

Benzene from idling cars concerns SLSD Board Toxic chemical among carcinogens students must walk through to exit schools

Posted: Wednesday, Mar 12th, 2008

BY: JOE HANSEN

On any given weekday, beginning around 3 p.m., cars start lining up outside of South Lane School District schools as parents wait to pick up their kids after the final bell rings.

Some of those cars are turned off, but others are idling. Likely unbeknownst to those drivers who leave their cars running, they are releasing a cloud of chemicals through which students must walk when they exit the school on their way to cars or buses.

One of those chemicals is benzene, a known carcinogen linked to childhood leukemia.

Benzene, which the Environmental Protection Agency classifies as a Group A human carcinogen, is a colorless, odorless constituent of motor fuels that's released via automobile exhaust and the evaporation of gasoline. According to the EPA, chronic exposure to benzene causes an increased incidence of a laundry list of things you don't want, like leukemia and blood disorders, and studies have shown that high levels of exposure may impair fertility in women.

"Benzene is a hazardous air pollutant," said Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Oregon Toxics Alliance. "Unfortunately, toxics just hasn't been a very palatable topic until recently. Now the public is beginning to open its mind to this issue."

As of last week, the dangers of benzene weren't lost on members of the South Lane School District Board, as they discussed the topic at the Board's March 3 meeting. Board President Jim Goes, who is also chair of the Lane County Health Advisory Committee, raised concern about the health effects of rows of idling cars sitting outside SLSD schools, releasing an invisible fog containing a known carcinogen.

"From our perspective, the real concern is exposure to kids," said Goes.

SLSD already has a Districtwide no-idling policy for its buses and is working on putting up signs at area schools instructing drivers to cut their engines while parked.

But the problem, according to Goes, is that word about the dangers of benzene simply hasn't yet reached all sectors of the public. And the fact that drivers still idle their cars has a lot to do with a persistent misperception that starting and stopping vehicles is bad for them.

"There's no reason to idle a car. You're just wasting fuel," said auto mechanic Mark Scnear of D&D Automotive in Cottage Grove, who said that advances in engine design and lubricating oil have made idling a thing of the past. "It's not even better for the engine. The engine's better off when you're driving down the road."

The SLSD Board plans to take up the issue of benzene and idling cars again at its April meeting, but Goes and the other members of the Board are well aware of their own limitations.

"The point is not to get into the 'idling police' thing. The point is to educate people," said Goes.

The issue of benzene has just recently begun to catch the attention of legislators and other leaders in Oregon, where benzene levels are elevated, due primarily to the Pacific Northwest's heavy reliance on benzene-rich Alaskan crude oil and the fact that reformulated gas is not required in the region. In 2006, United States Senator Ron Wyden won a drawn-out battle with the EPA, which resulted in a cap on benzene levels in fuels, but refineries have several years to comply, according to Wyden Spokesperson Tom Towslee.

The Lane County Board of Commissioners passed a benzene reduction policy in September of 2007, as well. At that meeting, Lane County Public Health Director Rob Rockstroh testified that parts of Lane County contain benzene levels that are ten times over the state's health standards.

Idling isn't the only way cars release benzene into the atmosphere. The seemingly innocuous act of "topping off" your gas tank also releases the chemical into the air. According to mechanic Thomas Brunson of Jackson's Auto Care in Eugene, newer cars have a system through which fumes released from fuel are captured and used in the combustion process. But when you top off, you bypass that system, which can flood the gas tank sensors, in the process releasing fumes that contain benzene.

"Ever seen gas running down the side of someone's car? That's 'cause some guy splashed it there. That means you and I get to breathe it," said Brunson.

Ultimately, according to the Oregon Toxics Alliance's Arkin, education is the key to reducing benzene levels in the air, since they are due primarily to habitual behaviors like idling cars and topping off gas tanks.

"We like to compare it to recycling. There are no 'recycling police'"; But it's becoming kind of a societal standard," said Arkin. "I think idling and topping off fall under the very same thing."

[Print](#)[Close Window](#)