

Connecticut Education Association NEWS RELEASE



For Immediate Release
March 9, 2020

Teachers and Students Suffering from Nausea, Lung Disease, Sinus Infections, Headaches, Coughs, Asthma, and Other Illnesses Due to Sick Schools

Teachers urge legislators to pass HB 5431 to improve indoor air quality in Connecticut classrooms

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.

As a result of working in an 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.

I have been out of work since 2018, due to exposure to and subsequent illness from black mold and other adverse environmental factors in my classroom.

My classroom was 100 degrees. I became dizzy and felt like I was being poisoned.

These are just a few of the shocking comments given by Connecticut teachers and CEA leaders before the legislature's Public Health Committee during a public hearing today at the Legislative Office Building. The educators outlined a host of medical problems, including respiratory ailments, rashes, sinus issues, and more, caused by mold and other toxins in their schools and classrooms. They urged legislators to pass Raised House Bill 5431, An Act Concerning Indoor Air Quality in Schools, to improve environmental conditions in classrooms across the state and set minimum and maximum classroom temperatures. Currently, the conditions in many Connecticut school buildings jeopardize the health and safety of students and teachers. The problem has grown so pervasive that many teachers are forced to go out on leave and students are being sent home sick because of extreme heat and humidity in classrooms.

“Every child and every teacher in every school deserves to be in a safe environment conducive to teaching and learning,” said Stamford teacher Jessica Reap. “There is no doubt that my health and emotional well-being have suffered from having to work in an unhealthy environment. 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.”

Addressing members of the Public Health Committee, Stratford teacher and 2011 Connecticut Teacher of the Year Kristen Record explained how she thought she suffered from seasonal allergies, because every September, when she returned to school, her symptoms emerged. But later she found out her classroom was making her sick.

“We have mold in our carpets and dust in our air vents,” she said. “During the winter, kids and teachers wear coats inside, and portable space heaters are used to bring classroom temperatures up above 60 degrees. In warm months, we are sometimes sent home early because of the oppressive heat and humidity in our buildings.”

Other teachers echoed Record’s experience. “During vacation I feel better, and when I return to the building, the cycle of symptoms starts again. This constant cycle has had no resolution for me, since the symptoms continue to return, and it takes longer for me to get better,” wrote Dinie James, a high school counselor in Stamford.

“My symptoms would begin when I returned from summer vacation to work in the school building. These symptoms included a raspy, strained voice; a dry, unproductive cough that became a chronic cough; shortness of breath; sinus infections; allergic rhinitis; and bronchitis,” said Orange teacher Denise Tickell.

Nearly half of public school buildings across the country have poor indoor-air quality, and teachers have the highest rate of asthma among non-industrial occupations. In many towns, schools have been forced to shut down due to dangerously high mold spore counts and other environmental concerns.

In the past several years, there has been a spike in the number of workers’ compensation cases involving mold and other environmental toxins in classrooms across the state, including at least 60 teachers from Stamford schools.

Westhill High School teacher Joe Celcis, who has been unable to teach for nearly two years, is undergoing treatment that may last for years. In written testimony, the Stamford teacher told legislators, “I am unable to fully engage in my daily activities in a normal and fruitful way. I am in constant varying levels of pain and suffer from intense bouts of brain fog and fatigue that sometimes leave me in bed for days at a time.”

“I have been out of work for three months on medical leave to regain my health,” wrote Fairfield teacher Kris Samuelson. “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.”

“Teachers across the state are reporting illnesses related to environmental problems within their schools,” says CEA Legal Counsel Melanie Kolek. “There’s black mold, extreme heat and cold temperatures, dust, asbestos, and other issues that are putting our students and teachers at risk every day. The legislature must pass HB 5431 to keep them safe.”

Testifying before lawmakers, Kolek stressed, “We have maximum temperatures for dog kennels and pet shops, but there are no laws or public health codes in Connecticut regarding minimum or maximum temperatures for school classrooms. This inequity must be addressed.”

Research clearly shows that excessive heat not only takes a toll on student learning, it can be dangerous and can lead to heat stroke, heat exhaustion, and dehydration and can cause greater health risks for those who suffer from asthma, allergies, and other health-related conditions.

“The temperature can sometimes go above 100 degrees inside the classroom, and when it gets that hot, students can’t learn, and teachers can’t teach,” one teacher wrote to legislators.

“The extreme temperatures caused mold to grow throughout the building, including in the HVAC systems,” Stamford teacher Melanie Rakoczy told lawmakers. She said teachers discovered mold behind ceiling tiles, around pipes, behind wallpaper, on baseboards, on student materials, and around windows. “Many of us, including students, were having medical concerns that affect our work and ability to function in our environment. We are concerned that the exposure to these elements will have lifelong effects on our overall health.”

For the past nine months, teachers in classrooms across the state have been recording temperature and humidity levels in their classrooms. CEA has collected a large data sample confirming that sweltering classrooms are indeed a problem in Connecticut schools, with temperatures in some schools reaching as high as 108 degrees.

Many of the shocking comments and medical problems that teachers shared with legislators today were highlighted in a [November 2019 CEA Survey of Connecticut Teachers](#) regarding the need to address environmental problems in Connecticut’s schools. More than half of teachers (53%) responding to the survey reported environmental conditions in their classrooms that are not conducive to teaching and learning, and nearly three-quarters of teachers (74%) have experienced extreme hot and cold temperatures in their classrooms. The survey found that 40% of teachers reported problems to their school administrator, but the issues were not resolved or only partially resolved.

Teachers are calling on Connecticut lawmakers to stop putting them and their students at risk and establish school temperature limits and require HVAC and air quality monitoring based on DPH standards. Passing HB 5431 with these measures will ensure that our school buildings remain free from toxins and other hazards that can harm our children and teachers.

“Students are our future. Educators prepare, teach, and guide students to that end. It is imperative that a healthy environment is provided and maintained,” concluded James, the Stamford counselor.

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The Connecticut Education Association is Connecticut’s largest teachers’ union, representing active, retired, and aspiring educators across the state.

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View written testimony at <http://www.cea.org/politics/testimony/>