

Lead Expert Delivers "Message of Hope" to Flint Area Educators



Chicago pediatrician Dr. Helen Binns, a national expert on the effects of lead ingestion and co-author of the CDC report titled "Educational Interventions for Children Affected by Lead," presented strategies to Flint-area MEA members in March.

Anationally known expert on the effects of lead poisoning in children delivered an unexpected but welcome message of hope to educators assembled at MEA Flint offices for a recent training session.

Dr. Helen Binns was brought in by MEA to train Flint area educators concerned about young people who ingested lead in the city's tainted water supply. There is no safe level of lead exposure, said Binns, a pediatrician at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and a professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

"I am delivering a message of hope that 'Yes, you can make a difference.'"

However, there also is no certainty in the research about lead's effects on an individual child, she added. The only guarantee Binns could make to educators—one she hopes will make its way to parents—is that Binns shared a wealth of data she's gathered in a career focused on the issue of lead exposure, historically a pervasive and persistent problem in the U.S. For perspective, she noted that between 1976 and 1980, 88 percent of American children had blood lead levels above 10 micrograms per deciliter. In Flint, approximately 5 percent of children who were tested had blood lead levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter. "How high? I don't know," Binns said.

watch for developmental, speech, and physical delays in children and refer struggling students for appropriate services and therapy as early as possible, she said.

United Teachers of Flint President Karen Christian said Binns' presentation underscored the need for schools to have a committee of professionals in every building dedicated to screening children for issues. "As these children age zero to six start entering school, we need to have interventions in place," she said. "Do we have enough? No."

MEA members expressed appreciation for Binns and her message. "It's nice to see that it's not a hopeless cause," said Iman Simberg, a school psychologist who works at several Flint buildings. "We can tell parents they're not doomed."

Fourth-grade teacher Alicia Judd agreed. "Now with some strategies she gave us we can at least inform parents there is hope for your child. It's not just 'Oh, my child has lead poisoning: it's the end of the world.' We need to keep screening and find the right services and strategies to help." ❧

How you can help:

MEA members interested in helping assist students and school employees in Flint can contribute to an ongoing classroom supplies drive.

Make a tax-deductible contribution with a check made payable to the MEA Classroom Support Fund, with "Flint" in the memo line. Mail checks to MEA Classroom Support Fund, Attn: Rick Trainor, 1216 Kendale Blvd., PO Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573.

Donation drives can also be conducted to gather supplies, including pens, pencils, colored pencils, markers, paper, binders, wipes, hand sanitizer, glue sticks, crayons, art supplies and more.

During April, a coordinated MEA Flint supply drive will gather donations from all corners of the state. Visit www.mea.org for details.

