little to keep out noise. When Margarita Sanchez, a nurse and mother of two children in the school, began walking her children to school, she felt she was "suffocating" from the pollution and noise of the diesel trucks traveling to the nearby freeway on-ramp.

So in December 1999, Sanchez and other parents started a petition asking for freeway sound walls, air-quality monitoring, and a tonnage limit on streets next to the school. They gathered 450 signatures on the petition and "hung banners up and down 7th St., with a picture of a truck in a circle with a line across it," says Sanchez. "That showed the unity of the community" and drew more parents into the group. They won city council support and a tonnage limit was in place within a year.

Convincing Caltrans to build a sound wall is a tougher job. With the support of community organizations including *Madres del Este de L.A., S.I.* and the Boyle Heights

Residents and Homeowners Association, parents wrote letters to Caltrans. They met with city council members and state legislators, who then wrote letters themselves. Parents went to Sacramento to Caltrans headquarters. They won the active support of the LAUSD Environmental Health and Safety Department, which did its own reports on pollution and noise at schools including Soto Street.

A Caltrans letter sent to school district lawyers in July said that a sound wall at Soto Street School is not needed and would be too expensive. Soto Street parents are now conducting a letter-writing campaign to Maria Contreras-Sweet, secretary of business, transportation, and housing, asking that Caltrans build a sound wall and close the on-ramp near the school.

Meanwhile, Soto Street parents pushed for their school to be an official site in the current statewide sampling of air quality at schools. When a local junior high was chosen instead, Soto Street parents persuaded regulators to install a satellite monitor at their school. An initial report from the Air Resources Board showed that on 16 of the 22 days tested, the air at the Soto Street School violated the state standard for particulate pollution. ■

## CUDAHY: "THE KIDS WERE PLAYING WITH SLUDGE"

Back in the '80s, when his older children were attending Park Avenue Elementary School in Cudahy, George Perez was one of the parents who forced the LAUSD to close the school for 15 months because of health hazards. So Perez was frustrated when new questions about the school's safety emerged in 1998, just as he was preparing to send his four-year-old daughter to preschool there. He and other parents organized—again.

In the '70s, a black tarry substance was bubbling up on the playground. By the '80s it was worse. "The kids were playing with sludge," says Jose Sigala, district director for Assemblymember Marco Firebaugh. When the parents protested, the district investigated and discovered that this school, too, had been built on top of a landfill.

Environmental Health and Safety Director Angelo Bellomo says the district promised parents and the DTSC that it would do a full investigation of environmental hazards at the school. In the meantime, it dug trenches, created vents, installed a "plastic liner" two feet under the surface, and reopened the school in 1990. "The district

said it would be good for 20 years," Perez remembers.

But in the late '90s children began complaining of headaches and rashes. Teachers suffered miscarriages. Vapors escaped into classrooms. When the parents organized again, Perez says he "jumped right into it."

Meanwhile, says Bellomo, controversy over environmental hazards at the proposed Belmont High School pushed the district to acknowledge problems at other schools, including Park, where the promised investigation never happened. "This never should have gone on for 10 years," says Bellomo. "It's inexcusable." He assured parents the district would do a real investigation this time. But parents, backed by city council members, state legislators, local businesses, and unions, demanded that the district shut down the school until it was safe.

Finally last June, after a heavily attended community meeting, the district promised it would remove the landfill completely. When this school year is over, Park Avenue students will be transferred to a newly built school nearby while the work is completed. ■

## DISTRICTWIDE: LESS TOXIC PEST CONTROL

One morning when Los Angeles mother Robina Suwol was dropping her children off at school she noticed a man in a white suit spraying something near the steps. As her six-year-old son passed through the cloud of the mist, he yelled back, "Mom, it tastes terrible."

So that day Suwol did some snooping and found out the chemical being sprayed was an herbicide that had been known to cause "horrifying" problems, including difficulty breathing. That night, her son had a bad asthma attack and told her he was afraid to go back to school. She promised him the spraying wouldn't happen again.

Suwol made good on her promise, launching a campaign that eventually persuaded the LAUSD to adopt an "integrated pest management" policy (see box). First she contacted environmental groups and learned that the school kept records of "trouble calls," incidents in which pesticides had been used. Suwol, a single mom, had a flexible work schedule, so she was able to go to the district offices to check out the "trouble calls." Many of the reports, she says, showed that the district had used dangerous pesticides or used pesticides in inappropriate ways.

Working with a core group at her own school, Suwol contacted parents in other schools. She noticed that low-

income Latino and African American neighborhoods seemed to have more incidents of pesticide misuse, so she formed a coalition that included Concerned Citizens of South Central and *Madres del Este de L.A., S.I.* groups with long track records of fighting environmental hazards.

