

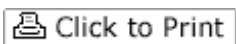
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Smokestack effect: Problems are widespread

Page 2 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

Factories, chemical plants and other industries are the lifeblood of many towns, providing the jobs and the tax base that sustain communities. The industries and the schools nearby often have co-existed for decades. For just as long, residents in cities large and small have tried to accept — or simply ignore — the tradeoffs: air pollution that leads to breathing problems or worse.

To identify locations where dangers appear greatest, USA TODAY used a mathematical model, developed by the EPA, called Risk-Screening Environmental Indicators. It estimates how toxic chemicals are dispersed across the nation and in what quantities.

COMPLETE COVERAGE: [Toxic air and America's schools](#)

With the help of researchers from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA TODAY plotted the locations of schools to rank them based on chemicals likely to be in the air outside. Some of the schools — and the companies responsible for the chemicals — may have closed or moved since the government collected the data. Others may have opened. The rankings showed 435 of those schools with air more toxic than the air outside Meredith Hitchens.

The good news: The model showed levels of industrial chemicals declined at three-quarters of U.S. schools since 1998, a trend that mirrors improved air quality across the nation.

The more ominous news: Outside one-quarter of schools, the model showed students were exposed to higher levels of industrial pollution in 2005 than they were 10 years ago.

Regulators caution that conditions at some schools may be far different than the model makes them appear. That's because the data used in the model are based on estimates submitted by the companies themselves. Clerical errors or flawed interpretations of what needs to be reported can result in misleading impressions about what's released.

Of the 435 schools that ranked worse than Hitchens, Ohio EPA toxicologist Paul Koval believes about "half of those could be better but half could be worse." The economist who helped create the model for the U.S. EPA, Nick Bouwes, takes a different view. The modeled results, he says, "may be a gross underestimate," in part because companies only approximate what they release. Without long-term monitoring, Koval and Bouwes agree, no one can be certain which schools have problems and which might not.

Among the hot spots that might justify monitoring, the government's model identified:

- Deer Park, Texas, near Houston, where students at elementary, middle and high schools faced dangerously high levels of butadiene, a carcinogen, and other gases from petrochemical plants on the Houston

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- Lucedale, Miss., where kids at five schools faced air with high levels of chromium, a metal that, in one form, has been linked to cancer.
- Oro Grande Elementary in California's Mojave Desert, where students breathed a variety of metals, including chromium, manganese and lead.

BEST OR WORST: [Where does your school's air quality rank?](#)

The likely exposures weren't simply the product of living in a part of town where pollution is heavy. In thousands of cases, the air appeared to be better in the neighborhoods where children lived than at the schools they attended, USA TODAY found.

At about 16,500 schools, the air outside the schools was at least twice as toxic as the air at a typical location in the school district. At 3,000 of those schools, air outside the buildings was at least 10 times as toxic.

But in all of these cases, precisely what risk children face remains a mystery — to parents, school officials and government regulators responsible for protecting public health. No laws or regulations require the sort of air monitoring that would tell them.

"There are health and safety standards for adults in the workplace, but there are no standards for children at schools," says Ramona Trovato, the former director of the EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection, who has since retired from the agency. "If a parent complains, there's no law that requires anybody to do anything. It's beyond belief." [Continue to next page...](#)

USA TODAY's special report on the smokestack effect:

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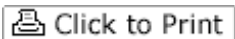
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PAGE 4: [Cancer at Port Neches schools](#)

PAGE 5: [Who's responsible?](#)

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