

Testimony of

**Kristen Ann Record**

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**Education Committee**

**Re: SB 287 – AAC Indoor Air Quality in Schools**

March 6, 2024

Good afternoon distinguished members of the Education Committee.

My name is Kristen Record. I am a resident of Bridgeport and have taught Physics at Bunnell High School in Stratford for the past 24 years. I am the Stratford Education Association Vice-President for Secondary Schools and I am the 2011 CT State Teacher of the Year.

I've testified multiple times over the years to the Public Health Committee about indoor air quality issues in our public schools, including extreme temperatures. Last session I spoke in favor of establishing the working group to study and make recommendations related to school indoor air quality, and I am pleased to now speak before this committee to support extending the reporting date of this important group, and the other components of SB 287.

In previous testimony I told the story of my seasonal allergies and how I had the unfortunate experience of having my classroom flooded during a heavy summer rain storm several years ago. Everything had to come out of my classroom that summer – literally everything - including the carpet in the room. It was a huge mess, but luckily everything was back in place by the start of school. But then something odd happened to me when school opened back up – no fall allergies. Imagine my shock as I slowly realized, it wasn't me that had been sick every fall – it was my classroom. And if my room, with its 20+ year old carpet was sick, probably every other room with that same carpeting was too - but I was the only one lucky enough to get it replaced. More than 2/3's of classrooms in my high school had that same carpeting and the more investigating I did, the more disturbed I became. Through conversations and surveys, I discovered many other teachers who had allergies, asthma, and headaches all attributed to indoor air quality issues. Through filing an OSHA complaint; we discovered inadequate housekeeping procedures had led to thick layers of dust and debris in our school-wide heating and ventilation system, and filters not being cleaned or replaced on a regular basis. Those issues were addressed, but the smells and mold and sickness related to the old carpeting persisted - carpeting rolls and tears were causing trip hazards and preventing even well-intended cleaning efforts from fixing the air quality issues in our building. It took another OSHA complaint to finally have a full remediation plan to remove all the old carpeting throughout the building last summer – 3 full years later! Can you believe that?

My one story is simply a microcosm of what is happening all across our state in our public schools. In the fall of 2019, the CT Education Association (CEA) conducted a survey of over

1,200 teachers across the state. The results showed that 74% had experienced extreme hot and cold temperatures in their classrooms, 48% reported damaged walls, ceiling tiles, carpeting, or air vents in their classrooms, and 39% experienced mold and mildew problems. And let's remember – what affects our teachers also affects our students.

For 2 years prior to the pandemic, I co-led an effort with CEA to investigate extreme temperatures in our classrooms. We launched a pilot program in several of school districts around the state where every morning and afternoon, dozens of teachers recorded the temperature and humidity level of their classrooms into an online database. The results were astounding - as we moved from May into June, and then again from August into September we saw temperature levels regularly in the 80s, often in the 90s, and once even above 100°F. In some of these districts, schools were closed early due to the excessive heat in classrooms. I, myself, have even taught a few physics classes in the hallway because it was cooler than being in my classroom. And then came the winter, when heating systems failed and teachers and students alike spent days in cold classrooms, wearing coats and gloves. Teachers across the state bring in space heaters into school to keep their classroom temperatures above 65F. When was the last time you had to regularly work in an office where the temperature was in the 80s or 90s? Or needed to wear your coat all day because it was only 60 degrees in your office? I would venture to guess, never. And yet these are the conditions we are asking our teachers and kids to endure while trying to deliver and receive a high-quality education. These conditions existed before the pandemic and they are still pervasive today. It simply isn't right.

Why is it that the American Veterinary Medical Association has ambient temperature guidelines for cats and dogs in animal shelters (60-80°F), and that the Animal Welfare Act regulations state that indoor housing for dogs at research and breeding facilities must never rise above 85°F for more than 4 consecutive hours, but kids and educators in Connecticut are left to fend for ourselves and make the best of it? It's just not acceptable. Legislation defining suitable temperature ranges for classrooms is not too much to ask. Why can't the inspection and evaluation of HVAC systems be a reimbursable expense under existing grant programs?

The last year legislators stepped in to help our public schools with the creation of the working group on school indoor air quality. You listened to our stories of pervasive infrastructure problems that are causing poor teaching and learning conditions. But the problems continue to persist - we are still getting sick at school due to poor indoor air quality and extreme temperatures and the result is increased illness and loss of instructional time for students and teachers. Why, in the start of the 2023 school year were we still dismissing schools early due to excessive heat? Why did my students, coworkers, and I have to wear our coats for days on end in October because it was barely 60 degrees in our classrooms? Why 2 months later in December did I have to have my windows open because my classroom was 87 degrees? It's 2024, not 1924. We have to do better. We can do better. I urge you to support SB 287 and continue to work to pass legislation that will help establish healthy indoor learning conditions for schools that are conducive to successful teaching and learning for all students.

