

March 17, 2025

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

Subject: Support for House Bill 5597

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

My name is Sabrina Chwalek, and I am writing in my personal capacity in support of H5597, a crucial step toward providing cleaner indoor air in schools across Rhode Island.

As a researcher at the Brown University School of Public Health, I have spoken with dozens of educators, parents, school officials, public health experts, and advocates working to improve indoor air quality in schools nationwide. The evidence could not be clearer—clean indoor air is essential for student health, learning, and overall well-being. Yet, for decades, this issue has been vastly under-prioritized.

H5597 aligns Rhode Island with a growing national movement. A dozen states have already passed legislation prioritizing indoor air quality in schools, and at least eight more are considering similar measures this year. The steps outlined in this bill are straightforward, cost-effective, and based on best practices already in place across the country.

Key provisions in the bill include:

- **State Guidance on Indoor Air Quality:** Many school districts and health departments nationwide already publish voluntary indoor air quality guidelines that are clear and easy to follow. Establishing state-level guidance in Rhode Island would provide schools and the public with accessible information to improve air quality—not just in classrooms, but in all public buildings.
- **Upgrading to MERV-13 Filters:** MERV-13 is the nationally recommended minimum standard for HVAC filters in schools. While Rhode Island currently requires MERV-11 filters in new school buildings, upgrading to MERV-13 filters offers significantly better protection against dust, mold, allergens, bacteria, and viruses—all for only about \$5 more per filter.
- **Routine HVAC and indoor air quality inspections:** Regular HVAC and air quality inspections are essential to school maintenance and should occur every few years. States such as Connecticut and California have already implemented programs to ensure schools meet air quality standards. Rhode Island can do the same by incorporating indoor air quality assessments into the School Building Authority's existing

facilities inspections every 5 years. Simple, cost-effective measures—such as conducting school walkthroughs or identifying ventilation deficiencies—can go a long way in ensuring safe learning environments.

Indoor air quality is a fundamental health and learning issue. By passing H5597, Rhode Island has an opportunity to take meaningful, evidence-based steps to protect the health of students and teachers. I urge you to support this bill and prioritize clean indoor air in schools.

Sincerely,
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