

# Learning Curve

## Charting Progress on Pesticide Use and the Healthy Schools Act

### Author

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## Executive Summary

A new survey by California Public Interest Research Group Charitable Trust (CALPIRG CT) finds that more than a year after implementation of the Healthy Schools Act of 2000 (AB 2260, Shelley), pesticides linked to cancer, reproductive and developmental effects, endocrine (hormone) disruption, and acute systemic and nervous system damage remain widely used in California schools. This progress report investigates two key questions regarding the Healthy Schools Act and pesticides in the state's schools. First, has the act reduced overall pesticide use in California's largest school districts? Second, having had a year to come into compliance, are surveyed districts meeting their responsibilities?

### Highly toxic pesticides are still common in California schools

The 2000 CALPIRG CT report *P is for Poison* surveyed the 15 most populous school districts in California, accounting for over 1.5 million students, or roughly one quarter of all California public school children. All 13 districts that responded reported using one or more extremely hazardous pesticides the previous year. The report also found that many school districts did not track, keep records of or notify parents about school pesticide use, and that the quality of information varied greatly among those that did.

In re-surveying the 15 districts examined for *P is for Poison*, this progress report finds that dangerous pesticides continue to be used and threaten children's health in California schools. Children are more vulnerable to pesticide exposure than adults for a number of reasons: they have relatively greater skin surface and rates of breathing, their behavior

puts them in greater contact with contaminated surfaces, and they are closer to the ground where pesticide residues collect. Pesticides in schools expose children to these toxic substances during critical stages of growth. Symptoms of pesticide poisoning are often never properly diagnosed, written off as "flu-like" by parents and doctors.

Although many of California's largest school districts have moved to reduce use of dangerous pesticides since passage of the Healthy Schools Act, 54 pesticide active ingredients that are known or suspected carcinogens, reproductive or developmental toxins, endocrine disruptors, acute toxins and/or cholinesterase inhibitors (nervous system toxicants) may still be in use in and around California schools. This is 12 more active ingredients than districts reported using in 1999. Even with two school districts providing incomplete pesticide lists, 10 of 15 districts either report using known or probable carcinogens or list them in their parental notification letter as potential candidates for use this year; 13 of 15 list suspected carcinogens; 13 notifications comprise reproductive or developmental toxins; 13 list endocrine disruptors; 13 notifications indicate pesticides that are acutely toxic; and 11 include pesticides that are cholinesterase inhibitors or nervous system toxicants. These results show no significant decrease from the findings of *P is for Poison*.

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California's children continue to risk exposure to dangerous pesticides in and around their schools a year and a half after Governor Gray Davis signed the Healthy Schools Act into law, stating that "Kids should not be exposed to dangerous and toxic materials when they go to school."<sup>1</sup>

### **Some changes in pest management practices are occurring**

Despite continued reliance on dangerous pesticides in California schools, some districts are taking positive steps to reduce children's exposure. Two years

ago, Los Angeles Unified and San Francisco Unified were the only districts of the 15 surveyed with model Integrated Pest Management (IPM) policies in place that dramatically reduced use of dangerous pesticides and mandated non-chemical pest control whenever possible. Since passage of the Healthy Schools Act, Oakland Unified has formally adopted a model IPM policy and shows great

commitment to elimination of dangerous pesticides on their grounds and in classrooms. Santa Ana Unified has also passed an IPM policy, though weaker than that of Oakland Unified. Two other districts—Capistrano Unified and Garden Grove Unified—have made promising pest management changes, but continue to regularly use many dangerous pesticides. Other districts have made few real changes since the Healthy Schools Act went into effect.

### **Inconsistent compliance with the Healthy Schools Act of 2000**

The Healthy Schools Act, signed into law in September 2000, is a right-to-know law designed to help remedy widespread toxic pesticide use and improve pesticide record-keeping, notification and reporting in California's schools. It requires school districts to send parents annual notification detailing what pesticides the district plans to use in their schools in the coming year and presenting the opportunity to be informed before each pesticide application. The law also requires districts to post warning signs near treated sites before and after each application.

In addition, the Healthy Schools Act mandates that the California Department of Pesticide Regulation

(DPR) provide resources and training to school districts to assist in reducing reliance on toxic pesticides. Though the law does not require pesticide use reduction by school districts, it clearly establishes a state policy that promotes reduced chemical pesticide use around children and use of non-toxic pest controls and Integrated Pest Management.

