



Flint Classroom Adapts to a Changing Community Post-Water Crisis

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Luna, the Greek Goddess of the moon, is also the name of a classroom in Flint, Michigan. This classroom, which doesn't go by a number but rather a name, consists of 11 four year olds. Most things about this classroom are pretty typical, they take a nap each afternoon, eat lunch together, read books, and sing songs and dance.

This classroom is at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) at the University of Michigan's Flint Campus. In April of 2014, news broke that the city of Flint's water was contaminated with lead. Flint had switched from The Detroit Water Authority to the Flint Water System, which pulls water from the Flint River. The water coming from this river had a different chemical makeup, and when untreated picked up lead in the pipes. This lead-contaminated water

affected nearly 99,000 residents, and 50% of the exposed children had dangerously elevated blood levels.

The Education Development Center unknowingly ran this contaminated water through its pipes. Rhonda Sevick, who was a teacher at the ECDC for 15 years, said, “I began noticing rashes on children’s hands who I knew regularly washed their hands.”

Dr. Lanphear, a professor and researcher at Simon Fraser University, and one of the leading lead researches in the world said, “On average, we expect this to disrupt children’s behavior abilities, not by a large magnitude, but by settle amounts. But these settle amounts can have big consequences on community and population health.”

In order to combat these consequences on the community and population health, the teachers and community around the ECDC began working to mitigate the effects of lead on children who were exposed. One of the first ways to do this was by opening a pop up school. This school existed on a bus that drove around Flint to places such as parks, women’s shelters, and the Boys and Girls club. This pop-up school was funded by a grant as an attempt to mitigate the effects of lead, and was, quite literally, what it sounds like—a school on wheels. This school target a population that likely would not be reached otherwise, and brought services and support such as nutrition information and healthy activities that have been shown to mitigate exposure to lead.

Meet Up and Eat Up was another program teachers at the ECDC implemented in the community. This brought healthy to children, as research shows eating every two to three hours can mitigate effects of lead.

Eventually, a more permanent resource grew out of the ECDC; Cummings Preschool. This five million dollar facility was built just across town. Nikki Swink, the teacher in Luna, said, “it is a sort of extension of the ECDC.” Cummings was built with grant money from the Community Foundation, the Mott Foundation, and the William White Foundation, as a tuition-free school exclusively for children who were directly affected, meaning they drank and bathed in lead water at home. Most of the kids from ECDC who had direct exposure switched over to Cummings, as it is tuition free and advertised as having ample resources for exposed children.

Sharneese Magee, who is a teacher at ECDC and a resident of Flint, chose this option for her son. Magee’s son was just two days old when information came out about contaminated water. Because she was pregnant and drinking the water from her home, her son qualified to be a student at Cummings. Magee’s son has a speech delay, and she says, “It is traumatizing to think that this may have came from the water.”

She explains that she sent her son to Cummings “to receive additional support and services.” But she also says “There hasn’t been any difference in what is offered at Cummings verse what is offered here, at ECDC.” Her son has access to a speech therapist, but that is because it is a Flint school, and would be available with or without additional lead-related resources.

At Cummings, as well as at the ECDC, her child has access to speech therapists, a nurse, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and a service coordinator. Magee plans on re-enrolling her son at ECDC this fall because she doesn’t see a difference in resources available. Additionally, this spring the original three-year grant that funded Cummings and covered tuition will expire. There will be some money secure for next year from state programs Early Start and Head Start, but Swink says, “everyone is brainstorming about where to get the money to fund the rest of it.”

Joslyn Marinelli, the director of the ECDC, says, “The future for how the state is going to deal with this doesn’t look great. This is the last year of the program, and it is already being talked about less.”

Noah Hall, the lead prosecutor on behalf of the people of Flint in the civil case, doesn’t have high expectations for State funding in the future. “The state is the reason the people of Flint are poisoned,” Hall said, “It should not be up to the state to decide to attempt to show some mercy on these same people.” Instead, Hall sees a different outcome for money he plans on the community receiving from his case later this year. “The money would not go to the state of Michigan, it would go to a community trust fund. We are hoping to bring a lot of financial resources to the people in a community trust fund, to provide education resources for kids, but really the entire community needs it. Sort of like reparation.”

Hall believes this money is so important because it is not only a problem that affected the 99,000 residents of Flint, but it affected an entire community. In Luna, at the ECDC, most of the students do not live within the city of Flint, but 75% of the children had some level of exposure. Two of the children were directly affected, meaning they drank the water at home, but the majority of this class had exposure to the water in a less direct context. Because ECDC was using lead-contaminated water in their own facility, students drank and used this water to clean their hands, an example of exposure that is not considered direct.

Luna, similar to the moon, has stayed steady, cycling children in and out when the world below it seems to be spinning out of control. Swink continues to do what she can to combat the lead exposure. Recently she enrolled her class in a competition called Commit to Fit that tracked the student’s active time. They go outside often, they play in the dirt, and they eat healthy snacks and a healthy lunch. In Luna, the sun shines through a wall of windows. In one of the windowsills

four, big block letter sit that spell out the word “LOVE”. Many aspects in this community are still unknown: where the funding will come from for Cummings, what the future looks like for Magee’s son and so many other children, and if Noah Hall will win the case. But one thing does remain sure, that these children are taught with love shining through.