

Written Testimony of
Jessica Reap, Stamford Teacher,
Before the Committee on Public Health
Regarding
Raised House Bill No. 5431
An Act Concerning Indoor Air Quality In Schools
March 5, 2020

Dear Legislators,

I am writing in support of HB 5431, because I believe every child and every school employee deserves to be in a safe environment conducive to learning.

I am a teacher with the Stamford Public Schools. This is my 14th year in the district, 11 of which have been at Westhill High School. For at least the last several years, I have been working in an environment with serious mold problems, water intrusion, poor air quality, and HVAC and ventilation systems that were not properly cleaned and maintained. These issues are documented in Stamford's own Mold Task Force report on "How Did We Get Here?" As a result of working in this unsafe environment, my health has suffered, and I am concerned for the health of every student and employee who has been exposed to these conditions.

In August of 2018, during the first week of school, my classroom was 100 degrees. I became dizzy and felt like I was being poisoned. I assumed it was the heat. The following day, I noticed a large puddle in the room and cleaned it, assuming a student had spilled coffee or water. That day, I began to have a fever with chills. I could not go into work the next day. Upon my return to school, I began to have problems breathing. My throat was very sore, I had headaches, and I continued to have fevers with and without chills.

These symptoms continued through the next several months, and there was not a day that I was not ill while in school. Some days were dangerously hot in the class despite the use of five fans I had set up at my own expense. In October, I figured out that there was a water intrusion problem in the ceiling. I also noticed several badly stained ceiling tiles above my desk.

The colder months ensued. The heat went on. The classroom was very hot, and it smelled bad. I tried to clean what I could of the radiator, which was filled to the brim with garbage. I wondered why I felt OK on Mondays but awful by Friday.

I spent weeks going to various doctors trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I began to have chronic sinusitis and developed a wheeze. In November, I went to the city's occupational health physician. He put me out of work. I was symptom-free while at home. At the end of November, I returned to work to a different classroom down the hall from my previous one. By the end of the day, I was sick again with headaches and a sore throat.

I was in and out of school all year. I bought a humidity monitor and noticed the level was dangerously low in my classroom. On most days, it was at 16%. My students complained of

headaches and quite a few had bloody noses. I began to have nosebleeds. In December, I was referred by the occupational health doctor to a pulmonologist. I was given the Methacholene Challenge. I was diagnosed with asthma (a condition I had never had previously) and given an inhaler as well as several medications in order to cope with the symptoms.

Over the summer, I felt good and was symptom-free. Upon my return to school in August, I began to have headaches again on the first day and became dizzy, having to use a rescue inhaler—when I had not needed one all summer.

The air quality was poor. There seemed to be no air circulating in the classroom. Several of my colleagues and students complained about having difficulty breathing. Again, each day I became ill. After only three weeks, I returned to the occupational health doctor, having suffered an asthma attack at school.

Over the last two years, there were numerous times that school and city officials claimed to be addressing the mold problem and in fact claimed that remediation was taking place. I have come to understand that unless water intrusion is eliminated, structural flaws are fixed, and HVAC and ventilation systems are working properly and maintained, a healthy work environment cannot exist.

I applaud your efforts to address some of these issues in this bill, specifically in regard to air quality testing and HVAC maintenance. I urge you to strengthen the bill by adding language that would call for specifying an appropriate temperature range in the classroom in accordance with good practices accepted by medical and engineering professionals. Similarly, I urge you to address standards for appropriate air flow throughout school buildings.

There is no doubt that my health and emotional well-being have suffered from having to work in an unhealthy environment. I know this is also true for many of my colleagues and students who have confided in me. I have serious concerns for all of the students and all of my coworkers who have had similar exposure. It is clear that students, teachers, and other school employees have been subjected to mold and poor air quality. There is no telling what long-term effects we may experience. It is my sincere hope that this bill can be strengthened and can put into law safeguards that will protect all students, employees, and teachers. It is my hope that a more robust law will help ensure that schools in Connecticut will never be as neglected as they have been.

Thank you for your consideration,