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GUEST VIEWPOINT: It's time to reduce pesticides in Oregon schoolsBy Lisa Arkin

Its time to protect children's health by reducing pesticides at schools

You might think schools would be the last place children and pesticides are mixed together. If so, you would be surprised to learn that many Oregon schools routinely use pesticides inside buildings where classrooms are located and on playgrounds and ball fields. (In Lane County, we can boast two exceptions: Eugene and Mapleton school districts manage their properties using minimal pesticides as the last resort).

But records kept at the state departments of Agriculture and Human Services show that many Oregon children are being exposed to pesticides at school.

With your help, Oregon will soon end this dangerous practice when lawmakers consider a bill to require Integrated Pest Management (IPM) plans in schools. IPM emphasizes environmental and human health protections by using preventative measures and nonchemical alternatives to solve pest problems.

Adults are finally learning the lesson of prioritizing nonchemical pest control for the sake of children. The rapid changes in children's organ and neurological systems make them more sensitive to toxic exposure, a fact that is verified by research from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the American Cancer Society, and scores of peer-reviewed medical journal articles.

Children are less capable of detoxifying and excreting harmful chemicals than adults. Yet they have a greater chance of absorbing pesticides because they typically roll on the grass, play on the floor, put their fingers in their mouths, and inhale more air and drink more fluids per pound than adults.

The recently released report "Warning! Hazards to Children: Pesticides in Our Schools by Oregon Toxics Alliance" investigated the frequency and severity of pesticide exposures at schools as reported in state documents. Dozens of confirmed and suspected pesticide poisonings involving school children have occurred in recent years.

Three recent examples help illustrate the egregiousness of these school pesticide poisonings. In 2000, pesticides were applied to the interior of an elementary school near Portland. In the days following, four teachers became sick; one teacher's blister-covered tongue was confirmed by a physician to have been caused by the pesticide exposure. Half of the students in one class left school complaining of sore throats or other illness.

The surprising practice of assigning students to use toxic pesticides for a classroom project occurred as recently as 2007. In the case of one Willamette Valley high school, Malathion was accidentally spilled when students dropped a pint of the chemical inside the classroom. Three students were directly exposed, and when the poisonous vapors wafted into other classrooms, the entire school was evacuated and students had to receive medical attention.

In a 2007 case, a parent became concerned when her son returned home from school covered with rashes. An investigation discovered that students had been told to spray a pesticide along the school's fence line.

Fortunately, Oregon legislators are acting to avert further harm. Following the lead of other states that have reduced pesticides at schools, Oregon senators will consider taking similar action with Senate Bill 637, a bill requiring IPM policies in schools. The bill will have its first hearing Thursday.

SB 637 directs school districts to adopt IPM policies by 2012 and authorizes Oregon State University to develop model IPM programs that will be easy to implement. The bill prioritizes student health and environmental protection. Any pesticide used at a school must be a nontoxic or "low-impact" product and must be applied by licensed applicators.

The bill was the result of an 18-month collaborative work group that included legislators and environmentalists, as well as representatives from state agencies, the pesticide industry, farming, timber and education groups.

This is an appropriate time to re-evaluate society's reliance on pesticides. Advances in scientific awareness, medical research and public health policy have forever changed the assumption that pesticides — even tiny amounts — are safe around children.

Take a moment to let your legislator know you want to keep children safe from pesticides in school.

Lisa Arkin is the executive director of Oregon Toxics Alliance. Oregon Toxics Alliance served on the Senate Workgroup as a children's health advocate.

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