

## **Questionnaire – 2008 IRE Awards**

1)TITLE: “Contaminated Water”

2)DATES: April 24-December 9, 2008

3) SYNOPSIS: In an ongoing investigation, KNBC-TV revealed how the nation’s second largest school district knowingly exposed many of its 600,000 students to drinking water contaminated with an unsafe amount of lead. Acting on a tip, we conducted our own tests at schools across Los Angeles, which showed levels of lead in the drinking water above what the US EPA says is safe. We also uncovered evidence that the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) knew decades ago that the water at numerous schools was tainted with high amounts of lead, which can cause learning disabilities, but didn’t share the information with the public. Our report revealed that some district employees were falsifying records to make it look like the water at their schools was safe to drink.

4) HOW THE STORY GOT STARTED: The story began with a tip from a parent at a single elementary school. The school had old lead pipes and drinking fountains that were leaching lead into the water. KNBC’s Investigative Team of Joel Grover and Matt Goldberg began digging deeper, and asking questions to the school district about water quality. Based on the initial information we uncovered, we began to think the water at schools across Los Angeles might contain high levels of lead as well.

5)MAJOR TYPES OF DOCUMENTS USED: We used many internal documents from the school district, but had a very tough time getting them. In the beginning of our investigation, we filed a broad public records request with LAUSD (using California’s Public Records Act), asking for the results of any testing the district had done on the drinking water at its schools, and for any studies done on water quality. Sources told us there had been random testing done on water fountains in recent years, and that there was a major internal report done in the late 1980’s, revealing there was a problem with lead in school water. But after reviewing our initial request, LAUSD gave us no records, denying they’d ever done any testing on school water. They also told us no copies still existed of the major study done in 1988. But we persisted, even threatening the school district with legal action if they didn’t produce the documents we knew existed. Only after our first story aired, did the district suddenly, and without explanation, hand over hundreds of pages of revealing documents. We also obtained documents and studies from the US Environmental Protection Agency, the California Department of Education, and the California Department of Health, about lead in drinking water at schools.

6) MAJOR TYPES OF HUMAN SOURCES USED: As mentioned, our story began with a tip from a parent. This parent put us in contact with some mid-level school district employees, who knew about the problems with water at LA schools. Once we gained the trust of those employees, they introduced us to other district employees who gave us important information. But we also reached out to employees at many schools, including

teachers, school nurses and custodians. Many of these people knew there were problems with the quality of water at their schools and gave us valuable information. Finally we worked with several toxicologists and environmental health experts who helped us collect accurate water samples, and educated us on the impact of lead-tainted water on children.

7)RESULTS: LAUSD reacted to our investigation before it even aired. Two days before our first report, the Superintendent abruptly cancelled an interview with us for the story, and instead held a press conference to announce that because of KNBC's investigation, the district would immediately begin testing the water for lead at all 800 of its schools, and would take action to make the water lead-free at any school found to have a problem. Then, LAUSD put a bond measure on the November 2008 ballot, asking voters to approve money for, among other things, removing the lead from school water. The bond measure passed, and the district is now moving ahead with a \$100 million program to replace old lead pipes and water fountains, to make its drinking water safe.

8)FOLLOW-UP: Since our first story in April 2008, we have aired 9 major follow-up reports. These stories have exposed LAUSD's attempts to calm parents fears about tainted drinking water by disseminating misinformation; we have done numerous stories about the district's broken promises to act immediately to test the water at its schools. And most recently, we've done stories about how LAUSD is finally taking the sweeping action it promised, to remove lead from drinking water. We plan to continue following this story for years, to see if LAUSD keeps its promises to provide safe water for students.

9) ADVICE TO OTHERS PLANNING A SIMILAR PROJECT: Many schools across the country have lead-contaminated water, because so many of them installed lead pipes and fountains, before they were banned in the late 1980's. Any journalist investigating this problem should first file a public records request asking their local school district(s) for records of any testing they've done on drinking water in schools. They should also try to cultivate some good sources at schools and school districts. If there's a problem with the water at schools, district employees on many levels will probably know about it.

10) DIFFICULTY OF THIS PROJECT: As we already mentioned, the school district initially lied to us, telling us that important public records we requested, did not exist. It was imperative that we developed good sources inside LAUSD, who helped us specifically identify which records to request, and how to eventually obtain them. Also, because the district was not handing over results of the tests it had done on school water, we had to convince our management to spend thousands of dollars to conduct our own tests. KNBC's tests proved there was in fact lead-tainted water being consumed by children across the city, and were the key to exposing this problem.

11)LENGTH OF TIME TO REPORT, WRITE, AND EDIT STORY: We spent three months investigating and editing the first stories. But we've continued our investigation for the last seven months and it remains ongoing.

