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Health risks stack up for students near industrial plants

By Blake Morrison and Brad Heath, USA TODAY

ADDYSTON, Ohio — The growl of air-monitoring equipment has replaced the chatter of children at Meredith Hitchens Elementary School in this Cincinnati suburb along the Ohio River.

School district officials pulled all students from Hitchens three years ago, after air samples outside the building showed high levels of chemicals coming from the plastics plant across the street. The levels were so dangerous that the Ohio EPA concluded the risk of getting cancer there was 50 times higher than what the state considers acceptable.

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The air outside 435 other schools — from Maine to California — appears to be even worse, and the threats to the health of students at those locations may be even greater.

Using the government's most up-to-date model for tracking toxic chemicals, USA TODAY spent eight months examining the impact of industrial pollution on the air outside schools across the nation. The model is a computer simulation that predicts the path of toxic chemicals released by thousands of companies.

USA TODAY used it to identify schools in toxic hot spots — a task the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had never undertaken.

The result: a ranking of 127,800 public, private and parochial schools based on the concentrations and health hazards of chemicals likely to be in the air outside. The model's most recent version used emissions reports filed by 20,000 industrial sites in 2005, the year Hitchens closed.


The potential problems that emerged were widespread, insidious and largely unaddressed:

- At Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in East Chicago, Ind., the model indicated levels of manganese more than a dozen times higher than what the government considers safe. The metal can cause mental and emotional problems after long exposures. Three factories within blocks of the school — located in one of the most impoverished areas of the state — combined to release more than 6 tons of it in a single year.

"When you start talking about manganese, it doesn't register with people in poverty," says Juan Anaya, superintendent of the School City of East Chicago district. "They have bigger issues to deal with."

- The middle school in Follansbee, W.Va., sits close to a cluster of plants that churn out tens of thousands of pounds of toxic gases and metals a year.
- In Huntington, W.Va., data showed the air outside Highlawn Elementary School had high levels of nickel, which can harm lungs and cause cancer.
- At San Jacinto Elementary School in Deer Park, Texas, data indicated carcinogens at levels even higher than the

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readings that prompted the shutdown of Hitchens. A recent University of Texas study showed an "association" between an increased risk of childhood cancer and proximity to the Houston Ship Channel, about 2 miles from the school.

The 435 schools that ranked worst weren't confined to industrial centers. Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania had the highest numbers, but the worst schools extended from the East Coast to the West, in 170 cities across 34 states, USA TODAY found.

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In some school districts, emissions from the smokestacks of refineries or chemical plants threatened students of every age, preschool through prom. Outside those schools, reports from polluters themselves often indicated a dozen different chemicals in the air. All are considered toxic by the government, though few have been tested for their specific effects on children.

Scientists have long known that kids are particularly susceptible to the dangers. They breathe more air in proportion to their weight than adults do, and their bodies are still developing. Based on the time they spend at school, their exposures could last for years but the impact might not become clear for decades.

That was the case in Port Neches, Texas, where more than two dozen former students of Port Neches-Groves High School have been diagnosed with cancer several years after they graduated, according to court records. So far, 17 have reached legal settlements with petrochemical plants located less than a mile from the school. In court filings, the plants' operators had denied they were to blame for the illnesses.

The U.S. EPA, which has a special office charged with protecting children's health, has invested millions of taxpayer dollars in pollution models that could help identify schools where toxic chemicals saturate the air. Even so, USA TODAY found, the agency has all but ignored examining whether the air is unsafe at the very locations where kids are required to gather.

If regulators had used their own pollution models to look for schools in toxic hot spots, they would have discovered what USA TODAY found: locations — in small towns such as Lucedale, Miss., and Oro Grande, Calif., as well as in large cities such as Houston — where the government's own data indicated the air outside schools was more toxic than the air outside the shuttered Hitchens.

"Wow," says Philip Landrigan, a physician who heads a unit at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York focused on children's health and the environment. "The mere fact that kids are being exposed ought to be enough to force people to pay attention. The problem here is, by and large, there's no cop on the beat. Nobody's paying attention." [Continue to next page...](#)

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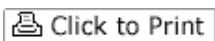
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