

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™



Rhode Island Chapter

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Testimony in Support of House Bill 5597
House Education Committee

March 14, 2025

Dear Chairman McNamara and Members of the Committee,

The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (RI AAP) is writing in full support of H5597, which takes a crucial step toward providing all students with access to healthy learning environments by improving indoor air quality in schools. The RI AAP represents 200 pediatricians practicing in primary and subspecialty care across the state.

All children are uniquely vulnerable to environmental health issues like poor air quality, because their organs are developing and they breathe more air in proportion to their body weight than adults. Poor air quality not only contributes to exacerbations of respiratory illnesses, but also reduced lung function and cognitive development as well as increased incidence of asthma and infections like bronchiolitis and ear infections. Children with asthma are especially susceptible to poor air quality and when exposed, are more prone to wheezing, decreased lung function, and increased use of medical services. As we all have learned following the COVID pandemic, improved air ventilation also prevents transmission of respiratory illnesses.

Asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. With most of our children in RI learning in aging school buildings that are over 50 years old, basic indoor air quality investments are especially pertinent for a state where we have one of the highest childhood asthma rates in the country—40% higher than the national average. 1 in 10 children in RI struggle with asthma. Allergens such as dust mites, pests, and molds are frequent triggers for asthma and these allergens are common in schools. Especially for schools located in more urban environments, exhaust from vehicles is another trigger. We regularly care for children in our offices or emergency rooms who are missing school or struggling to pay attention or participate in classes due to headaches, coughing, dizziness, sinus congestion, and/or fatigue due to indoor air quality issues. Clean indoor air is essential to student health—both mentally and physically—as well as academic performance and attendance.

Following the COVID pandemic, children have especially struggled with chronic absenteeism and learning loss. Keeping children healthy and in the classroom is a priority for all of us. As Governor McKee stated, “Our children cannot learn if they are not in class, and it is up to each one of us to ensure that they are present, ready to learn, and succeed.” Poor air quality is a significant public health burden of respiratory issues in children, including asthma exacerbations, but also the development of asthma, allergies, and infections through impaired lung development. We can keep children in the classroom by ensuring that Rhode Island schools provide healthy, safe, and equitable learning environments. Reducing airborne pollutants and allergens will lower healthcare costs, improve productivity for parents who do not have to take time off to care for their sick children, and help our children stay healthy and in school. Therefore, we urge the committee to support H5597 as a targeted, evidence-based intervention to protect those who are most vulnerable, our children.

Thank you for your time and commitment to our Rhode Island community and educational system.

Sincerely,

Karen Maule

Board Member, Environmental Champion
Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics