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Testimony of James Celenza

On Behalf of RI Committee on Occupational Safety and Health

Support- 2026 -- S 2873===== STATE OF RHODE ISLAND IN
GENERAL ASSEMBLY JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2026 _____ A N A C T RELATING
TO EDUCATION -- HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS

S2873 bill would require the RI Department of Health and the RI Department of Education to jointly provide for healthy air quality standards for schools. This act would further provide that the Department of Education incorporate indoor air quality testing as part of the school building authority needs assessment conducted every five years which would benefit students, teachers, and the community. We have a historic opportunity to prioritize clean indoor air in many RI schools. The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education has already approved more than \$5 billion in school construction projects.

The development of IAQ school programs has already been well nourished and exemplified by the US Environmental Protection Agency {EPA} so that RIDOH and RIDOE do not have far to turn to find well developed guidance and programs to fulfill the proposed mandates. USEPA has advocated for of maintaining healthy indoor air environments with over two decades of studies and has develop a comprehensive healthy school maintenance approach **Tools for Schools** that accents the critical role of indoor air quality. The EPA **Tools for Schools** project recommends schools can dramatically improve air quality by ensuring their buildings and HVAC systems are functioning as intended through a process called *commissioning* — similar to giving your car a “tune-up.” Just as regular tune-ups keep your car running smoothly, commissioning should be a standard line item in school maintenance budgets. {IN addition, our response to the COVID epidemic has greatly clarified the important role that air quality improvements play in airborne disease prevention.

The quality of the air in schools directly influences student absenteeism, performance, and teacher retention. Well-ventilated and filtered air has been shown to induce far fewer respiratory infections and produce less burden from chronic illnesses. Kids are less likely to be sick and will miss fewer school days. cleaner air is linked to better math and reading scores, improved concentration, enhanced cognitive function, and even improved *mental health*.

Teachers and other school employees like custodians, clerical staff and cafeteria workers benefit as well from a healthy indoor school environment. Almost 10% of all adult asthma cases and triggering episodes results from occupational exposures.

While better indoor air is good for everyone, it is especially important here in Rhode Island where we have one of the highest childhood asthma rates in the nation — an alarming 40 percent higher than the national average. One in 10 Rhode Island kids struggle with this chronic disease and it is a leading cause of student absenteeism. The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of

America just ranked Providence among the 10 worst cities for people to live with asthma. These statistics represent real children struggling to breathe, missing school, and falling behind. . In addition, almost 10% of all adult asthma cases and triggering episodes results from occupational espouses.

- **The RI Committee on Occupational Safety and Health {RICOSH} is a (non-profit) resource center for occupational and environmental health and safety. Our primary focus is to prevent occupational and environmental disease and injury. RICOSH pursues this goal in three broad areas: advocacy, training and technical assistance.**