

Testimony of Kristen Record to the Public Health Committee

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February 8, 2021

Good afternoon, Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Somers, Senator Hwang, Representative Petit, and distinguished members of the Public Health 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 21 years. I am the Stratford Education Association Vice-President for Secondary Schools, and I am the 2011 CT State Teacher of the Year.

Last March, right before the pandemic shut down schools, I spoke before this committee on a similar bill related to school indoor air quality (HB 5431). You may recall that I told you 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 who 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 two-thirds 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 – three full years later! Can you believe that?

This one story is simply a microcosm of what is happening all across our state in our public schools. In the fall of 2019, the Connecticut 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.

During 2019 and 2020 I co-led an effort with CEA to investigate extreme temperatures in our classrooms. We launched a pilot program in several 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 classroom temperature levels regularly in the 80s, often in the 90s, and even above 100°F. In only some of these districts were schools 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. 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 themselves and make the best of it? It's just not acceptable. Legislation defining suitable temperature ranges for classrooms is simply not too much to ask.

And then came the COVID pandemic, further exposing the horrible infrastructure problems in schools across the state. How are we supposed to believe that the same systems that are unable to regulate temperatures properly in our buildings were going to help keep us safe from COVID? The same systems that weren't properly maintained to mitigate dust and mold in the air are still there, and yet teachers have been told all year "school is the safest place to be." This was bad enough when I could keep the windows open in my classroom to allow for better outdoor air circulation, but now it's winter and that's not possible – and yet more and more school districts are now returning to in-person learning. How does any of this make sense? How is it safe? Why isn't the indoor air quality of our schools regularly monitored? Why isn't there money available to districts to address these issues? Do you want to wear a mask when it's over 85 F inside your office for hours at a time?

The time has come for legislators to step in and help our public schools – so many of them are suffering from infrastructure problems that are causing poor teaching and learning conditions. We are 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. The COVID pandemic has only exacerbated these issues. I urge you not only to support SB 288 but to also amend it to include acceptable temperature ranges for schools as well as bond funding for the remediation of problems with HVAC systems.

Our kids and our teachers deserve clear legislation that establishes and ensures healthy indoor conditions for schools that are conducive to successful teaching and learning for all. The time has come – please do the right thing.

Thank you.