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High time to stop school idling

By Michael J. Caduto

School will soon be back in session as the familiar yellow-and-black buses ply Vermont's roads; engines humming like autumn bumblebees, gathering and dropping off precious cargo to feed the next generation.

As an environmental educator, author and storyteller, I have presented more than 3,500 programs at public and private schools. When arriving at many schools I often encounter acrid fumes from the exhausts of school buses and automobiles that are idling while bus drivers and parents wait to drop off their kids. Exhaust pipes from delivery vehicles add more toxic air to the mix. Although this situation has been relieved at some Vermont schools by a 2007 law designed to control idling (Act 48), many children are still exposed to air pollution every day.

In addition to fouling the air outside, these fumes often get sucked into school ventilation systems and blown into schoolrooms. And since many schools in northern New England lack air conditioning, the rooms adjacent to student drop-off zones must keep windows open during the warmer days of autumn and spring, which allows exhaust fumes to invade.

Every year, exhausts from idling cars, trucks and buses generate millions of pounds of air pollution, including particulate matter that lodges deep inside the lungs, plus toxic gases such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide. Every person sitting in idling vehicles, waiting nearby and in nearby schoolrooms inhales this insidious elixir.

Medical research shows that, since children are smaller and take more breaths than adults, they inhale 50 percent more air pollution for each pound of body weight. The health problems caused by exhaust gases are especially serious for young people with asthma — the leading cause of hospital visits for children.

Needless engine idling also contributes to the rising cost of health care by:

Increasing the frequency of medical care needed for treating both low-level and chronic respiratory distress caused by exhaust fumes among asthmatic children and adults.

Increasing the need for treatment of other short-term and longterm respiratory conditions that are aggravated by exhaust fumes.

In addition, exhaust from a single car that idles for 5 minutes each day, over the course of a year, can create 30 pounds of toxic pollution and 300 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to global warming.

On an average day, Vermont's 1,800 school buses shuttle 75,000 students to and from school. Shutting off engines while waiting for longer than 10 seconds reduces wear and tear, saves

fuel and reduces air pollution. Modern diesel fuel formulas, and the advanced designs of today's engines, have eliminated the need to keep engines running while kids disembark, even in cold weather. At any rate: the cost of engine upkeep is finite, but the worth of maintaining the longterm health of our children is priceless.

The noxious effects of idling are so pervasive that many kids have become avid environmental advocates — organizing local, regional, statewide and provincial campaigns to stop idling on school grounds. Some students have testified before government officials and lobbied legislators to pass new laws and regulations. Here are web links to two successful efforts:

Nathan Moos' No-Idle campaign — Sandy, Utah:

greenrightnow.com/wabc/2008/07/17/young-eco-heroes-take-planet%E2%80%99s-future-into-their-own-hands/

Idle Free Girls — Stonewall, Manitoba:

edu.gov.mb.ca/youth/leadership/stories/idle_free_girls.html

Some states, provinces and municipalities have now passed regulations requiring school buses to turn off their engines if they are going to be idling for more than 10 seconds, in order to avoid the harmful effects of idling on human health and the environment.

Fortunately for children of the Green Mountain State, in 2007 students from Browns River Middle School in the town of Jericho spearheaded a lobbying effort in the legislature that led to the passing of Act 48, establishing regulations that prohibit school buses from idling while on school grounds, and encouraging schools to adopt anti-idling zones for all other vehicles on school property.

There is, however, no provision for enforcing Act 48 and no one knows exactly how many schools have actually established and maintained no-idling zones. As for adopting a policy to control idling on school grounds for vehicles other than school buses: a recent survey conducted of Vermont's 253 school boards and districts by the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) was returned by one-third of the school boards. Of this number, 40percent said they have created such a policy, which amounts to only 12 percent of the total school boards statewide.

Vermonters are fortunate to have a statewide organization, called Idle-Free VT that is devoted to promoting clean air by eliminating idling in our communities. Anyone who is interested in learning more about these issues, and wants to get involved, can visit idlefreevt.org.

Slowly, the air is clearing. Last June, when I drove up to Fayston Elementary School in north-central Vermont, I saw Anti-Idling signs where students were being dropped off. Nearby, the school's own electrical-generating windmill spun in the breeze.

Over time, schools like Fayston, Weybridge and others are getting idling under control.

As students, parents and members of communities who care about the health of our children and the environment, we can take the lead from the kids and staff of activist schools. We can lobby our local school administrations and school boards to establish firm no-idling policies for

all vehicles on school grounds, and then do the work to make it happen. Isn't it time that our kids' new school year truly begins with a breath of fresh air?

Michael J. Caduto travels widely, presenting environmental and cultural programs for all ages, including "Kids' Power: Energy Alternatives for Today's Kids." His website is www.p-e-a-c-e.net
