

California Safe Schools
Embracing the Precautionary Principle
LAUSD's Integrated Pest Management Policy

Robina Suwol Presentation, June 10, 2006

I. Overview

The Los Angeles Unified School District practices Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to control environmental hazards without dangerous pesticides or chemicals. The policy was the first in the United States in 1999 to embrace the Precautionary Principle, the concept that no chemical is free from harm, unless proven so, and Parents Right to Know.

IPM is defined as follows:

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is the coordinated use of pest and environmental information with available pest management methods to prevent unacceptable levels of pest damage by the most economical means, and with the least possible hazard to people and the environment. The goal of the IPM approach is to manage pests and the environment so as to balance costs, benefits, human health and environmental quality. IPM systems utilize a high quantity and quality of technical information on the pest and its interaction with the environment (site). Because IPM programs apply a holistic approach to pest management decision-making, they take advantage of all low risk pest management options, emphasizing natural biological methods, and the appropriate use of selective pesticides. IPM strategies incorporate environmental considerations by emphasizing pest management measures that minimize intrusion on natural bio-diversity ecosystems. Thus, IPM is:

- *A system utilizing multiple methods*
- *A decision-making process*
- *A risk reduction system*
- *Information intensive*
- *Biologically based*
- *Cost effective, and*
- *Site specific*

Alternatives to toxic chemicals, such as scrupulous cleaning of food scraps (to eliminate attractions to insects and rodents) are part of IPM. The education and involvement of students, teacher, Administrators, custodians, cafeteria staff, and craftspersons is also part of this practice. Another element of IPM involves using beneficial plants and insects as an alternative form of control against undesirable insects.

The preamble to the LA Unified IPM policy states:

“Pesticides pose risks to human health and the environment, with special risks to children. It is recognized that pesticides cause adverse health effects in humans such as cancer, neurological disruption, birth defects, genetic alteration, reproductive harm, immune system dysfunction, endocrine disruption and acute poisoning. Pests will be controlled to protect the health and safety of students and staff, maintain a productive learning environment and maintain the integrity of school buildings and grounds. Pesticides will not be used to control pests for aesthetic reasons alone. The safety and health of students, staff and the environment will be paramount.

Further, it is the goal of the District to provide for the safest and lowest risk approach to control pest problems while protecting people, the environment and property. The District’s IPM Policy incorporates focusing on long-term prevention and will give non-chemical methods first consideration when selecting appropriate pest control techniques. The District will strive to ultimately eliminate the use of all chemical controls.

The “Precautionary Principle” is the long-term objective of the District. The principle recognizes that:

- a) No pesticide product is free from risk or threat to human health, and
- b) Industrial producers should be required to prove that their pesticide products demonstrate an absence of the risks rather than requiring that the government or the public prove that human health is being harmed.

This policy realizes that full implementation of the Precautionary Principle is not possible at this time and may not be for decades. However, the District commits itself to full implementation as soon as verifiable scientific data enabling this becomes available.”

II. Background/Author’s Role

In March of 1998, a group of school children, about to begin their day at Sherman Oaks Elementary School, encountered a gardener in a hazardous materials suit employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) which administers Sherman Oaks Elementary among its 800 schools. The gardener, unaware students were present, sprayed the herbicide Princep creating a cloud of pesticide mist students were forced to walk through in order to reach their classrooms.

Several parents who had dropped off their children at the school were alarmed to witness this event. One of them was the author, Robina Suwol, whose sons, aged six and ten, walked directly through the cloud. That night, her youngest son, Nicholas, whose asthma had been under control, experienced a severe asthma attack. Suwol’s research on a pest management web site sponsored by Cornell University revealed that a single exposure to Princep could cause tremors, convulsions, paralysis, and other symptoms.

Parents of the exposed children decided to investigate. They learned that LAUSD, the nation's second-largest school district, relied on an industrial approach to pest control. They learned that training for pesticide applicators at schools was uneven, and that mixtures surpassing recommended safety levels were not unknown at LAUSD. They learned that many chemical pesticides commonly used in schools have a high risk factor for growing children, with risks of cancer and learning disabilities. Because LAUSD cares for more than 800,000 students, the issue of pesticide safety at school became evident as long overdue for parent and community attention.