Thank you.



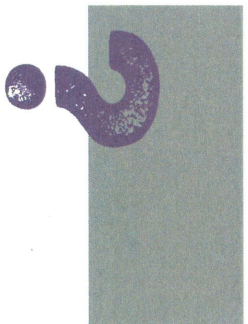


"We're told to live with it," says teacher Kristen Record (left) of the unhealthy working conditions that impact many educators.

# IS YOUR SCHOOL BUILDING MAKING YOU SICK?

UNIONS SOUND THE ALARM AS INDOOR AIR POLLUTANTS AND EXTREME TEMPERATURES PRESENT A GROWING HEALTH RISK FOR STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS

By Tim Walker



"When you have breathing issues, ... it is extremely hard to concentrate for lengthy periods of time."

—Kristen Record, high school teacher, Connecticut

learning and working conditions. "When you have breathing issues or it's too hot or too cold or too humid, you will not be productive," says Kristen Record, a high school physics teacher in Stratford, Conn. "It is extremely hard to concentrate for lengthy periods of time." Several years ago, Record moved out of her office at Bunnell High School while workers removed the mold-infested carpet, relieving symptoms she had blamed on seasonal allergies.

When a clear health risk emerges, the response from districts is usually to close the school until some sort of repair or remediation can be completed—usually a temporary fix that buys a little time. That is no longer acceptable, says Darrell Turner, a teacher at Marth Luther King Jr. Early Learning Center in Richmond.

The dismal air quality at Turner's previous school forced him to take his students outdoors for short breaks. "We're setting up our students for a lifetime of health issues," he says. "If the buildings they're learning in make them sick, it's not creating a safe environment for them—or for us."

**A lasting impact on students**  
A June 2020 report by the Government Accountability Office estimates that 41 percent of public school districts need to replace or update their heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems in at least half of their schools—roughly 36,000 schools across the country.

nators have collaborated with school administrators to address poor IAQ by updating HVAC systems to improve ventilation.

In Albuquerque, N.M., public schools are replacing all HVAC units in 35 schools with new refrigerated air systems at a cost of over \$16 million in relief funds. Massachusetts has allocated \$100 million in American Rescue Plan funds at the state level to improve and install HVAC systems in its schools.

More recently, however, as rising concerns over student learning, gun violence, and other issues have taken center stage, it's become challenging to focus attention on the dire condition of school buildings. "People, parents especially, will pay attention when schools actually have to close," Record says. "But they are not tracing falling grades and misbehavior to issues around heating, cooling, HVAC, and mold."

While these connections are not always easy to see, the physical and cognitive effects of poor indoor air quality and extreme temperatures are well established by research. A 2006 study found that when air quality improved in schools, student achievement increased on average by 8 percent.

A 2020 study revealed that students scored increasingly worse on standardized tests each school day when the temperature rose above 80 degrees. Furthermore, a recent study by Harvard University found that extreme temperatures exacerbate absenteeism and student disciplinary referrals.

Mold is just one of the many pollutants that degrade indoor air quality (IAQ) in many school buildings. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly half of the educators and students working and learning in school buildings are breathing air polluted by bacteria, chemicals, viruses, and pesticides.

When hot weather hits, conditions become even more dangerous. Long before the end of the school year, temperatures—fueled by climate change—are reaching 90 degrees, creating stifling, often unworkable



# IS YOUR SCHOOL BUILDING MAKING YOU SICK?

(Top) Mold grows on a ceiling tile in a Richmond, Va., pre-school. (Bottom) In schools without air conditioning, fans do little to keep students cool.



## Impact on teacher retention

Poor working conditions are also becoming a key factor in retaining educators. A recent teacher survey by the RAND Corporation found that pay increases alone—without improvements in hours worked or working conditions—are unlikely to improve teachers' job satisfaction enough to reverse their intention to leave.

Indoor air quality and temperatures are critically important working conditions, along with class size, respect, support, and workload.

"Pay is the number one issue in Richmond," Turner says. "But working conditions are right up there as well. And the safety of our buildings—this mold and heat—is one that we are concerned with."

Forrester, who is vice president of the Richmond Education Association (REA), agrees. "Mold in our building and the health issues it has caused [won't] do wonders for teacher retention."

In 2022, as the school district downplayed the dangers posed by mold, Forrester transferred to a different school. Although there were other reasons she wanted to move—namely, a desire to teach at the high school level—the mold problem at Boushail was a major factor.

"Educators whose health is being affected will do the same," Forrester says. "They don't have to leave the profession, just their school or district. But it's still a disruption for students."

The disruption is more likely to be felt by students of color in high-poverty districts, where state shortfalls can be more severe. Lack of professional pay and burnout are cited as top reasons for departures.

But the dismal condition of many school buildings in these communities—and the documented impact on student achievement and health—can only contribute to educators' sense of frustration and helplessness.

