

The Environment Affects our Health

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Living in certain low-income communities can be hazardous to one's health. Literacy programs can be a source of empowerment for students by providing curriculum that explores the roots of health problems and emerges with possible solutions.

Being healthy is not just about the body – what you privately feel and experience. It is also about your environment – where you live, work, play, worship, and go to school. Those who live in a poor community or a community that is mostly people of color are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. In these communities, there are many environmental conditions and structures that are likely to lead to poor health. These include waste dumps, bus depots, chemical factories, apartment buildings with lead contamination, and other such places. A revealing statistic indicates that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood leads to a 50-80% increase in risk for heart disease. Tobacco, liquor, and fast foods are everywhere, but fresh produce is not.

Across the nation, research data shows racial disparities around a whole range of environmental hazards including air pollution, pesticide exposure, and the nearness to chemical toxins. Toxic waste sites abound in cities and low income neighborhoods. These hazards pose serious health threats such as contamination of ground water by seepage from buried chemical waste and air pollution from chemical plants and idling buses.



Many related conditions such as the lack of access to fresh food, unreliable transportation, and unsafe public spaces, contribute to poor health. Job loss, unemployment, and underemployment add significant wear and tear on the body. The associated stressors grind into the body and leave victims and their families with ill health.



An interesting phenomenon that affects our students is what researchers call the “Latino paradox” – that most Latino immigrants come to the U.S. healthy and after about 5 years they start to show the same illnesses as native citizens. In fact, they are 1.5 times more likely to have high blood pressure and to be obese. Clearly, environmental factors are at play.

In addition to creating curriculum that teaches about environmental hazards, literacy programs could support students to join with others to fight for cleaner neighborhoods. There are numerous environmental justice organizations in neighborhoods across the United States and they are making an impact.

In New York City, the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition rallied community members to take action against toxic emissions that were extremely unhealthy for residents, particularly children. Their organizing work was instrumental in closing a medical waste incinerator plant that was located a few blocks away from a large housing development and several schools.

In West Harlem, another community group called West Harlem Environmental Action <www.weact.org> mobilized residents to close or clean

up the bus depots in their neighborhoods. They persuaded the governor and key state legislators to mandate the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to retrofit diesel buses with compressed natural gas. The MTA now boasts it has the cleanest fleet in the nation.

Consider working with your students to assess the environmental hazards in nearby neighborhoods, envision alternatives, and take action! The following guidelines could help you create lesson plans on environmental health:

Investigate (and Envision) Your Own Environment

- Describe your neighborhood. What businesses are in it? Is there heavy industry or light industry? How many homes and lots are vacant? Are there abandoned factories? Are there parks? Playgrounds? Bike paths? Does it feel safe to let your children play outside?
- Write about or draw your ideal neighborhood.
- Describe your home/apartment. Do you live in an older building that may have a lead problem? Do you have a problem with roaches and/or rodents? Do you feel safe in your home/apartment building?
- Write about or draw your ideal home.



WE ACT's Deepti KC installs an air monitor across from the 100th Street Bus Depot.

- Find out about health conditions around neighborhoods where there are environmental problems. Check the health statistics from your health department.
- Test air quality around neighborhoods where there are bus depots or dumps.

Take a Field Trip

- Visit a farmers' market to see the produce and to taste the freshness of the products.
- Visit urban gardens and talk to the gardeners about what it's like growing food.
- Visit a reclaimed toxic site.
- Go on a tour of abandoned sites and other toxic dump sites around the neighborhood.
- If you live close to a river/waterway, take a tour and see its condition.

Find Out What Others are Doing

- Teachers can bring case studies, video documentaries, and films that tell the story of a community dealing with environmental hazards. (See the video "Unnatural Causes.")
- Invite a guest speaker from the community to come and share how they identified a problem and organized to address that problem.

Take Action

- Design your own action plan.
- Find out about an already existing effort to address environmental health and join it! Help to design fliers or pass on information about meetings or activities.

Sources: Mary Lee, "The Health Challenge: Creating a Policy agenda Focused on Place," National Black Latino Summit <www.nationalblacklatinosummit.org/bls_health.pdf>; "Unnatural Causes," video by California Newsreel 2008; <www.unnaturalcauses.org>.

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