Our re-survey found that by late January 2002—one year after the Healthy Schools Act went into effect and almost six months after the first full school year under the Act began—a third of the districts were not in compliance with the Act's parental notification requirements. This deficiency deprives parents of important information regarding their children's safety and health.

Moreover, many districts that complied with notification requirements were still unable or unwilling to produce records concerning pesticide use and application. The ease of finding out which and how frequently pesticides are applied and how many parents are registered for notification before each application varied greatly among districts. For example, Long Beach Unified returned the survey almost blank and Elk Grove Unified and San Juan Unified required nearly two months of follow-up calls to return even the most basic elements of requested information.

### **School districts should adopt strong Integrated Pest Management policies**

Adoption of model IPM policies best ensures long-term reduction and elimination of chemical pesticides in California schools.<sup>2</sup> Among surveyed districts, Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified and Oakland Unified boast excellent IPM policies that have dramatically improved pest management practices and reduced reliance on chemical pesticides. These districts show that alternatives to toxic pesticides are effective and debunk the myth that schools must choose between pests and toxic pesticides.

The Healthy Schools Act establishes California's state policy regarding IPM in schools. Under the Act, IPM is a pest management strategy focused on long-term prevention or suppression of pest problems through combinations of techniques that minimize risk to people, property and the environment. IPM methods emphasize monitoring for pest presence and establishing treatment threshold levels, non-chemical strategies to make habitat less attractive to pests, improved sanitation, and mechanical and physical controls. IPM permits

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effective pesticides that pose the least possible hazard only as a last resort or after careful monitoring indicates their need according to pre-established guidelines and treatment thresholds. A strong IPM policy eliminates use of the most toxic pesticides.

Though nine of the 15 districts reported having written IPM policies, most of these policies appear to have little if any real impact on pest management practices. Most give mere lip service to less-toxic pest control methods and lack clear guidelines or requirements for their priority and elimination of the most dangerous substances.

By codifying commitment to eliminate toxic pesticides through formally adopting strong model IPM policies, school districts can manage pests in an effective, cost efficient manner that—most importantly—protects the health of California's children.

### **Recommendations**

Because numerous highly toxic pesticides are still deployed in California schools, much more must be done to protect children from potential exposure to dangerous chemicals. The Healthy Schools Act just begins the work we must do to make California schools safe and healthy. To eliminate the danger of toxic pesticides in schools, CALPIRG CT and the statewide coalition Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR) recommend the following for school districts, parents and teachers and state policymakers:

#### **School districts**

- ▼ Immediately phase out use of highly toxic pesticides.
- ▼ Adopt and implement model IPM policies.
- ▼ Fully and immediately comply with the Healthy Schools Act of 2000.

- ▼ Ensure that thorough, accurate notification is sent to every parent immediately and that the notification registration process is as clear and simple as possible.
- ▼ Improve tracking and record-keeping so that pesticide use and application information is available immediately upon request.
- ▼ Halt pre-scheduled pesticide applications.

#### **Parents and teachers**

- ▼ Obtain a Healthy Schools Pesticide Action Kit for more information on the Healthy Schools Act and how to pass an IPM policy in your school district. The kits are available at <http://www.calhealthyschools.org> or from CPR (see Appendix E for contact information).
- ▼ Work with your school board to adopt and implement IPM policies.
- ▼ If your school district already has a strong IPM policy, participate in the IPM oversight committee to help ensure full policy implementation.
- ▼ Hold your districts accountable to the Healthy Schools Act and see that they provide notifications and postings as required.
- ▼ Register to be notified before each pesticide application.

#### **State policymakers**

- ▼ Phase out use of highly toxic pesticides in California schools and anywhere else children are likely to face exposure.

**By committing to eliminate toxic pesticides through formally adopting strong model IPM policies, school districts can manage pests in an effective, cost efficient manner that—most importantly—protects the health of California's children.**

### **Notes**

1 *San Jose Mercury News*, September 25, 2000.

2 Definitions of IPM vary substantially. In this report, the definition of IPM or model IPM is consistent with that in the Healthy Schools Act of 2000 (see page 10).