## When it gets too hot

When a heat wave gripped the Pacific Northwest in May 2023, many students and educators in Federal Way Public Schools—a high-poverty district south of Seattle—sat in classrooms without air conditioning.

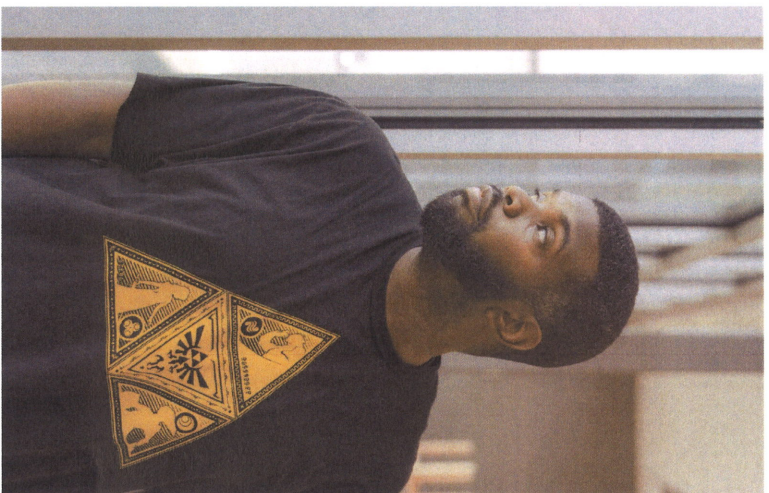
The district provided more fans, but educators were tasked with finding other ways to alleviate the heat. There was only so much they could do. The impact on students was alarming.

Sara Rowe, an office manager at Adelaide Elementary School, took care of students when no nurse was on duty. She saw students who were close to passing out, as well as some who suffered from nosebleeds, headaches, and anxiety. "We had a young girl with a panic attack," Rowe recalls. "The heat was making it feel as if the walls were closing in on her."

Educators in Federal Way and across the country began posting photos on social media of classroom thermostats hitting 80 to 90 degrees, drawing attention to the oppressive conditions.

In 2022, Columbus, Ohio, educator Joe Decker purchased a large fan to try to mitigate classroom temperatures in excess of 90 degrees. Milfin Middle School, where he teaches eighth grade, was one of many in his district without air conditioning.

"More than 90 percent of our students have free or reduced lunch," he says. "Some of them are malnourished, and I can't watch them become dehydrated.... I should not have to be thinking, 'Do I need to call a Life Squad for one of my students?'"



"Pay is the number one issue in Richmond. But working conditions are right up there as well."

—Darrell Turner, teacher, Virginia (above)

## Filling the leadership void

No national or state standards exist to govern how public schools should monitor, detect, and address air-quality problems, including heating and cooling. Then there's the prohibitive cost of repairs or upgrades. The result is often inaction or half-measures on the part of school districts.

The response from the Federal Way district during the 2023 heat wave was underwhelming. "We were told to think outside the box, be creative," Rowe recalls. "We didn't really feel supported."

After the federal Way Education Association sounded the

alarm about extreme heat and poor air quality last spring, state lawmakers took notice. Educators hope to see a bill in next year's legislative session that helps address these issues.

Progress can take time, as Connecticut's Record discovered. Back in 2018, the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) found that while the state had statutes governing temperature ranges in animal shelters, no such mandates existed for public school buildings.

That same year, Record copied a CEA data collection drive that asked educators to report temperature and humidity levels of their classrooms into an online database.

In September, classroom temperatures regularly exceeded 85 degrees. A couple of months later, as winter approached, temperatures barely topped a chilly 55 degrees.

The effort helped launch a CEA advocacy campaign. The union urged lawmakers to address air quality and extreme temperatures, direct pandemic relief funds to HVAC repair and installation, and secure additional grant funding.

"It's all a work in progress," Record says. "What we're really focusing on is getting those

funds into underserved communities, where the need for upgrades is more urgent."

In Columbus, Decker and his colleagues used the power of collective bargaining. The Columbus Education Association's successful three-day strike, in October 2022, led to a new contract that, among other highlights, won a guarantee that all student-learning areas will be climate-controlled no later than the start of the 2025–2026 school year—including the installation of HVAC units.

In Richmond, educators persuaded the district to conduct more mold testing, and REA lobbied the school board to establish criteria for maximum and minimum indoor temperatures and air quality standards.

Record says district leaders and lawmakers must acknowledge that when you close schools due to allergens or extreme temperatures, the problem has reached a crisis stage.

"Instead, we're told to live with it," she says. "We shouldn't still be talking about this in 2023, and I have no doubt that if our state and local associations were not speaking up, no one else would be."

## LEARN MORE

NEA offers resources to help address indoor air and environmental quality in public schools at [nea.org/indoor-air-quality](http://nea.org/indoor-air-quality).

## Indoor Air Quality Toolkit