

■ An Earth Day project on lake pollution has energized a fifth-grade class in Northbrook to research and fight asbestos and other contaminants in the water. Staff reporter **Charles Nicodemus** talked to the budding environmental activists.



Karen Jump's class at Shabonne Trail School has asked for answers from leaders at every level up to President Clinton.

When the fifth-grade class at Northbrook's Shabonne Elementary School set out to study asbestos and other Lake Michigan pollutants, the children had no idea what big waves they might make.

"The kids thought it would be a good idea to write to our local water department, to ask officials there how the village tests for asbestos in the water supply," said their veteran teacher, Karen Jump.

"The answer they got back was certainly a surprise," she said.

The embarrassed water production supervisor, Tom Papreck, sent a three-page response April 3, explaining details of the northern suburb's water treatment and testing program. But, "Oops," there was one small problem:

Papreck said that in response to the kids' inquiry, he'd gone back into his files to check results of the last test made for asbestos—in 1995. Only to find he'd never gotten back the results from the lab where the samples were sent. And nobody had noticed.

"However . . . we are scheduling another asbestos test early this month," Papreck wrote, adding: "I will pass on the results to you as soon as we receive them."

The 19 kids, 10 and 11 years old, are now up to their knees in asbestos and other kinds of pollutants—in asbestos research, asbestos art, asbestos speakers and asbestos poetry, among other things.

On Friday they recorded a rap song; they're putting out a project newspaper, the *Perilous Times*, and on Monday they finished making their "Stop Asbestos . . . the Deadly Drink" T-Shirts Monday.

By today—Earth Day—class members, who all use computers, planned to go online with their own Web page, chronicling and illustrating their interest in and research on asbestos and other pollution problems.

The project's climax will come on Saturday when they staff a booth at Northbrook's Earth Day Fair, on the Village Green at Shermer and Meadow.

Meanwhile, they've been firing off more prickly, insightful inquiries to other public officials. Such as President Clinton,

Vice President Al Gore, Gov. Edgar, their two U.S. senators, their congressman and their local state legislators.

After class discussion, Jump also agreed to write last month to the heads of the three state agencies—Natural Resources, Public Health and Environmental Protection—that are directly concerned with the widely publicized washup of asbestos debris at Illinois Beach State Park.

"I can understand that the kids wouldn't have heard back yet from Mr. Clinton and Mr. Gore, or the senators," Jump said. "But I think the various state officials have been conspicuous by their silence." Only State Rep. Elizabeth Coulson (R-Glenview) had responded by Monday, with a brief note commending the children's interest and promising to check out their Web site.

It all began in early February when the fifth-graders, in consultation with Jump, decided to take on lake pollution as a spring class project.

Two days later the news broke about how asbestos debris had been washing up since July along the shoreline at heavily used Illinois Beach State Park—but nobody

had informed the public until the Sun-Times disclosed the phenomenon Feb. 3. "That really energized the class," Jump said.

In part of their "Asbestos Rap"—which is a bit more restrained than a Snoopy Doggy Dog production—the students declare:

Our lake's pollution is very bad; the extent of it makes me very sad. Asbestos are little particles of waste; they're sure not very much fun to taste.

And while none of the fifth-graders' poetry threatens laureate Gwendolyn Brooks, it is issue-oriented and straight from the heart. Bradley R., 10, wrote:

When the oceans were safe and the lakes were still clean, The Indians fished and swam in the streams . . .

Chemicals made the rain turn into acid, Changing the water that used to be placid . . .

One student, Emma R., 11, perhaps a budding diplomat, started off her plea to Clinton for anti-pollution action by say-

ing: "Dear Mr. President: I am sorry to bother you, with all that is happening to you, but . . ."

Stephanie C., 11, saved the soft soap in her appeal to Clinton until a P.S. that said, "You are my favorite president so far." (She said she could only remember two). And in a wily P.P.S. she added: "How's your puppy doing? Is he back from training school yet? I have a puppy, too. His name is Max."

Josh M., 11, perhaps a budding politician, sought to ingratiate Gore, saying: "I would send a letter to the President, but I am sure you will do more than he will because you are a big environmentalist." Later he threw in the clincher:

Gore should come to their Earth Day Fair, Josh said, since "it is also very fun because there is very good food and an ice cream store very close."

Ben K., 10, tried a more in-your-face approach with Gov. Edgar, complaining about pollution and then adding: "People say you are not doing anything about it . . . If you want

some good ideas, call Mrs. Jump's class."

After another class discussion, Jump wrote on behalf of the students to ask the Natural Resources director if it is safe to bring her class for a firsthand look at Illinois Beach State Park. And would the state pay for the bus?

Then she relayed to the state's Public Health chief this class question: Because the department announced it had "zero tolerance" for asbestos in food like Twinkies, why did it accept a standard permitting 7 million asbestos particles in just one liter of water? And she told the EPA the kids wanted to know what was being done to trace and stop asbestos debris at the state park.

If any of the officials still want to respond, Jump said, the kids' e-mail address is jumpteam1@northbrook27.k12.il.us.

And their Web site address is: www.northbrook27.k12.il.us; then click on Shabonne school; then Mrs. Jump's class, and then their environmental page.

"We still haven't heard a peep back from any of the state officials," Jump said. "Maybe they don't think the questions of children are important."

Students get lesson in rocking the boat

RICHARD A. CHAPMAN/SUN-TIMES