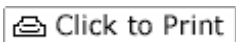




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Smokestack effect: Cancer at Port Neches

Page 4 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

A few blocks beyond the trees around Port Neches-Groves High School in Port Neches, Texas, gray towers jut into the air. The towers help cool factories that use chemicals to make rubber and plastics — the kind of chemicals that former students there say gave them cancer.

The federal government built the plants in Port Neches during World War II, searching for a substitute for rubber supplies that had been cut off. Now they're owned by ISP Elastomers and Texas Petrochemicals.

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For decades, butadiene was released from the plants, often at levels that state monitoring showed could be harmful. So much escaped that it sometimes formed sweet-smelling clouds hovering over roads near the school, remembers Dave Cerami, who graduated in 1984.

Cerami, 43, is in his fourth bout with cancer. This time, it has spread to his brain.

"The last time I was diagnosed, that was a big kick," he says. "It's like, how many times can you dance this dance? How many times can you push your luck before your luck runs out?"

It is one of many questions that he — and those he grew up with — cannot answer. Another: How bad was the air at their schools?

"If you lived here and you have kids in the school, you don't want to believe it's harmful. And if you're the school, you don't want to believe that having a school there would be giving kids cancer," says Dale Hanks, a Beaumont, Texas, lawyer.

Hanks has represented 27 graduates of Port Neches schools, including Cerami, who sued the chemical plants, their former owners and others after being diagnosed with cancer. The emissions they blamed took place before the plants' current owners took over.

Seventeen of those cases have been settled out of court since the late 1990s, and confidentiality agreements bar the plaintiffs from discussing agreements. Ten more complaints are pending. No trial dates have been set.

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Five years after Cerami graduated, state regulators tried to find out how bad the air was. When Texas authorities looked in 1989, their monitors detected levels of butadiene near the schools that were more than four times higher than the state's safety standard. A decade later, state workers sent to monitor the air reported dizziness, nausea and "facial numbness," according to a 1999 report

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by the state Commission on Environmental Quality. Another report, in 2003, noted butadiene levels as much as 120times higher than the state's standard.

After monitoring began, the state pressed the chemical plants to upgrade their equipment to curb emissions; butadiene levels fell sharply. Texas considers its efforts a success.

But Vic Fair, head of the commission's regional office until he retired in 2001, says he never talked to the school district about what the monitors showed, and the school district never asked. "We didn't really have a way to tell people whether this is dangerous or not," he says. "What can we say?" [Continue to last page...](#)

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