

# A Personal Story and the Change that Followed

Turning a poisoning incident into a precautionary policy

by **Robina Suwol**

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First of all, I want to thank Debbie for her lovely comments, but I think we all know –everyone working in this room– that all of these efforts are collaborative. So when we work together, miracles can happen. I don't want any of you to think you're ever alone, or that you don't have colleagues to help you.

My journey began in 1998. It was March, a beautiful spring day. I was dropping off my two sons at school in the carpool lane – one was six, one was nine – and we went through our regular ritual of kiss-and-goodbye and running up the steps. My youngest son, who is asthmatic, yelled back at me, "Mommy, it tastes terrible!" And when I looked to my right, I saw simultaneously this gardener in a hazardous materials suit spraying something, and it was very clear that it wasn't water. I was extremely alarmed because of his asthma and wanted to know if I needed an antidote. I was heading off to work and I called the school office, but at that point in time, schools (or workers) were not required to notify the administrative office that they were doing work on the perimeter of the property or anywhere near it. So they didn't know and they referred me downtown to a district office. When I called there they were very reticent to tell me what the product was. Quite frankly, I was frantic to find out if an antidote was needed. I finally said, "Well, the grounds look beautiful, can you tell me what you're using?" And they said, well, it's a product that you can't buy off the shelf, ma'am; it's a product that requires very stringent guidelines to purchase, called Princep. That's a product I hadn't heard of, and I was like, "Well, you know, this Princep went all over kids as they were entering school, and I hope this was an isolated incident, and if it is and it won't ever happen again, you won't hear from me."

I looked up Princep on the Cornell website and also Beyond Pesticides website and was horrified to see what was there: it was a product that, clearly, I did not feel should be used around children, animals, adults, anyone at any time. The fact that they were using it in a school district, in itself, was rather alarming to me.

## My child's poisoning

When I picked up Nicholas at school, he had a full-blown asthma attack, and I was really alarmed by it, and he said to me, "Mom,



please, is this going to happen to me again?" And, you know, really without knowing where all this was going to lead, I said, as any parent would, "Of course not. This isn't ever going to ever happen to you again." And he said, "What about my friends?" and I said, "No, it's not going to happen." So I began a journey to try to educate myself about whether there were alternatives. I knew that, being just a mom, influencing the Los Angeles Unified School District –the second-largest school district in the nation that spans 704 square miles, 28 cities, and has more than a thousand school sites, not to mention administrative sites– was going to be very daunting unless I had some information to support me. So I began. I made some calls to a number of environmental groups. They helped. A small group was formed, and we created an organization called California Safe Schools.

## Organizing for change

We met with the school board member who was very open to this: Julie Kornstein, whose mother happened to be a physician and understood the kind of cumulative and synergistic effects of chemicals, especially on a young child. I came to learn that the threshold levels for children were based upon a 160-pound, healthy adult male. So I just really wanted to move forward. We met with the school board. We created an oversight team: this team, in the initial stages, consisted of anyone who wanted to come forward and participate. At some point, there were something like 60 to 70 people around tables in very large meetings.

At one of these meetings, something curious happened. This man, after hearing everyone speak (and there were physicians and scientists present, as well as environmentalists, parents, and community members at these initial meetings), said, "Excuse me, everything I've heard so far is hysterical, none of it is based on science." He's saying this to scientists and medical experts, and I thought, and I didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, I very politely said, "May I please ask your name and who you're representing today?" And he said, "My name is Mr. Orange, and I'm from Monsanto." And I thought, "Well, how interesting that Monsanto would show up." Clearly their products were being used at this school district, and they had a financial interest certainly in attending these meetings to see what the outcome was going to be. So we talked to the school board and then Monsanto representatives were prevented from attending any further meetings because of their financial conflict of interest.

## A policy is born

Shortly after that, we continued working on a school pest management policy, and one year from the date that Nicholas became ill, L.A. Unified created the most stringent pesticide policy in the country for schools. It was the first to embrace the precautionary principle and parents' right to know. It went down from 136 products to 36 products. Currently, L.A. Unified does not even use Roundup.

It wasn't enough to create a policy. We wanted to ensure its implementation. We created a highly visible 15-member oversight team that meets monthly, often with speakers, and includes among its members a physician and environmental health expert. I would urge you all in creating policies to create some sort of oversight team that includes parents and environmentalists and community members. We also wanted to locate who, at that time, would have the most experience working with a school district this large on integrated pest management (IPM), and was considered to be a national and international expert. We located William Curry, who had worked with the National Park Service. Bill came and immediately started training the staff. To date there have been thousands and thousands of staff trained, including nurses, school teachers, maintenance and operations directors, and plant managers, as well as students. This is a collaborative effort, ensuring that this policy goes forward. The training extends to crafts-people as well, so individuals that come to do plumbing work at the schools are trained not to leave gaping holes. So it's a really interesting and extensive program that's very intense.

At one of our oversight committee meetings, a woman came and said, "Well, I'm here today because I'd like to use Los Angeles Unified school sites to test experimental products." And she offered, "They're stronger and we use less, so therefore they're safer." We said, "I don't think so, we have a policy that embraces the precautionary principle," and we really weren't interested. So as she departed her final comment was, "You know, that's okay if L.A. Unified doesn't want to use these kinds of products, we have tons of other school districts lined up, so thank you very much." Just like the initial experience with Nicholas, that comment haunted me. I thought, "Oh my gosh, what is going on with this?"



In an event not unlike this, I was talking about this story, and California Assembly member Cindy Montanez came forward and said, "I'd like to carry a bill that prevents K-12 public schools from being used as lab rats, as guinea pigs. This will not only be for experimental products, but for phased-out products." I also want to acknowledge Jay Feldman and Beyond Pesticides for their tremendous help in reviewing the draft legislation because it was a very complicated issue in determining what were conditional, experimental and phased-out products. The bill, AB 405, became law, banning experimental pesticide use in California schools and this is something that we are moving forward on at the federal level. I urge you to please help support this as we move this forward so that all our children throughout the United States are protected.

The policy of L.A. Unified led to California legislation, which doesn't mandate that schools create IPM, but it does mandate right to know at the beginning of the year and posting. That's called the *Healthy Schools Act*, which was adopted in 2000.

When I went to testify for the *Healthy Schools Act*, there was a gentleman in the audience, and he was talking (he was someone from one of the pesticide companies), and saying, "There's nothing to fear from pesticides, it's cockroach defecation that's really the most serious and problematic." My youngest son—he was six at the time—who heard this in a quiet hearing room said, "What's defecation, mommy?" I explained to him, and he said, "That's silly!" really loudly.

When it came time for me to testify, my son said "I want to come with you," and I thought, "What is he going to say?" You know, he goes, "I want to say something." And so I said way too much, and at the conclusion of my comments, he just said, "I just want to say, the kids go to school to learn, not to die, that's it. And I want a cookie." And so I'll leave it at that. Thank you; our children have no lobbyists, they have no vote, they depend upon adults to protect them. Thank you for all for doing all of your work. Thank you.

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