FAQs on Environmental Conditions of St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) represents a class of Black school children in St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools in a decades-old federal school desegregation case.

LSU Health Sciences Center Professor Adrienne Katner has conducted a review of industry-associated health risks potentially faced by St. John the Baptist Parish (St. John) Public Schools students. Dr. Katner concluded that students at some of the St. John schools may face unacceptably high cancer risk based on facility proximity, EPA air monitoring data, and prior health investigations. The following is a selection of Dr. Katner’s findings from her extensive report calling for various precautionary measures to protect the health and safety of St. John Public Schools students:

Environmental Health Risks in St. John

- St. John is one of the most highly industrialized parishes in Louisiana and has some of the highest rates of toxic substance releases and air emission events in the state.
- The people of St. John face the highest theoretical cancer risk in the nation.
- Denka Performance Elastomer LLC facility (Denka) emits carcinogens (substances that cause cancer), such as chloroprene, which is associated with lung and liver cancer.

People living in Denka’s census tract face the highest cumulative lifetime cancer risk in the nation, nearly double the risk of the second highest tract, based largely on Denka’s chloroprene emissions.1

Air Products Performance Manufacturing Facility (Air Products) received several Clean Air Act violations from 2015-2017 and was designated as one of the top-25 highest risk facilities in the nation due to its emissions ethylene oxide emissions, which is associated with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, breast cancer, occupational asthma, headache, vomiting, burning eyes and weakness.

St. John consistently experiences high incidence rates of asthma, compared to other parishes in Louisiana—asthma is known to be triggered by air pollution.

1 Cumulative cancer risks are from all chemical exposures from all sources.

FIFTH WARD ELEMENTARY

25%

HIGHER INCIDENCE RATE OF “ALL CANCERS” THAN THE STATE AVERAGE

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NY (212) 965-2200  |  DC (202) 682-1300  
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Health Risks Associated with Fifth Ward Elementary

- Fifth Ward Elementary is located less than ½ a mile from Denka causing students to face unacceptable cancer risks of 1.1 to 1.6 cancers-in-10,000 people exposed, from chloroprene emissions alone.
- The census tract containing Denka and Fifth Ward Elementary has a significantly higher incidence rate of “all cancers” than the state average (25% higher).
- Fifth Ward Elementary students are vulnerable to carcinogens, including chloroprene, which means very low doses may pose elevated risks to children.

Health Risks Associated with St. John STEM Magnet High School

- St. John STEM Magnet High School is adjacent to Air Products, the emissions of which may have caused students to suffer exceptional rates of respiratory ailments, headache, vomiting, burning eyes, fever, and weakness in 2016.

Fifth Ward Elementary and the St. John STEM Magnet School student bodies are 84% and 70% Black, respectively.

The people of St. John face the highest theoretical cancer risk in the nation.

FIFTH WARD ELEMENTARY

84% BLACK STUDENTS

STUDENTS FACE UNACCEPTABLE CANCER RISKS OF

1.1 TO 1.6 CANCERS-IN-10,000

PEOPLE EXPOSED FROM CHLOROPRENE EMISSIONS

ST. JOHN STEM MAGNET SCHOOL

70% BLACK STUDENTS

If you are a resident of St. John Parish, or have a child attending a St. John school, and would like to be considered for an LSU Health study concerning exposures to harmful emissions, please contact: Hmcmil1@lsuhsc.edu.

This study entails responding to a survey. If eligible, you may be offered free medical testing services to evaluate potential exposures.
Frequently Asked Questions

1. WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE?

Environmental injustice occurs when certain communities or groups are disproportionately exposed to environmental risk and harm due to factors, such as unequal protection from health risks and hazardous environments and unequal involvement in the development of, and protection by, environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

2. WHAT ARE THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS OF THE ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOL LOCATIONS?

The Parish’s school district contains several industrial sites, including the Denka Performance Elastomer LLC (Denka) facility whose chloroprene emissions have led the Parish to have the highest cancer risk in the nation based on 2015 and 2018 National Air Toxics Assessment reports. Denka emits chloroprene, which is associated with lung and liver cancer. Denka also emits ethylene oxide, which is associated with occupational asthma and certain cancers, including lymphoma and breast cancer. Ethylene oxide and chloroprene are the top two primary drivers of cancer risk in the Parish.

