

Chicago Tribune



FRIDAY, APRIL 1, 2011 | Questions? Call 1-800-TRIBUNE | 24 hours at chicagotribune.com

The Cubs

vs. Pirates at Wrigley Field
Time: 1:20 p.m. TV: WGN-Ch.9
In Sports: 9 pressing questions

Chicago's Opening Day



The Sox

vs. Indians in Cleveland
Time: 2:05 p.m. TV: CSN
In Sports: 9 pressing questions

High levels of lead fill air at school

Readings from Pilsen monitor spark investigation by federal, state EPAs

By Michael Hawthorne
TRIBUNE REPORTER



Residents in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood complained for years about metallic-tasting smoke rolling down their narrow streets but had little evidence it was harmful.

Now they have proof. New monitoring data obtained by the Tribune reveal that high levels of toxic lead frequently lingered in the air last year outside an elementary school in the predominantly Latino enclave that is attended by nearly 500 children.

Average lead levels at Perez Elementary School were at or above federal limits during three three-month periods in 2010, the data show. Lead pollution exceeded health standards during a fifth of the days monitored and, on one day in December, spiked more than 10 times higher — findings that alarm even veteran investigators.

None of the 14 other lead monitors placed near factories, steel mills and high-

ways in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana recorded as many high readings as the one that state officials put on the roof of Perez a year ago, responding to Tribune reporting about air pollution in Pilsen. The only other part of Illinois where a chronic lead problem was detected is a neighborhood surrounding a steel mill in Granite City, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.

With a full year of results in hand, the high airborne lead levels found at Perez are prompting a joint investigation by the U.S. and Illinois Environmental Protection agencies. Officials put another monitor on the roof of nearby Juarez Community Academy two weeks ago in an attempt to pinpoint the culprits.

While officials aren't sure yet where the lead is

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BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE PHOTO
Joe Berton re-enacts his Sidd Finch pitching motion outside Oak Park and River Forest High School.

THE GREATEST PITCHER WHO NEVER WAS

Sidd Finch was too good to be true. In fact, he was the greatest sports hoax ever.

By Christopher Borrelli
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Joe Berton was the greatest pitcher to ever climb a mound. And today, Joe Berton, a retired school teacher who lives in Oak Park and is 57 and Ichabod Crane spindly and does not swivel heads anymore, is a footnote to sports history. No, that's not quite it: Joe Berton is a footnote to a footnote to sports history.

Wait, scratch that: Joe Berton is a footnote to a footnote to a bit of sports history that never happened.

Yes, that's it: Joe Berton was Sidd Finch. Or rather, he was the model for Finch, who was born in the spring of 1985. Finch was the baseball player featured in the



The original two-page opening spread in Sports Illustrated on Sidd Finch was an elaborate hoax for April 1, 1985 — April Fools' Day.

April 1, 1985, issue of Sports Illustrated; the story, titled "The Curious Case of Sidd Finch" by George Plimpton, was a 14-page profile of a New York Mets pitching phenom who had never played the game but whose fastball was a leather-wrapped sonic boom of 168 miles per hour.

So with the Cubs and Sox opening their seasons Friday, the first of April, April Fools' Day, we thought to check in on Berton. This is, after all, the anniversary of the greatest hoax in the history of baseball. He was 32 in 1985. He landed in

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BUSINESS

Trade show rules dismantled

A federal judge declares that state lawmakers went too far in their attempt to change work rules affecting unionized labor at McCormick Place. PAGE 21



JOSÉ M. OSORIO/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Mary Stephenson Schroeder gave her son an extra year of preschool, but he must now go to first grade, CPS says.

CPS flags parents with 'redshirt' rule

Age policy upsets families who want to hold back kids

By Cynthia Dizikes
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Jonathan Schroeder was a congenial and curious 4-year-old, but preschool proved challenging.

He rarely raised his hand to speak, stuck close by his teacher and set a year-end goal to spend less time hiding in the bathroom.

