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Courtesy of: Elaine Lemieux

The Sauganash Elementary School Student Council helped implement the school's idle-free zone to reduce pollution.

## Idle-free school zones give kids a cleaner breath of air

by **JESSI PROIS**  
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A child's delayed art project or a jammed locker may cause a congested line of cars in the Sauganash and Peterson elementary school parking lots on Chicago's North Side.

But one thing an end-of-day holdup doesn't cause is unnecessary pollution, says Elaine Lemieux, head of the idle-free zone project at Sauganash Elementary.

Lemieux, a mother of a former Sauganash student, and Susan Casey, a mother of a Peterson student, initiated idle-free zones to discourage parents from idling their engines and emitting pollution while waiting to pick up students.

The project became official with the implementation of signs this August and has picked up support and interest over the fall term, said Sauganash principal Christine Munns.

"Parents are, in fact, parking their cars or turning off their engines," Munns said. "Kids got into it, parents saw it as a good initiative and we have the support of local school officials."

More parents are becoming aware of the issue and doing their part by adhering to the request not to idle, said Deborah Clarke, Peterson School assistant principal.

"We have more parents turning off their engines who weren't aware of the issues with idling in the past," she said. "They wouldn't have known about it otherwise."

Lemieux began researching the idle-free zone concept last fall with the help of the Sauganash Student Council. They collected data during dismissal time and calculated that, over the course of a school year, almost six tons of greenhouse gases were being emitted and 588 gallons of fuel and almost \$2,000 was being wasted by idling cars.

Lemieux noted the health tolls as well. Children's asthma and other respiratory symptoms increase when they breathe car exhaust.

"People are constantly telling me that the project is [successful]. Anecdotally, it's working," said Casey, of the idle-free zone at Peterson.

Both Lemieux and Casey had help for their projects from the Chicago Conservation Corps, which provides training and support for volunteers to do community service projects that help the environment.

"I began the program because it's an issue that needed support," Lemieux said. "Idling has always been a concern for me."

Casey worked with a seventh grade science class at Peterson and said the project has piqued the interest of other parents who want to continue encouraging drivers to turn off their engines in the school parking lot.

"I still hope to do more with the students and parents with keeping it as an issue in the forefront and not letting it go as a one-time thing," she said.

Lemieux and Casey said they hope the idle-free zones will spread to other schools. Chicago Public Schools faces the challenge of communicating new ideas such as this to other schools, said Suzanne Carlson, CPS Environmental Programs Director.

"They did a great job figuring out what the issues were at their particular schools and coming up with solutions," she said. "We just need a better way to share some of those successes and inspire other schools to do what they have done."

Carlson noted that other schools have clubs and curriculum that focuses on reducing idling around the school. North Side Bell Elementary School implemented a Kiss 'N Ride, which keeps traffic flowing and prevents parents from idling, she said.

On top of car emission, bus idling is an additional concern, she added.

"When you're talking about school buses, you're also talking about student health," Carlson explained. "Diesel fumes are very toxic to kids and come out of the buses at the level of students. They are even worse than automobiles."

A Chicago Public School district policy prevents buses from idling more than five minutes except during cold weather and heavy traffic. An Illinois state law prohibits diesel vehicles from idling over 10 minutes, she said.

It is unlikely that the maximum idling time for buses will be changed. Buses need to be mobile during dismissal time, which necessitates short-term idling, Carlson explained.

#### **Idle facts**

\*Vehicle exhaust is the leading cause of toxic air pollution in the United States.

\*We all breathe about 20,000 breaths per day but children breathe 50 percent more air per pound than adults.

\*10 seconds of idling uses more fuel than restarting your engine.

Source: Chicago Conservation Corps