*Testimony of*

**Louis Rosado Burch**

**Connecticut Education Association**

*Before the*

**Education Committee**

Re:

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

***HB 5347 – AAC Authorization of State Grant Commitments for School Building Projects and Revisions to the School Building Project Statutes***

March 6, 2024

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and distinguished members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. I’m Louis Rosado Burch, Legislative Coordinator for Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA is the state’s largest association of certified public-school teachers, representing over 43,000 active and retired teachers from 160 school districts across Connecticut. CEA works to improve the lives of our teachers, the success of our students, and the quality of public education in our State.

According to the CT Dept. of Administrative Services (DAS), as many as 1/3 of Connecticut’s public-school buildings are served by failing and inadequate heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. School buildings can be a breeding ground for potential health hazards, including pathogens, viruses, and wide variety of respiratory irritants. Without proper maintenance, even new HVAC systems can quickly fall into disrepair, resulting in bad air quality in our schools. Indoor air quality (IAQ) issues in school buildings contribute to increased chronic health impacts and student absenteeism, and can have a direct impact on academic outcomes, especially in our highest-need districts.

CT Public Act 22-118 established a grant program to reimburse school districts for the cost of upgrading/replacing school HVAC systems as needed to address IAQ issues in Connecticut public schools. Districts are eligible for reimbursement on a sliding scale (20-80%), depending on the availability of resources at the local level to provide for necessary HVAC improvements in schools.

This law was a critical step forward in improving air quality and health outcomes in our public schools. Like any good policy, it requires modifications over time to ensure the program will continue to serve its purpose in the most meaningful and effective way possible.

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

CEA supports SB 287 and urges the committee to approve this bill without delay.

Last year, PA 23-167 required local and regional Boards of Education to provide for the uniform inspection and evaluation of the HVAC system in each school building. This must be done no later than January 1, 2025, and again every five years thereafter. School boards are required to complete their 5-year inspections to be eligible for reimbursement under the DAS HVAC grant program.

Some school grounds managers and facilities staff have raised concerns about not having sufficient time to complete their 5-year comprehensive HVAC assessments before the January 2025 deadline. Some have pointed to the lack of available contractors to conduct their HVAC evaluations. Others point to concerns related to the number of school buildings under their purview and a lack of resources in being able to cover the cost of inspections.

SB 287 offers the following solutions:

1. ***Allows for the cost of the 5-year HVAC inspection to be eligible for reimbursement under the DAS grant program.*** This is of great importance; if the costs associated with inspections are a barrier towards districts being able to meet the requirements of the law, they should be included as a reimbursable expense under the grant program. Low-income urban, suburban, rural and alliance districts have some of the greatest needs in terms of air quality improvements. A truly equitable program will ensure that districts with the greatest needs get priority when making funding decisions for school air quality improvements. This bill will help make that a possibility.
2. ***Ensures that each school board provides for the uniform inspection of 20% of schools in their purview each year at a minimum, until every school has completed its inspections.*** It also provides boards of education with the latitude and authority to determine how best to prioritize school buildings in their jurisdiction for inspection.
3. ***Extends the reporting date of the official School IAQ Task Force to July 1, 2025.***  This ensures that the task force may continue to study and make needed recommendations pertaining to the wide range of health & safety concerns and implementation challenges that exist around this program.

**HB 5347 – AAC Authorization of State Grant Commitments for School Building Projects and Revisions to the School Building Project Statutes**

CEA supports HB 5347. The bill makes 2 substantive changes related to the school building project statutes related to indoor air quality in schools:

1. ***Allows Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), incorporated or endowed high schools/academies and state-funded charters to apply for the DAS HVAC grant funds.*** We have heard from our charter school members that they are not eligible for reimbursement under this program as they are not governed under a local or regional board of education.

We believe strongly that school air quality improvements are a necessary investment, especially in urban and suburban schools where needs are high, and resources are scarce. This provision will ensure that students in our State-funded charters are able to benefit from the grant program, along with their counterparts enrolled in traditional neighborhood public schools. All CT public school students deserve healthy indoor air, including those attending classes at our RESCs and State charter schools.

1. **Sec. 5(i) requires the Commissioner of Administrative Services to automatically reconsider any grant applications that were submitted prior to July 2024 and were not awarded.** We recognize that the grant application process itself may create barriers for some of the very schools we have identified as priority schools under this process.

CEA has advocated and will continue to advocate that extra consideration should be given to urban and alliance districts that may lack the funds to conduct necessary inspections and corrective repairs. Some districts may not have the capacity to rework and resubmit their applications, and many have been discouraged by the time and resources needed to craft a complete grant proposal. This will help create a fairer and more equitable application process, that gives special consideration to any schools that have applied for grants previously and been passed over.

SB 287 and HB 5347 are necessary improvements to Connecticut’s school air quality inspections and grant programs, which help to provide greater flexibility and increased equity in decisions related to school HVAC funding. Connecticut is a national leader on improving school IAQ and should continue exploring opportunities to upgrade school HVAC systems, promote healthier school buildings, and improve educational outcomes through enhanced HVAC inspections, upgrades, and installations.