

Opinion: Lead poisoning makes it hard to do well in reading, writing and arithmetic



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By Marty Johnson and Elyse Pivnick

Not long ago, a Trenton elementary school principal was baffled by a student's struggles to learn the basics — until she discovered the child had lead poisoning. That was a eureka moment.

As families see their children go off to school to start another academic year, it's time to remember that the principal and her student are not unique. Lead poisoning is still with us, and so are the dusty, outdated policies that don't help much. In fact, they seem to be getting worse.

What's the problem?

Evidence is increasingly clear that even low levels of lead in a student's body affect learning and behavior. Yet, few teachers, principals and parents know the students who carry this burden. And too few know how to protect their kids from this burden in the first place. Nor do they know that federal and state allocations meant to tackle this health, housing, education and, yes, criminal justice challenge have been cut.

Those of us who have studied this with (luckily) non-poisoned brains understand that the actual taxpayer cost of ignoring the problem is far greater than the cost of addressing it head-on.

Over the last 10 years, Isles has tested nearly 1,600 homes in Trenton for the presence of the hazard of lead. More than half of them are so hazardous that they should not be lived in by children.

Research by the New Jersey Department of Health shows that 24 percent of Trenton kindergarteners entered school with lead poisoning in 2011. Over the past 13 years, it is likely that approximately 40 percent of children in Trenton schools had lead levels that were affecting their ability to learn.

Tragically, educators are too often in the dark, because young students are not required to share their lead screening results when they enroll in school. Or they simply do not get tested at all. As society struggles to find ways to close the achievement gap between poor and wealthier students, ignoring lead poisoning is, well, toxic.

This is not a hopeless situation. We can prevent lead poisoning, and researchers are finding promising new ways to teach a child who has lead poisoning.

How to prevent it?

In cities like Trenton, the typical source of lead poisoning is old lead paint, which flakes and turns to nearly invisible lead dust. A child doesn't have to eat paint to get poisoned. She could just crawl along a lead-contaminated floor and then put her hands in her mouth, eat food off the same floor or breathe in the leaded dust.

Until Isles began testing a few years ago, no one was systematically looking at this threat to city children, even though housing codes require homes to be kept in a manner that protects the health, safety and welfare of residents.

Isles has been testing ways to make homes lead-safe at relatively low cost. To date, we have repaired more than 100 homes, typically making them energy-efficient as well as healthy for an average cost of \$6,000 to \$8,000. We are also training people across multiple professions to assess homes for toxins, including lead. While we need to train more people to clean up homes where children live, who should pay for it? In 2011, the state of New Jersey closed its lead hazard control program, which made funds available as loans or grants to building owners who could not afford to make lead-safe repairs. Let's restore the program.

For those students who are poisoned:

- Require lead screening results to be submitted at time of school entry, and make them available to educators in a way that protects a child's privacy.

- Each district should have someone who is knowledgeable about lead poisoning and who monitors the progress of children who have lead poisoning before and after they enter school. A child who has lead poisoning can be referred to special services for monitoring and enrichment activities, because evidence shows that the earlier the intervention, the better.
- Ensure child study teams understand current research on the impacts of lead.
- Update the assessment process of children suspected of or known to have lead poisoning. Research shows that conventional IQ tests are inadequate for understanding the deficits of a child who has lead poisoning.
- Better protect our children from lead poisoning. Parents, landlords, educators, health care workers, inspectors, government and organizations such as Isles all have a role to play. No child should be robbed of his or her potential by lead poisoning.

The good news is that we are smarter than we have ever been about lead in our environment. And it is far cheaper to prevent the problem than treat its symptoms. It's time to act.

Marty Johnson is president of the Trenton-based, nonprofit Isles Inc. (isles.org) and Elyse Pivnick is director of environmental health at Isles Inc.

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