

Superfund Seniors

Narrator: The 1989 Enrichment Project which came to be known as Superfund Seniors Project, had a series of shared objectives. To establish a link between the EPA and the local community that could serve as a model for the future; to pilot a federal local outreach program for mutual enrichment while developing a sense of environmental challenges; to foster career awareness of science and technology particularly those associated with the EPA; and to develop useful products for use by both participating parties.

The District of Columbia School System requires its students to do public service. It also encourages them to participate in professional internships. In the summer of 1989, students from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts participated in an intense 6-week program at the United States Environmental Protection Agency. This internship was sponsored by the public school's Parental Involvement Volunteer and Community Services unit, the EPA Office of Human Resources Management, and the Superfund Program, along with the participation of other EPA offices, environmental groups, federal agencies, private industry, and citizens. The program began on Monday, July 8, 1989.

Henry Longest: You're going to be working with is called Superfund. You know in the federal government we have names and acronyms and we have to explain them. And what Superfund basically is, is a cleanup of hazardous waste sites. Various companies as they've disposed of waste over the years haven't always done it in an environmentally safe way. So the congress has recognized a need

to go out and clean up these hazardous waste sites. And they've basically taken a two-fold approach to it. First is, uh, if we have what we call a responsible party, in other words we know who created the problem, we take an enforcement action and go after that company and require them to clean up this hazardous waste. But if it turns out that we don't know who created the problem, or the company that caused the problem is bankrupt, or they left town, or what have you, then the fund, the federal dollars will be used to clean up that site.

So that, in a nutshell, that's what the Superfund Program is and that's what you'll be learning about.

Charlie Grizzle: For our country but that we take a leadership role for the, uh protecting the environment of our entire planet. International environmental issues are very much a concern of our new administrator and of President Bush. The President has invited the Administrator Riley to accompany him to, to Paris to the Economic Summit uh, and environmental issues are going to be very high on the agenda. Transport of hazardous waste materials across national boundaries is something that's very, uh, a very big concern. Some people would say well let's just use third world countries as a dumping ground. Uh, we, we can't very well do that. Third world countries say, well you created the, your, uh, the pollution in our planet because of your industrialization. We now want to catch up and industrialize our own uh, co-, uh economies. So we're not going to take your hazardous waste materials.

So there are many, many complicated international uh environmental issues and the U.S. EPA has to step up to the plate so to speak, and play ball in that arena.

Narrator: The Duke Ellington students came to EPA with some definite perceptions on environmental protection.

Male Student #1: What they need to do is, instead of spending all this money to build a new site, they need to clean up their sites that they already have. Like the sites they had back when they was building the bombs in 1950, they need to clean up, clean this, all that stuff, and then instead of just spending like billions of dollars trying to make new weapons and all the new weapons, that's not even going to be needed.

Male Instructor: Shawn, what's your initial views of the role of EPA?

Male Student #2: Well I think that the Environmental Protection Agency is just that. It is an agency which protects the people and the environment. I think that uh, I've always thought of it as a conservation group.

Female Student #1: Well the role of the Environmental Protection Agency is to do exactly what their name says. Its to clean up the environment and help keep our environment safe for us to live in. And the Environmental Protection Agency goes, finds hazardous waste sites such as uh, places that were a dump, like chemicals were dumped, that were unsafe or hazardous, and they go and clean it up.

Female Student #2: I think EPA's role in the community is to make the drinking water safer, make places where recent chemical spills have occurred, make it safer for the residents to come back, and also to protect the environment.

Narrator: The students proceeded through a whirlwind of intensive sessions on various environmental issues. Next the subject moved to the government's activities and these environmental matters. The focus became more defined as discussions centered on the Environmental Protection Agency and finally Superfund. Once this stage was set, all of the components of the Superfund program were introduced, but this overview of environmental studies didn't all take place in the classroom.

The students visited the White House Domestic Policy Council to better understand the President's role in protecting the environment. Next stop was congress to discuss to discuss the legislative angle on the environment. Another day students went to the Coast Guard's National Response Center to learn their part in protecting the seashores, tidal rivers, and great lakes. But perhaps more impressive were those places where the battles for a clean environment were being directly waged. A Superfund site, a laboratory, and an Emergency Response Team.

The first stop was the Elkton Superfund site. Here the students saw the results of bad and unscrupulous business practices that had left this locale mired in dangerous chemicals.

Male Environmental Contractor: Okay. This is a tank that the owner had taken out and was getting ready to sell. And what he didn't do is he didn't clean it and its leaking out the bottom valve. There's not very much liquid in it, you know, like maybe an inch in that whole tank. So we basically treat it just like you'd treat a baby. We diapered it. And we change the diaper every now and then, like about once a week.

Okay, this stuff? This is basically an oil containment boom. Just like the ones they used on the river for the oil spills. We've got it around this particular drum because this is a, you'll notice it's a plastic overpack instead of a metal overpack. The reason that this drum is here is there is a leaky drum of acid inside here. We couldn't use a metal overpack, and we've got this so in case, its not in case it does eat through the plastic, its when it eats through the plastic, it'll at least go on the boom and we can re-drum it. Again, we're hoping to get it out of here before then.

Narrator: Next, EPA's Annapolis laboratory was visited. Here these young people saw the sophisticated equipment that is at the cutting edge of environmental analysis.

Male Chemist: If I was going to prep a drinking water for metals analysis I would have to add my acids, put it on a hot plate, cook it down for x period of time, then dilute it back up, package it, and get ready to run it for analysis. Well what this is, basically is doing the same thing that I would do, except it runs automated.

Narrator: The last stop was a Hazardous Materials Response Team in Prince George County. At this site the students met the men and women who respond to the environmental emergencies that threaten our communities and learned the challenges of working under those conditions.

Male Emergency Responder: This is the same people that make bullet-proof vests. These are fire-proof vests. This is a cool vest. I'm going to put it on just so you can feel it. We would never go into an incident in shorts and sneakers but this will do for, just for demonstrations. We didn't put a hardhat on you but we would, the other requirement is that you'd have to wear a hardhat.

Narrator: During each phase of the internship impressions of the program were committed to film, video, and paper. Divided into workgroups according to their artistic disciplines, the students developed final projects based on their studies. Completion day ceremonies found the students with drafts of brochures, comic books, photography, and video. Dr. Vanessa Spinner of the DC school system offered the keynote comments.

Dr. Vanessa Spinner: We are well on the road to meeting our mission in terms of our products. We've had some very exciting products come forward from the students that will be closed over the next uh, 24 to 40, 30 days. We have, will also be able to tell you that we'll meet the mission in terms of their commitment to work with other students. Each one of these students has agreed to be involved in a special presentation series that will go into at least 6 of our schools and in particular your host partnered school uh Backus Junior High School I believe is

your partner school for EPA. And we're going to do some surveys in each school site to see what are the outcomes in terms of the younger students' perceptions of what they learned.

Narrator: The benefits of the Superfund Seniors Enrichment Project were: increased awareness by students of the environmental issues facing the nation; increased interest in applying environmental themes to their career selections; an opportunity for EPA personnel to examine their responsibilities from a fresh and different perspective; and the DC public school system has a videotape program on environmental protection for middle school students.