The citywide coalition of parent and community groups gathered more than 1,000 signatures on a petition calling for the LAUSD to reduce its use of toxic pesticides. Kids in tow, parents attended long school board meetings and met individually with school board members. Some parents traveled to Sacramento to testify in the state Assembly for a bill, passed last year, that requires school districts to inform parents before they apply pesticides. Back in L.A., they held a press conference where they displayed a giant report card that gave the LAUSD an "F" for pesticide use.



Robina Suwol with sons Brandon and Nicholas at Los Angeles Safe Schools Coalition press conference.

Finally the district created the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Group including parents, environmental groups, teachers, and district staff. In March 1999, one year after the spraying incident at Suwol's school, the LAUSD adopted an IPM policy. "It's not a complete ban on pesticides," says Suwol, but it rules out pesticides known to cause cancer or neurological or hormonal problems, and directs district staff to try other means of controlling pests first. ■

## "Integrated Pest Management" in California schools

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a strategy of long-term prevention of pests like insects, rodents, and weeds. As much as possible, pests are controlled with strategies such as introducing natural predators (for example, putting ladybugs in a garden to eat insects that harm plants) and changing the environment (for example, sealing holes where rodents enter a home). Least-toxic pesticides are used as a last resort. School districts in Los Angeles, Fresno, Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose, among others, have adopted Integrated Pest Management policies.

For more information, contact Californians for Pesticide Reform at 888-277-4880, [www.igc.org/cpr](http://www.igc.org/cpr)

## Children's Environmental Health: California laws

The movement to protect children from environmental hazards has won some important protections in California laws.

- It is illegal to build a school on a dumpsite.
- School districts must inspect schools built before 1992 for lead and control any identified lead hazards.
- The Children's Environmental Health Protection Act of 1999 requires reassessment of air quality standards to ensure they protect infants and children.
- The School Contamination Prevention Act mandates that school districts make sure a site is safe for children before they buy land or build a school.
- The Pesticide Prevention Act and the Healthy Schools Act of 2000 requires schools to notify parents when pesticides are applied and establishes a least-toxic pest-management program.
- State and federal laws give residents the right to know what hazardous chemicals are used or stored in their communities.

### PENDING LEGISLATION

- Senate Bill 702 by Senator Martha Escutia (D, Montebello), would create a tracking system to link health problems to environmental hazard exposures. This would be the first step in setting up an environmental health surveillance system for California. For information, call Escutia's office at 916-327-8315 or see [www.sen.ca.gov](http://www.sen.ca.gov)

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—ROBINA SUWOL, L.A. SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION PARENT

## Campaigns for safer schools

Two nationwide campaigns seek to eliminate environmental health hazards from school and child care environments.

Child Proofing Our Communities, a project of the Center for Health, the Environment, and Justice, launched its campaign last year with the release of *Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions*, a report on environmental health hazards in schools and on strategies for combatting them. The campaign seeks to:

- Ensure that parents, teachers, students, and communities have the right to know what environmental hazards exist in their schools
- Make certain new schools are built on land posing no unnecessary health risk to children from contaminated air, soil, or water
- Ensure that any contaminated school property is brought to standards that protect children, or if cleanup is impossible, remove children and staff

- Eliminate toxic pesticides by implementing Integrated Pest Management (see box).

The Childproofing our Communities campaign offers resources and technical assistance to parent and community groups fighting environmental hazards in school. 702-237-2249, [www.chej.org](http://www.chej.org)



The Preventing Harm Action Campaign informs parents about the link between toxic pollution and disabilities in children, as outlined in *In Harm's Way: Toxic Threats to Child Development*, a report by the Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility. The report summarizes evidence that many common pollutants—lead, mercury, manganese, nicotine, dioxins, PCBs, pesticides and solvents—are "neurotoxics," harmful to the developing brain.

Exposure to neurotoxics dur-

ing fetal life, infancy, and childhood can create problems with speech, language, learning, memory, and attention. These chemicals also contribute to visual disturbances, mental retardation, and problems with coordination. And neurotoxics can contribute to hyperactivity, aggression, and problems with school performance and social skills. The report points out that most government regulation of pollutants has been based on research on adults and that developing children can be harmed by much smaller quantities of pollutants.

The campaign provides information on neurotoxics, news about efforts to fight pollution, links to local and national environmental groups, and tips on how parents and communities can reduce their children's exposure to dangerous chemicals. 202-895-0432 [www.preventingharm.org](http://www.preventingharm.org) ■