LESSON

What is Environmental Justice?

Students will learn how air pollution affects people of color and those living in poverty and will use a map to locate environmental injustice.

Grade Level 3-5

Topic: Rights & Activism
Subject: Reading & Language Arts, Social Studies, ELL/ESL, Math & Technology
Social Justice Domain: Justice

OBJECTIVES

Activities will help students:

- See how air pollution affects people of color and those living in poverty
- Use a map to locate environmental injustice

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is environmental racism?
- How is pollution related to inequality?
- How can maps help us see where injustice exists?

MATERIALS

Map: Air Pollution in Minority Areas

Vocabulary

air pollution [ air puh-loo-shuhn ] (noun) dirt in the air that we breathe
inequality [ in-i-kwol-i-tee ] (noun) unfairness; a situation in which some people have privileges that others don’t have

minority [ mi-nor-i-tee ] (noun) a group of people who differ—in terms of race, ethnicity, national origin, etc.—from a larger group of which it is a part

Procedure

1. This lesson is about air pollution. As a class, answer these questions: What is air pollution? *(Write answers on the board or chart paper.)* What are some causes of air pollution? What are some effects of air pollution?

2. This lesson is also about the people who are most likely to be affected by air pollution. Who do you think are some groups of people who are affected most by air pollution? *(List answers. Prompt students if necessary, pointing out that pollution can be especially harmful for people with asthma, elderly people, etc.)*

3. Sometimes people are affected for reasons besides their physical health. People who don’t have much money often live near places that produce air pollution—like factories and power plants. People who have more money often live farther away from those places. Why do you think that is? If you need some guidance, answer these questions in order: What makes a place a good place to live? Who has enough money to live in places like that? Are places with a lot of air pollution good places to live? Why or why not? Who has enough money to live there?

4. So how much money people have affects whether they live near places that pollute the air. Let’s look at other groups that might be more affected by air pollution. Look at the map Air Pollution in Minority Areas. This is a map of the state of Connecticut. It shows two different things. It shows the parts of the state where lots of members of minority groups live, and it also shows where power plants that pollute the air are located.

a. Look at the key. The key is at the bottom of the map. It tells you what the different colors on the map mean. First, there are yellow dots. It says in the key that the yellow dots show where power plants are. Power plants make electricity for homes and businesses to use. They need to burn coal, gas or oil to make the electricity. When they burn these fuels, the power plants pollute the air.

b. There are also parts of the map that are different shades of blue. The key tells you what the different colors stand for. In the areas that are the darkest blue, most of the people are members of minority groups. The second darkest shade of blue shows areas where more than half the people are members of minority groups. As the shades of blue get lighter, there are fewer minority people living there. In other words, the lighter the blue, the fewer minority residents.
c. Now put together the two kinds of information on the map: The yellow dots and the shades of blue. Where are the yellow dots? What do the yellow dots tell you? What shades of blue are there? What does that tell you?

d. What pattern do you see? In what shade(s) of blue do you see the most yellow dots?

e. Sum up what you’ve seen on the map by completing this prompt: There are more power plants located in areas where people who are __________ and people who are _______ live. Have a volunteer read the completed sentence aloud.

5. Have a class discussion to answer this question: Do you think it’s fair that people who are poor and people who are members of minority groups live in areas where there is more pollution? Why do you think they stay in those areas? What makes it hard for them to move to a place with less pollution? What would you suggest as a way to make the situation fairer?

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