So when it came time to enroll him in kindergarten, his parents researched and debated before making a decision that has become increasingly popular during the past several decades: They gave Jonathan another year to grow older, bigger and maybe a bit more confident.

They also unwittingly broke the rules.

When the Schroeders entered Jonathan into this year's kindergarten lottery for a slot at one of the city's elite magnet schools, Chicago Public Schools officials notified them that he had exceeded the district's age limit because he will turn 6 in July. His only option was to apply directly to first grade.

"I started crying, I was so angry," Mary Stephenson Schroeder said at the Wicker Park home she shares with her husband and three children. "I feel like I made all these plans for what I thought would be best for him and they just threw it out the window."

The practice of kindergarten "redshirting" became more common in the 1990s as course work turned from coloring and singing about the alphabet to reading, simple arithmetic and

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CHICAGOLAND

On-duty cops accused of sex assault

Two officers were relieved of police powers after they allegedly sexually assaulted a woman while on duty. PAGE 6

CHICAGOLAND

Police release sketch in CTA robbery, death

A long-faced man with short, dark hair is sought in the death of a woman he pushed at the Fullerton station. PAGE 10

NATION & WORLD

Tea party wants GOP to stand firm

As Congress works on a budget deal before the shutdown deadline, tea party protesters demand deep cuts. PAGE 14

MARY SCHMICH

Getting to the armpit of this image crisis

A firm says women hate their armpits. It has a solution, of course. PAGE 6



TOM SKILLING'S FORECAST



See complete forecast on the back of Movies SECTION 3

NEWS FOCUS Tribune watchdog



ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Leo Flores of the Cook County Environmental Control Department replaces a glass filter on a lead monitor atop Perez School. In the background is the Fisk coal-fired power plant.

Pilsen air tests high for lead

Continued from Page 1

coming from, both Pilsen schools are within a few blocks of two of the biggest industrial sources of the toxic metal in the Chicago area: the H. Kramer and Co. smelter and the Fisk coal-fired power plant. Perez is north of the two polluters; Juarez is west.

"We're trying to move quickly because children are involved," said Laurel Kroack, chief of the Illinois EPA's air bureau. "But we need better data to figure out the story before moving forward."

More stringent limits on airborne lead emissions are part of a decades-long campaign to protect kids from lead poisoning. A growing number of studies show that even tiny amounts of the metal ingested or inhaled can damage the brains of young children and trigger learning disabilities, aggression and criminal behavior later in life. Most scientists say there is no safe level of exposure.

Efforts to prevent lead poisoning are focused largely on safe removal of old lead-based paint, though limits on industrial polluters and the elimination of leaded gasoline already have led to declining levels in children.

Pilsen is drawing attention from federal and state officials in response to "environmental justice" complaints that the minority, low-income neighborhood is disproportionately affected by air pollution.

"Lead pollution is another big problem for us," said Jerry Mead-Lucero, a community activist who lives in Pilsen. "The only way we're going to get answers is to keep the pressure on the EPA to find out where it's coming from and go after them."

As part of their investigation, EPA officials gathered annual reports from H. Kramer, Fisk and the four other polluters that reported lead emissions in a 20-square-mile area bordered by the Eisenhower and Dan Ryan expressways, Pershing Road and Cicero Avenue.

Three of them each emitted 4 pounds or less of lead in 2009, the last year for which figures are available, according to records obtained by the Tribune under the Freedom of Information Act. By contrast, H. Kramer and Fisk released 242 and 149 pounds into the air, respectively.

