

ENGAGED RESEARCH CASE STUDY

Dr Edward Zlotkowski

Dr. Ann Smithson teaches chemistry at a college in the midwest. Recently, she has become increasingly concerned about contaminants leaching into the soil from chemically treated lumber. When she learned that a playground in a nearby town had been built primarily by community members using donated lumber, she thought an analysis of the playground soil might provide the perfect project for her environmental chemistry course.

Before the semester started, Dr. Smithson had a brief meeting with one of the town's selectmen to discuss the project. She assured him that the soil samples would be taken at times when the playground was not being used. The selectman said the project sounded interesting and didn't think there would be a problem if no children were involved.

Dr. Smithson undertook the project as planned, and, after a semester of sampling, analyzing and mapping, the class was able to pinpoint several places in the playground where the level of chemical contamination either reached or exceeded government guidelines for the substances in question. Students were proud of their work and were eager to share their findings with town officials. Dr. Smithson herself was so pleased with the quality of student learning and the research it produced, she immediately considered making playground soil analysis a regular feature of the class.

Unfortunately, the semester ended before there was time to present the findings to the town. However, a few weeks into the summer, Dr. Smithson succeeded in making another appointment with the selectmen and brought him the results of the analysis. Having summarized the findings in the report, she suggested that some parts of the playground be put off limits as soon as possible, that several structures be replaced, and that the soil in less contaminated areas be regularly monitored.

It would be hard to describe how shocked and disappointed she was at the chilly reception she received. The selectman not only expressed skepticism regarding her findings and concerns but also seemed to take offence at the implication that the town would in any way endanger its children's health. The official assured her that such chemically treated lumber was the norm for playgrounds and that there had been no reported increase in illness among the town's children. He also seemed indirectly to question her motives, and kept asking why she chose to analyze the soil in his town's playground. Why hadn't she chosen a site on campus? The only 'concession' she could win from him was his agreeing to share the report with other "appropriate" officials.

Dr. Smithson is now far less enthusiastic about campus-community collaborations and is not inclined to risk a similar experience with next year's class. If you were one of her faculty or community colleagues, and believed strongly in the potential of such collaborations, how would you advise her to proceed next time? Are there any important stakeholders she has not taken into account?