The parents, led by single mother Robina Suwol found support in existing parent and toxics-safety groups. California Safe Schools officially began when these parents realized that no organization existed to protect student's health while keeping their school environments toxic-free. A coalition of existing organizations, including the PTA, United Teachers Los Angeles, groups joined in common cause with the parents of Sherman Oaks Elementary School. Fortified by coalition members well versed in the hazards of pesticides and knowledgeable about alternatives to them, the parents met with LAUSD staff and school board members. Los Angeles Unified School Board member Julie Korenstein insisted a working group of parents, medical experts, environmentalists, community members and scientists work together with Los Angeles Unified staff to create a policy that would ensure health and safety for students, teachers and staff. One year to the day after Suwol's son Nicholas became ill, LAUSD adopted the most stringent pesticide policy in the nation for schools. The policy is known as Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

When the IPM policy was officially adopted for its more than 800 schools (which comprise 28 cities and 704 square miles), it was considered a great accomplishment by both California Safe Schools and by LAUSD. Today the policy has become the model for the nation with many school districts and communities throughout the United States creating similar programs. The District's IPM program is all-inclusive, and its pest management department is a versatile and diversified unit that is dedicated to addressing ALL pest problems on District properties. The scope and breadth of the District's current challenges can best be put in proper perspective by the following statistics.

Enrollment: 877,010 (second largest in the nation).
1,131 schools, centers, offices, etc. spread over 710 square miles.
12,000 buildings with 68 million square feet.
Serves over 500,000 student meals daily.
Over 77,000 employees

With a geographical area extending from the ocean, to the desert, mountains and everything in between, LAUSD's territory includes diversified plant and animal communities and habitats ranging from dense urban to ravine, foothill, canyon, and mountainous areas. The pests addressed under the IPM program include,

but are not limited to rodents, cockroaches, ants, pigeons, sparrows, starlings, sea gulls, crows, mosquitoes, feral cats and dogs, fleas, spiders, honey bees (including Africanized), wasps, ground squirrels, gophers, skunks, coyotes, raccoons, opossum, venomous snakes, weeds, pests of trees and shrubs, turf-grass pests, drywood and subterranean termites, other wood destroying organisms, flies, bats, and dead animals of various species.

Innovative Posters created by California Safe Schools and “Pest of the Month” publications have been developed and issued as resources to schools in preventing and eliminating pest problems through IPM methodologies. Public service announcements and other IPM-related programming has been developed and broadcast on the District’s public access television channel. Special IPM-related events and Workshops produced by California Safe Schools are conducted in Los Angeles-area schools, and nationally. The IPM Team has presented information for the past several years to thousands of parents at the District’s annual Parent Summit regarding the benefits of IPM in the schools, and their workplaces. In addition to in-house training, California Safe Schools and LAUSD staff has conducted training for other school districts, public agencies, and pest control applicators throughout California and responds to inquire from school districts nationwide.

The success of LAUSD’s IPM program was the impetus for the State of California’s Healthy Schools Act of 2000. In recognition of its pioneering IPM program, California Safe Schools and Los Angeles Unified have received national and international recognition for their leadership and creativity in advancing risk-reduction techniques for pest management in schools.

III. Best Practices

Identify and collect data that supports the use of IPM at your school or in your district. If full data isn’t available, use the Precautionary Principle to guide decision making. The education of the goals and recommended strategies of IPM for students, teacher, Administrators, custodians, cafeteria staff, and tradespeople is critical. Each of these groups can employ one or more the following IPM methodologies in an effort to manage pests.

- a) Monitoring (tracking paths of movement and shelter, trapping)
- b) Exclusion (installation of door sweeps, caulking cracks and crevices, repairing holes, installation of 45-degree angles on Ledges or netting to deter birds)
- c) Sanitation (eliminating availability of food and water to pests)
- d) Habitat modification (storage of food in classrooms in metal containers, disposal of food and trash in closed trash receptacles, removal of paper and other clutter)

IV. Lessons Learned

No food, no water, no shelter, no pests!

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