



Real World Foundation's Idle-Free School Zones

Grant Results Report – May, 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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Grant Title: Idle-Free School Zones

Grant Amount: \$50,000

Grant ID: 1593053

Period Covered by the Grant: January 2006 — March 2008

Foundation Program Officer: Jacqueline Martinez

ABOUT THE GRANTEE

Since 2002, the Real World Foundation's Asthma Free School Zone program has been dedicated to improving the health of New York City communities by making school neighborhoods safer and healthier.

THE PROBLEM

In some parts of New York City, 25% of school-age children have asthma, more than twice the 11 percent national rate. When students have difficulty breathing, they cannot focus on their schoolwork and often miss class time for visits to the school nurse.

Vehicle exhaust is a major trigger of asthma problems. Unnecessary and illegal idling of cars, trucks, and buses near schools poses a major health threat for students walking to school and for crossing guards who spend hours a day in the middle of intersections, as well as for the community at large.

PUPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The Asthma Free School Zone program raises awareness of the importance of clean air around schools to reduce students' exposure to asthma triggers. To promote safe and healthy school zones, the program provides signage to designate asthma-free school zones and training for school and community members to advocate for clean air. But until this project, one important group had been left out of the community mobilization and awareness effort—school crossing guards. (In New York City, school crossing guards are attached to police precincts, rather than to schools.) If crossing guards were educated about the health issues related to idling, they could help drivers comply with existing idling regulations and become more effective overseers of safe, healthy school zones.

UNDER THE GRANT

Asthma Free School Zones conducted an environmental health intervention, training school crossing guards in four New York City police precincts on what asthma is, what to do if a child has an asthma emergency, and the connection between tailpipe emissions and health.

“Crossing guards are an untapped community resource,” says Rebecca Kalin, Project Director. “They are key players in the school zone who know the children, know the traffic patterns, and should be members of the team that includes schools, parents, and local community leaders in advocating for a healthy school zone.”

Under the project, 110 crossing guards were trained, exceeding original estimates of 50 to 70 guards at 65 schools. The schools were located in the South Bronx, Brooklyn (Bushwick–Bedford Stuyvesant), and Manhattan (East Harlem and the Lower East Side), in neighborhoods designated by the City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene as areas with a high prevalence of asthma.

The guard training, which took place at police precinct houses, was originally intended to last two to three hours. However, the guards did not have that much time available and

were not accustomed to being in a classroom for that long, so it was condensed to one hour and 15 minutes.

Nearly 100% of crossing guards serving the targeted schools attended the trainings. According to Kalin, “No one had ever talked to them about anything but the basics of crossing children. They were thrilled that we were paying attention to them and said, ‘We didn’t think anyone knew we were out there!’”

One early, unanticipated glitch delayed the start of the training project. When Kalin called the first community affairs officer at the first targeted precinct for permission to conduct the training, she received approval. But when she revealed that she wanted to repeat the program at three other precincts, she was told she would need permission from Police Commissioner Ray Kelly’s office. “It took a month and a half of solid work, submitting papers and making calls, to be invited to One Police Plaza and get the needed permission,” says Kalin. “I am sure, however, that the Foundation grant helped give us legitimacy.”

In addition to the training, the project used belt-clipped monitors to measure particulate matter in the air around three crossing guards. Researchers at CUNY Hunter College Center for Environmental and Occupational Health and Queens College Center for Biology of Natural Systems are analyzing these data.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Before the training, crossing guards completed surveys regarding what they knew about asthma and air pollution, how confident they felt about asking drivers to turn off their engines, and whether they actually did so. “We knew that if they were going to be part of the team and be able to ask people to turn off their idling engines, they had to understand what was going on,” says Kalin. “People don’t change their behavior unless they understand why it’s important.”

Project staff conducted three focus groups shortly after the training. Staff talked to the guards about their increases in knowledge, attitude, and behavior. The results revealed “very significant gains in everything we measured,” says Kalin. Importantly, prior to the training, “the guards had not known there was a law against idling in school zones.” According to one focus group report, when school guards were asked whether they since had asked people not to idle, “almost 100% raised their hands. None of them said they felt shy or hesitant about asking.”

DISSEMINATION AND AFTER THE GRANT

Rebecca Kalin and her team had the distinction of being the subjects of an October 15, 2007, *New Yorker* article (including a line drawing illustration). The article describes their air quality monitoring work at Brooklyn P.S. 274 and quotes crossing guard Desiree Maldonado: “I’m so used to the air here, I can’t even tell you if it’s polluted. I know I get sick a lot. I used to sing high soprano, and I can’t anymore. This job has ruined my vocal cords.”

After the grant, the program has continued to ramp up its efforts. On May 6, 2008, Asthma Free School Zones sponsored Idle-Free NYC, to spread the word that idling is injurious and against the law, and encourage drivers throughout the city to turn off their engines. Electronic boards on bridges and the FDR Drive, and signs on the backs of 250 Metropolitan Transit Authority busses announced “Idle-Free NYC May 6.”

“We worked with schools, businesses, unions, City government, and the general public. Throughout the city we got everybody focusing on idling for one day—and it all tied into May as Asthma Awareness Month,” says Kalin.

From school crossing guards to cabbies and bus drivers, Asthma Free School Zones has enlarged its zone of concern to all of New York City.

“We look at air quality in a micro-environmental way—to what happens in the urban canyon where there is not a lot of air flow and where fumes are trapped by high buildings,” says Kalin. “We try to empower all the players to be aware of sources of pollution and to become stewards of their own backyards.”