Written Testimony of
Kris R. Samuelson, Fairfield Teacher,
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 Kris Samuelson, and I am a Fairfield teacher who has been significantly impacted by poor indoor air quality. I have taught in my current building for over 17 years and have been a teacher in public schools for over 31 years. This past fall, I was severely impacted by what I believe to be a significant mold exposure while at work. I have never felt anything like this in my entire 56 years of life. I use the word believed because my district chose to clean the ducts before testing, after a supposed complete duct cleaning, and then tested after a thorough “recleaning.”

I may never truly know exactly what impacted me, but evidence of mold was discovered even after the recleaning.

When I realized I was being impacted by what I believed to be mold, I formally requested that comprehensive air quality testing occur prior to any maintenance procedures. This did not happen. They chose to clean first.

Due to the exposure, I have been out of work for three months on medical leave to regain my health. I have experienced a myriad of symptoms, including shortness of breath (all the time), headaches, fatigue, sinus pressure, joint pain, sleeplessness, voice hoarseness, complete loss of voice, and brain fog, all at the same time. I have since been diagnosed with dysphonia (vocal cords not working correctly) and have been going to voice therapy for the past few months. There has also been a significant impact on my lungs, and I was diagnosed, as an adult, with asthma—just over nine years ago, while in this building.

I would experience an onset of symptoms at school, and those symptoms would dissipate over time when I was not in the building. Symptoms now come on faster, and they linger for much longer periods. By the end of the first month at school, my voice would disappear five minutes after I entered my room, and I would not be able to carry on a conversation until the next morning, when it would start all over again as I entered the building.

The increased impact on my lungs has created the need for prescription medicine, Symbicort, which is a combination steroid and a long-acting bronchodilator used to prevent bronchospasm in people with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). There is no timeline for ending this medication; it is uncertain whether I will ever be able to stop.

The building in which I work is older. My wing was built in 1951, with numerous additions over time, and as far as I have been able to determine, up until the past two summers, the ventilation shafts were never cleaned since the building opened. Some members of the staff, including me, had requested that
the town do a complete cleaning and sanitizing of all ductwork after a remediation construction project that had occurred over the preceding two summers. This remediation was required by the EPA for window replacement, due to the presence of PCBs in the caulk surrounding windows in a significant portion of the building. The level of PCBs the EPA states as safe is less than 50 parts per million. Most of the windows had caulk that measured in the thousands of parts per million, tens of thousands parts per million, with some in the hundreds of thousands of parts per million. This entire wing is also painted with a PCB-based paint on all walls, which is being monitored for air emissions a few times a year in only a few select rooms, as required by regulations. The option for monitoring was decided upon as the only other alternative was to tear down the existing concrete walls, which the PCB’ had leached into over the years. The town decided this was too costly. This wing does not have active ventilation, as listed in Standard 62. There is no air conditioning in this part of the building. Adding air conditioning has been discussed for over a decade and is considered too expensive by the town. A telltale sign of lack of building maintenance is ceiling tiles routinely being replaced after they get wet repeatedly in the same locations over the years, with leaks not being addressed. This leads to possible mold growth and indoor air quality issues. Air temperatures are also oppressive in the warm months and routinely exceed 90 degrees when it is hot outside in the areas not air conditioned—which is over half of the building.

I am not the only teacher who has been impacted by the air quality. Many others are experiencing a variety of symptoms indicative of mold exposure and have had ailments that have been difficult to diagnose.

I am in support of this bill and especially the accountability it could have for towns to do the correct procedures when issues are discovered. Our teachers, staff, and students in our schools deserve a safe space to do what is required of them without injury or sickness occurring due to lack of maintenance or necessary upgrades.