

Written Testimony of
Denise Tickell
Before the Committee on Public Health
Regarding Raised House Bill No. 5431
An Act Concerning Indoor Air Quality in Schools
March 5, 2020

My name is Denise Tickell, and I am writing in support of HB 5431.

I have taught in the public school setting for the past 30 years, 23 of those years in the Orange Public School System. I have been affected by an occupational lung disease and become a victim of multiple sick school buildings due to air quality issues and mold.

My symptoms would begin when I returned from summer vacation to work in the school building. These symptoms included a raspy, strained voice; a dry, unproductive cough that became a chronic cough; shortness of breath; sinus infections; allergic rhinitis; and bronchitis. My doctors noticed that my symptoms would flare up in the school building, with weekends and vacation weeks being clear of symptoms. Over time, these symptoms increased to bronchospasms, asthma, pneumonia, unintentional weight loss, and intense fatigue. Relief and recovery, if any, happened only on weekends. Other teachers and staff members experienced symptoms and sought work opportunities out of the Orange Public Schools, in other locations.

As my health concerns grew, I required many appointments with pulmonologist Dr. Brett Gerstenhaber and became a patient at Yale Occupational and Environmental Medicine with Dr. Carrie Redlich and her team of doctors. Testing included bloodwork, chest X-rays, spirometry pulmonary function tests, and CT scans.

I educated myself on my worsening condition, learning hypersensitivity is an inappropriate immune response, occurring as a condition in which there is an exaggerated response by the body to the stimulus of a foreign agent. For my body, the foreign agent is mold, which I have been exposed to within the classrooms I taught.

Hypersensitivity reactions occur when the normally protective immune system responds abnormally, potentially harming the body. (This information is gathered from Mayo Clinic resources.)

My treatment continues with multiple inhalers, cough medication, daily nebulizer treatments, and oral steroids. The side effects of these medications require additional medications for heartburn and painful mouth ulcers. Treatment focuses on reducing inflammation in my lungs and avoiding irritants and known triggers. This caused multiple leaves of absence due to illness, using up all my acquired 100+ school days. The team of doctors guided me twice to request changing my work environment to different school buildings.

While in each school, administration was informed of my health concerns, including musty moldy odors and visible probable mold growth on classroom furniture, in between floor tiles, and on ceiling tiles. As reported by FOX 61 and NBC Connecticut (1-13-2014, 1-22-2014) in January 2014, Peck Place School experienced frozen water pipes, flooding many classrooms and school areas. There was an extensive renovation due to the flood and asbestos. The children and staff had to move out of the building for over a six-month period of time. Peck Place School was built on wetlands, and there are times of uncontrolled humidity and increased temperature levels. Connecticut OSHA made visits and recommendations through their reports. Yale Occupational and Environmental Medicine requested many times to do site visits with the Yale Occupational and Environmental staff hygienist to formulate and assist any recommendation on my behalf. These site visits were denied by school administration.

There have been many changes in my life to try to avoid triggers as much as possible to protect my health. In the workplace there are accommodations needed as requested by my team of doctors. In my personal and family life, changes are ongoing. There are times when public or community activities are extremely difficult, including inability to pump my own gas, parking garage and outside smoking zone fumes, traffic jams, and going over the Quinnipiac Bridge, where there are smells of oil and gasoline. Attending funerals where incense is burned or church services or public events where people use perfume, aftershave lotion, and scented personal care items are all difficult for me. When I have asthma attacks, there is immediate and constant coughing, which brings on the need for me to use an emergency inhaler. During these times, it is like trying to breathe through a straw. Unfortunately, anxiety can occur, thinking about when another trigger or an attack will happen next.

As many people in the last few weeks are concerned regarding the coronavirus, I am also. I have a respiratory illness and I am more vulnerable to this viral illness.

I have been affected by an occupational lung disease that has reduced the quality of my life, with varying sicknesses, fatigue, and exhaustion. I struggle to maintain a new kind of normalcy, which includes extensive medication and daily treatment, doctors' appointments and testing procedures.

Nowhere in my training to become a teacher was there any warning about health issues inside of sick school buildings, which could cause injury to teachers or shorten their professional careers. Concern about sick classrooms and buildings is reported more often, showing a growing problem, one that is becoming more prevalent in our communities.

I ask you to support the Sick Building Bill, HB 5431, and I urge you to consider setting minimum and maximum classroom temperatures. Thank you for your consideration.