

MARCH 17, 2025

State of Rhode Island General Assembly
House Committee on Education
State House, 82 Smith Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Chairman McNamara and members of the House Committee on Education,

My name is Natalie Kopp and I'm writing in support of H5597.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, I joined Dean/Dr. Ashish Jha at the Brown University School of Public Health as chief of staff to help the nation and the state of Rhode Island navigate the pandemic through clear science-based communication, answering questions from state and local leadership—including both RI governors, and offering advice throughout the decision-making process during a very complicated few years.

While [leading the clean indoor air initiative](#) at the White House, my top priority was helping schools get the information, funding, and technical support they needed to improve indoor air quality. Instead of being our first line of defense, buildings were dangerous places to be. We shut down schools nationwide—which unnecessarily disrupted all of society. We can prevent this. Last week, Dr. Jha and I wrote a piece about [indoor air quality in Rhode Island schools](#).

Clean indoor air is a universal health solution—it does not discriminate in the threats it mitigates. Whether the concern is chronic illness, infectious disease, or environmental hazards, improving air quality reduces risks across the board.

Why should Rhode Island take on cleaner air in schools?

- Providence is ranked the [10th worst city](#) to live with asthma and we have more asthma prevalence than almost every other city.
- Most of RI's schools are over [55 years old](#) and the air quality reflects it.
- Many high-need schools are located near congested highways. In Providence alone, 24 of the 39 schools are situated [within 1,000 feet of major roads](#)—which leads to increased rates of asthma and other respiratory issues.
- Rhode Island's emergency rooms are overburdened with the [highest occupancy rates](#) in the nation. Clean indoor air helps prevent infectious disease and lessens the impact of asthma—keeping kids out of emergency rooms and in the classrooms.
- The [state is striving](#) to reduce chronic absenteeism, and clean indoor air is shown to decrease absenteeism.

The good news is that the Ocean State is uniquely positioned to take this on now:

- Rhode Island has one of the most respected school board authorities in the country when it comes to understanding these issues. They know exactly what needs to be done at [each school facility](#) and have the desire to take on this work. This is rare.

- The state is dedicated to solving critical issues like chronic absenteeism, overburdened hospitals, community health efforts, increased student performance, teacher retention, etc. This tool helps address more problems and threats than people realize—and we have the leadership and tools to deploy this strategic tool.
- RI has been striving to pass IAQ legislation since 2003. There is now national and state support for this work in our state, and there are droves of experts, organizations, and groups who stand ready to support it.
- Cleaner air addresses a whole host of long-standing, pre-COVID, issues that plague our society. It has been well-researched and available to us for decades. Rhode Island can lead the nation and world with this “secret weapon” and highly effective tool.
- This bill meets RI where it is, and isn’t calling for costly change instead is calling for the highest impact possible at the lowest cost.

As one of the most respected experts in the field, Dr. Joe Allen recently said, *“Healthy buildings represent one of the single greatest public health opportunities of our lifetime. The decisions we make today regarding our buildings will determine our collective health for generations... The person who designs and operates your building has a greater impact on your health than your doctor.”*

H5597 is Rhode Island’s opportunity to lead. I urge you to pass this bill—for the well-being of our children, the strength of our communities, and the resilience of our state.

Warmly,

Natalie Kopp
natalie_kopp@brown.edu
(317) 292-0750