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## Environmental Health Literacy

By Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn

This month's theme of Environmental Health Literacy (EHL) may seem a bit lofty for elementary students, yet there are many reasons why the topic could and should be introduced to children. Learning how to make informed decisions regarding one's health and wellbeing is essential at all ages. Children can begin to understand the links between healthy food choices and obesity or the need for clean drinking water. Students can collect data about air, water, and soil quality to determine the health of an environment, whether it's a fish tank, a schoolyard garden, or a salt marsh. Empowering students to make decisions about personal health and understand the impact humans have on the environment is critical to preparing literate, well informed citizens.

EHL can serve as an entry into advocacy and environmental justice, as students delve into topics such as a community's access to quality food choices or the link between air quality and asthma. As students collect and analyze data, they can learn about real-world health issues in their neighborhoods. Equipped with data-supported evidence, students can shine a light upon health concerns and advocate for change. What better way to motivate students to learn than to empower them to advocate for themselves?

Years ago, while working with fifth-grade teachers, I helped develop a unit examining food choices linked to health and wellbeing. We began by investigating the amount of sugar found in certain types of food, measuring out grams of sugar to display the actual amount found in different foods expressly packaged to appeal to young people. Students read nutrition labels and compared advertising claims. We went on to examine the amount of sugar and salt added to certain fast

foods popularized as kids' meals. The students were shocked to find that many of the kids' meals had twice as much sugar and salt as their counterpart adult meals. Armed with this information, the students wrote letters to companies, made better personal food choices, and even examined their lunchroom food options.

Just as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* became a catalyst for change in the 1960s regarding the use of harmful pesticides in the environment, our empowered students shifted from passive acceptance to demanding equity and change within their world. This life-long learning sprinkled with advocacy and action became a meaningful lesson for these students and teachers as well.

*Addendum:* Little did I know as I wrote this editorial in early February, our world would soon be entrenched in a global pandemic with schools shuttered and teachers scrambling to meet the needs of online learning for their students. First and foremost, to our readers and authors, we send our sincerest well wishes to you and your loved ones who are dealing with loss and uncertainty. It has been inspiring to see how our educational communities have already risen to meet teaching and learning obstacles. I gather strength and solidarity by reaching out to my family, friends, and colleagues.

Please connect with your NSTA community for support, guidance, and at times a comforting shoulder. Lessons learned during this challenging time have focused a much-needed spotlight on technology inequities as well as the need for preparing the next generation of scientifically literate citizens!

Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn

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