3. WHAT HEALTH RISKS ARE STUDENTS AT FIFTH WARD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EXPOSED TO?

Fifth Ward Elementary School is located near Denka which emits both chloroprene and a toxic mixture of industrial chemicals. Fifth Ward Elementary students (84% Black) face unacceptably high cancer risks based only on six years of school attendance (PK-4th grade), with an estimated 1.1 to 1.6 cancers-in-10,000 individuals exposed to chloroprene emissions, not to mention the risk posed by other emissions (the maximum EPA acceptable risk for adults is 1.0-in-10,000). This is especially concerning as children have early life susceptibility to mutagens like chloroprene and may also have reduced capacity to metabolize and eliminate chloroprene.

4. WHAT HEALTH RISKS ARE STUDENTS AT THE ST. JOHN STEM MAGNET HIGH SCHOOL EXPOSED TO?

St. John STEM Magnet High School (70% Black) is adjacent to the Air Products and Chemicals Manufacturing Facility, which releases ethylene oxide at some of the highest rates in the nation. The Louisiana State Department of Health (LDH) has concluded that industrial emissions triggered a range of documented adverse health events impacting students in this location in 2016. Along with cancer, industrial emissions have been associated with outbreaks of illnesses, including respiratory ailments, headache, vomiting, burning eyes, fever, and weakness— symptoms which have been associated with ethylene oxide.

5. HAS THE DISTRICT CONSIDERED MOVING STUDENTS AWAY FROM THESE INDUSTRIAL SITES?

While the District considered relocating students at the Fifth Ward Elementary School in 2019, environmental health was not among their considerations, most likely due to the conclusions of a 2018 report released by LDH. The LDH concluded that moving students away from these toxic sites would not significantly decrease their “theoretical” risk of developing excess cancers from exposure to chloroprene, based only on three months of air monitoring data. LDH failed to consider other chemicals that students might be exposed to and the major risks that such co-contaminants might pose to students.
6. WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO THESE TOXIC AIR EMISSIONS?

While children attending all Parish district schools likely face increased risks due to industrial emissions, children attending schools near Denka face the greatest potential risk. Children residing in the community surrounding Denka are at even greater risk. Residents are constantly exposed to chloroprene and other carcinogenic air emissions, and EPA data shows that the Denka census tract has nearly double the cumulative lifetime cancer risk than the second highest tract in the nation. Despite this, there has been no other study of the cumulative risks posed by all other chemicals emitted by Denka, many of which are also carcinogens.

7. WHAT COMMUNITIES ARE MOST IMPACTED BY THESE HEALTH RISKS?

The student bodies at the Fifth Ward Elementary School and the St. John Magnet School comprise of 84% and 70% Black students, respectively. The community around the Denka facility is disproportionately populated by low-income, economically distressed areas and historically Black rural communities. Community members are continually impacted by the facilities’ noises, odors, lights, emissions, and road traffic, and are subject to discriminatory practices, such as inequitable state approvals for facility siting permits and lax regulatory oversight and enforcement. This has resulted in declining property values, inability to relocate, and regular community complaints of ongoing health problems. The burden of these toxic emissions falls disproportionately on people of color, serving as a prime example of environmental injustice.

8. WHAT GOVERNMENT OR LOCAL ACTION HAS BEEN TAKEN TO ADDRESS THESE ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS?

The District should relocate students who are currently being educated at Fifth Ward Elementary and St. John STEM Magnet High School to safer, less environmentally hazardous educational facilities. Moreover, the District should ensure schools that are exposed to elevated environmental hazards have the infrastructure necessary to implement active health surveillance and support programs.

Notably, Louisiana has been listed as one of the worst states at enforcing federal clean air, water, and hazardous waste laws, **flunking the Public and Global Integrity’s assessment** of state government transparency, ethics enforcement, executive, legislative, and judicial accountability, and public access in 2015. The EPA released a report in 2016 that classified the District’s cancer risk from airborne toxins such as ethylene oxide as unacceptable and warned Regional officials of the urgent need to educate residents around the facilities about the health hazards of ethylene oxide. Despite this request, to date, **neither the EPA, the LDEQ, nor the facility have alerted residents to risks**, nor has LDEQ conducted any further assessment of the area.

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