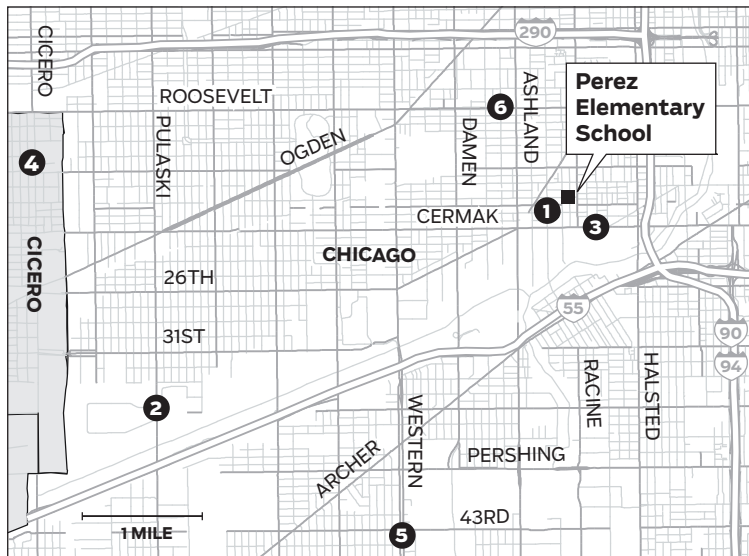
Another polluter, the Crawford coal-fired power plant at Pulaski Road and the Stevenson Expressway, emitted 210 pounds of lead. It is nearly four miles from the monitors at Perez, 1241 W. 19th St., and Juarez, 1450 W. Cermak Road.

EPA scientists are collecting more frequent samples from the monitors, tracking weather conditions during days when spikes of pollution are measured and chemically matching lead particles sucked into the testing devices with emissions from nearby polluters.

Officials have not widely shared the monitoring results in Pilsen, where brick three-flats that survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 are crammed cheek by jowl next to factories. Speaking in

Lead polluters loom near school

A lead monitor placed at Perez Elementary School in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood found levels during 2010 that at times exceeded federal health standards. Regulators are trying to pinpoint the source of the contamination, including collecting records from nearby industrial polluters that release lead into the air.



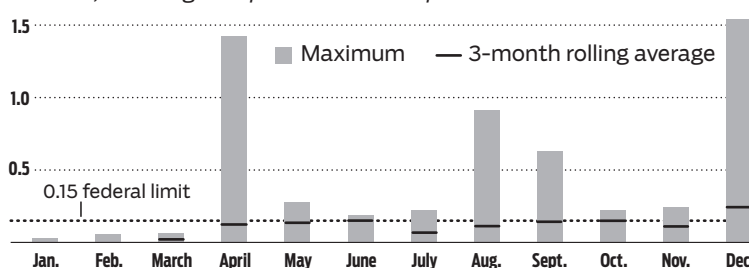
EMITTING LEAD NEAR PEREZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Pounds of lead emitted in 2009 (most recent available)

1	H. Kramer and Co. smelter 21st and Throop streets	242
2	Crawford Power Plant 3501 S. Pulaski Road	210
3	Fisk Power Plant 1111 W. Cermak Road	149
4	United Scrap Metal 1505 S. Cicero Ave., Cicero	4
5	Ames Metal Products 4323 S. Western Ave.	1.7
6	University of Illinois at Chicago 1140 S. Paulina St.	0.3

PEREZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEAD LEVELS

For 2010, in micrograms per cubic meter of air



SOURCES: Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. EPA

Spanish, a woman who lives less than a block from Perez said she is concerned about how the frequent spikes of lead pollution could affect children.

"We have to make sure they are breathing clean air, right?" said Reyna Rebolgar, whose 9-year-old grandson is a third-grader at the school. "This is bad. It's blood poison."

Spokesmen for H. Kramer and Fisk denied their facilities are responsible for the high levels of pollution. The smelter, once the largest industrial source of airborne lead in Cook County, has significantly reduced its emissions in response to pressure from community leaders and environmental regulators.

"We have no idea why they would place a lead monitor so close to us," said Todd Wiener, an attorney for H. Kramer. "We are not a major source of lead."

Charles Parnell, a spokesman for Midwest Generation, the company that owns the Fisk plant, said its emissions account for only a small fraction of lead pollution in the Chicago area.

