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Smokestack effect: Who's responsible?

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

Regulatory responses, even slow ones, remain more the exception than the rule — especially at schools. Children's health experts have tried, with limited success, to push the EPA to make better use of its own tools.

As early as 2002, an EPA advisory committee now led by Melanie Marty, a California EPA toxicologist, questioned the agency's failure to be more proactive. The group, called the Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee, is composed of 30 experts from industry, state governments, academia and advocacy groups. It reports to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson.

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Hundreds of pages of correspondence reviewed by USA TODAY show that among the committee's recommendations were calls for the EPA to develop better information about the exposure of children to toxic chemicals. One letter, sent by the committee to then-EPA administrator Christie Whitman on May 2, 2002, urged a more aggressive approach by the EPA to "environmental health threats at schools."

Although the letter focused on concerns about air quality inside schools, it asked the EPA to "identify environmental considerations" that communities could consider as they select school sites. Among them: proximity to "hazardous facilities."

"School communities need reliable information about the risks to children's health from exposure to environmental contaminants," the letter read.

A response came almost three months later, from Assistant Administrator Jeffrey Holmstead, restating the agency's commitment to children and listing a variety of programs it supported. The letter did not mention proximity of schools to hazardous facilities.

The EPA has taken many steps toward making children safer.

It has worked with schools to improve air quality inside buildings, primarily by identifying toxic cleaners and other chemicals that might harm students.

Today the EPA is investigating whether athletic fields made with synthetic turf expose children to unsafe levels of toxic chemicals.

What the agency hasn't done is use its models, as USA TODAY did, to look for potential problems around schools — then follow up by testing for toxic chemicals. "Honestly, it didn't occur to me to do this study when I was there, and if it had, we would've initiated it," says Trovato, who directed the

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EPA's children's health office from 1997 to 2002.

"This isn't something you want to ignore," she says of what USA TODAY found. "If I were still in that job, the only thing I'd feel is, 'I wish I'd thought of it.' "

The current head of the children's health protection office, Ruth McCully, sees her role differently. "It's not my job responsibility to initiate those types of activities," says McCully, who took over this year. "Do I personally have any idea of the chemicals that might be outside kids' schools? Well, I'm not going to answer that," she says. "I'm not out there doing air monitoring."

That's precisely the problem, critics contend: a lack of urgency and initiative on the part of EPA.

"That's the argument EPA puts up: 'We don't know so we don't have to act,'" says Lois Gibbs, executive director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, an advocacy group that focuses on children and schools.

John Balbus, chief health scientist for the Environmental Defense Fund and a member of the EPA children's advisory committee, frames the problem more practically. "To me, the greatest failure of this administration has been the failure to focus on where problems may be occurring now and take action."

At Meredith Hitchens, the Ohio EPA concluded the risk of getting cancer was 50 times what the state considers acceptable. If a school is one of the 435 where the model indicates air worse than at Hitchens, what should parents do?

"If it were me, I would be going to the school board. I would be going to my legislators and raising Cain," says Marty, the California toxicologist.

And the companies near schools? "I would think that responsible industry would be very supportive of monitoring," says Rick Hackman, a former member of the EPA advisory committee and the associate director of regulatory and technical relations for P&G North America.

And what about regulators, state or federal, primarily responsible for protecting health and safety? Says the EPA's Bob Lee, an economist who directs the team that manages the pollution model: "I'd suggest they go do some monitoring."

Contributing: Mark Hannan

USA TODAY's special report on the smokestack effect:

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