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Testimony of James Celenza

On Behalf of RI Committee on Occupational Safety and Health

In Support of H-7125

House Committee on Finance

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Support H7125, the school construction proposal

Schools are a key indoor environmental space for kids, teachers, and school employees as well as anyone using schools for community events and meetings. A 2017 study on K-public schools in RI found that 66.7% of all school buildings were between 35 and 85 years old—many designed and constructed without what are now currently accepted health standards (Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health {2016}). In the same 2017 study over 50,000 building deficiencies were found across all K-12 Rhode Island public schools.

As we have witnessed with the current COVID-19 pandemic many schools were ill prepared to remain open and in some triggered COVID transmissions. This supports an imperative to invest in school building environments that can significantly control the current pandemic as well as other respiratory hazards like acute respiratory syndrome, influenzas and additional versions of coronavirus that currently—and in the future-- impact school environments.

The “new normal” requires recognizing that SARS-CoV-2 is but one of several circulating respiratory viruses that include influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and more. COVID-19 must now be considered among the risks posed by all respiratory viral illnesses combined. Many of the measures to reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (eg, ventilation) will also reduce transmission of other respiratory viruses. A ‘National Strategy for the “New Normal” of Life with COVID’ Ezekiel J. Emanuel, MD, PhD; JAMA. Published online January 6, 2022. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.24282

Better building environments are also linked in many studies to enriched cognitive function and higher academic achievement as well as reducing asthma related events in staff and children. Childhood asthma--the leading cause of school absenteeism related to chronic illness-- accounts for 13 million schools missed school days each according to CDC (2015)

‘There is substantial evidence that indoor environmental exposure to allergens, such as dust mites, pests, and molds play a role in triggering asthma symptoms. These allergens are common in schools and can affect student attendance, comfort, and performance and reduce teacher and staff performance’ (U.S. EPA, 2016)

These add up to a mandate for a ‘new normal’ for our schools.