

The Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment

Blake Morrison and Brad Heath

**The Smokestack Effect: Toxic Air and America's Schools
USA TODAY**

Winners of The Grantham Prize for 2009

Good investigative journalism uncovers a wrongdoing, researches it, and reports on it. Ideally, questions are answered, wrongs are righted, and the public takes note. Blake Morrison and Brad Heath exhibited those qualities and more in their series, *The Smokestack Effect: Toxic Air and America's Schools*, for USA TODAY, the nation's largest newspaper.



The reporting team worked with academic researchers to pool government data on industrial polluters near 127,800 schools. What they found was incredible—in thousands of schools, the models indicated that the air outside could be at least twice as toxic as the air in nearby neighborhoods. In some cases, the difference reached 10 times higher. Morrison and Heath discovered cases where regulators knew there were problems, but never informed parents or school officials.

The research was integrated into an online, interactive database, allowing people to look up schools and get information on the air quality nearby. The methodologies for the notoriously difficult assessment of toxic exposure were carefully described in the companion Web site for the series, and a list of frequently asked questions was added to help readers understand how to interpret and act upon the findings.

Government officials, including Senator Barbara Boxer, chair of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee, lauded the work. Boxer called it “a shocking story of neglect,” adding, “if USA TODAY can do this, certainly the EPA can do this.” The series also prompted EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson to initiate a new program to determine whether industrial pollution impacts air quality outside of the nation's schools.

Blake Morrison, Deputy Enterprise Editor and Investigative Reporter, has worked at USA TODAY since October 1999. After the September 11 terrorist attacks he began covering aviation security and broke stories on problems with the air marshal program, airport checkpoints and cargo security. He now reports and helps direct investigations and projects. Previously, he worked at the St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer Press as an investigative reporter. Morrison teaches reporting and writing at the University of Maryland, has guest lectured at Louisiana State University and University of Wisconsin.



Brad Heath, National Reporter, specializes in data-driven enterprise stories at USA TODAY and has covered subjects ranging from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to aviation safety. Before joining USA TODAY, he was an enterprise writer for *The Detroit News* and was the investigative reporter for the *Press & Sun-Bulletin* in Binghamton, New York.



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Discussion Questions from the Authors

Exclusively for The Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment

What level of scientific certainty is necessary to prompt government intervention?

In the case of the USA TODAY series, the newspaper used the most recent government data available—and a computer simulation created by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency—to identify schools that might be located in toxic hotspots. The EPA had never used its data and simulation to examine the impact of toxics in the air outside schools. The newspaper's findings prompted a \$2.25 million program by the EPA to follow up. Is this an appropriate response?

Should regulators consider special permitting requirements for facilities located near schools?

Communities have laws about where sex offenders can live relative to children. Some also regulate the proximity of adult bookstores to schools. Given the unique susceptibility of children to the effects of toxicants, would it be wise for the government to have stricter regulations for factories that might impact the air outside schools? What about situations where the cumulative impact from multiple facilities—each meeting permitting requirements—creates dangerous levels of toxics in ambient air near schools? If so, how would regulators go about creating such standards and enforcing them? What impact would they have on industries?

How can journalists and academics work together to promote a better understanding of the impact of toxic chemicals on society?

Given the reach of publications such as USA TODAY—and its mission of communicating complex subjects such as this to a general audience—how can academics work with reporters to promote understanding and appropriate responses without creating undue fear or confusion?

From the home page for the series,

<http://content.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/smokestack/index>, readers can key in specific schools to learn about the national rank percentile for air quality (including exposure to cancer-causing toxics and other toxic chemicals), chemicals most responsible for the toxicity, and polluters most responsible for toxics outside the school.

Readers will also find links to the reporters' methodology and more Q&A relating to the series.