He speculated that the lead found in Pilsen could be coming from construction equipment or is being kicked into the air as nearby buildings are demolished. (Lead-based paint was banned in the late 1970s but remains a festering problem in Chicago and other older cities.)

"Furthermore, lead may have accumulated in soil for decades and could possibly be spread by high winds on a particular day," Parnell wrote in an email response to questions.

EPA officials also suspected that lead-contaminated soil in the neighborhood could be part of the problem. They ruled that out after realizing the highest amount recorded by the Perez lead monitor

Pollution an issue in aldermanic race

Air pollution in Pilsen is a major issue in the aldermanic race in Chicago's 25th Ward, where the incumbent, Daniel "Danny" Solis, faces a Tuesday runoff against challenger Cuahutemoc "Temoc" Morfin.

Morfin, who garnered 28 percent in the first round of balloting, is vice president of his brother's construction company and a former local school council member at Juarez Community Academy. He has campaigned largely on a pledge to clean up or shut down the Fisk power plant, an aging coal-fired generator that rises above the southeast corner of the neighborhood.

Solis, who earlier declined to back a proposed city ordinance aimed at Fisk and the Crawford power plant in Little Village, signed on as a co-sponsor after Morfin forced the incumbent into a runoff. The alderman, chairman of the influential Zoning Committee, got nearly 49 percent of the first vote, just under the majority needed to win.

Solis has said he isn't convinced the city has authority to impose pollution limits that are tougher than state or federal law. But he recently told the Tribune that Morfin was right to back the proposed Clean Power Ordinance.

— Michael Hawthorne

came Dec. 10, when there was more than 2 inches of wet snow on the ground.

Illinois expanded its statewide network of lead monitors to Perez and five other locations after a 2008 Tribune story revealed how President George W. Bush's administration had exempted dozens of polluters from scrutiny.

Faced with a court order, the U.S. EPA that year lowered the maximum amount of lead allowed in the air to 0.15 micrograms per cubic meter, a standard that is 10 times more stringent than the former limit. Violations are determined by three-month rolling averages.

To enforce the rule, federal officials had planned to require lead monitors near polluters emitting at least a half-ton of the metal a year. But in response to industry lobbying, the Bush White House set the threshold at a ton of lead or more, slashing the number of factories monitored nationwide by 60 percent.

Some states decided to follow the EPA's original advice. In Illinois, that meant putting a new monitor in Pilsen, where H. Kramer churned out as much as 1,450 pounds of lead (or 0.725 tons) as recently as 2007.

Federal, state and city officials had brushed aside complaints until residents, organized into a group called the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, collected soil samples around the smelter in 2005. The group's testing prompted an Illinois EPA study that confirmed high lead levels in nearby yards, in some cases up to seven times higher than federal safety limits.

H. Kramer denied it was responsible but later agreed to clean up its property, scour two nearby sites and spend \$500,000 on more effective lead controls.

Federal and state officials now question whether the efforts were effective enough to meet tougher health standards. After inspectors in late February discovered smoke hovering inside the smelter building, the U.S. EPA cited H. Kramer for violating the federal Clean Air Act.

"They worked on closing up the windows and the roof, where a lot of the lead was leaking out before," said the Illinois EPA's Kroack. "But they could still have a problem."

Wiener, the H. Kramer attorney, said the company has requested more information from regulators. "It's our goal to cooperate with them," he said.

Fisk and Crawford are two aging coal-fired power plants that ComEd sold to Midwest Generation in 1999. Activists have fought for years to force the owners to clean up the plants or shut them down, something Midwest Generation has agreed to do by 2018, but local activists want to happen sooner.

New anti-pollution rules unveiled last month by the Obama administration will force the power company and other utilities to dramatically reduce emissions of lead and other toxic metals. Midwest Generation also faces a federal lawsuit and a proposed Chicago ordinance that would impose tougher pollution limits.

Tribune reporter Becky Schlikerman contributed.

mhawthorne@tribune.com

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