



Connecticut Education Association

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Testimony of
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Before the
Education Committee

Re:
HB 6922 An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Department of Administrative Services Regarding the School Building Project Statutes

February 19, 2025

Honorable Committee Chairs, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members and rank and file members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important legislation.

My name is Louis Rosado Burch, Legislative Coordinator for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) and member of the School Indoor Air Quality Work Group. CEA is the state's largest association of certified public-school teachers, representing over 43,000 active and retired teachers across more than 150 school districts in Connecticut. CEA is dedicated to improving the lives of our teachers, the success of our students, and the overall quality of public education in our state.

I'm pleased to testify in support of HB 6922, which proposes changes to the statutes governing school building projects. I will limit my comments to the provisions of section 1, subsections (b) 1 and 2, which relate to the approval of funding for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system installations/upgrades in public school buildings.

CEA supports this committee's efforts to provide a dedicated, long-term funding source for school HVAC improvements through school construction projects and would like to offer the following considerations.

School Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) has been an important priority for the Education Committee since 2022, when it passed the first major update to the state's IAQ statutes in almost 20 years. This included establishment of a school HVAC grant program under DAS, to reimburse boards of education for eligible costs related to school HVAC upgrades and replacement. That funds for

that grant program were approved at \$450 million over two years (2023-2024), through a combination of bonding and ARPA funds.

This grant program was a critical step forward in providing cities and towns with urgently needed funds to support healthy school IAQ at a time when available local funding for school HVAC projects was limited and varied significantly from town to town. For the first time, municipalities could apply for assistance to make costly (albeit necessary) HVAC improvements that they might not otherwise have been able to afford. According to DAS, after two rounds of grant funding, 163 reimbursement grants were awarded to more than 60 school districts, for a total of over \$178,172,387 in state grants to municipalities.

While this came as a tremendous and welcome investment at the time, we know that there is still much work to be done to ensure healthy schools for all. Eligibility for these funds must be based on need and not be contingent on some lengthy, overly complicated application process. This grant program must be tailored to give priority to the districts that need it the most, not those that have shovel ready projects and the funds to back them up.

We cannot ignore the fact that many districts that applied for reimbursement under the previous grant opportunity were disqualified and not awarded due to an incomplete rubric or because of insufficient local funds for a match. According to the Governor's 2026-2027 proposed budget summary, \$138.5 million in unallocated funds remain under "school air quality improvements." These funds should be leveraged as we move forward.

According to DAS, *as many as one-third of Connecticut public schools are served by HVAC systems in need of repair or replacement.* This must be underscored as we consider our future commitments to improving school indoor air quality. Providing a dedicated funding stream for HVAC repairs through school construction will help ensure that municipalities in need will be able to apply for those funds on a rolling basis.

Further, we recognize that routine maintenance of school HVAC systems is an ongoing responsibility for municipalities, one that comes with continual short and long-term cost considerations. For this reason, we appreciate that this proposal preserves the requirement for municipalities to certify compliance with the 5-year HVAC inspection, a prerequisite for reimbursement under the previous grant program. This is intended to ensure that school districts routinely inspect and maintain newly installed HVAC equipment, which can fall into disrepair and/or require adjustment within just a few years following installation. To ensure the continued maintenance and efficacy of state-subsidized HVAC equipment, municipalities should be held to this requirement moving forward.

Recommendations

While CEA strongly supports the inclusion of School HVAC grants into school building construction projects, we are asking legislators to make the following modifications before moving this legislation forward:

1. Equity must be a key consideration in approving school HVAC grants moving forward. Throughout our advocacy, we have argued that underfunded districts may lack the available capital for upfront costs or a local match. The grant awards from the first two rounds of school HVAC grants confirms this; several well-funded districts were given access to the grant program while a number of distressed municipalities did not “make the cut” due to the lack of some essential eligibility criteria or matching funds.
2. An accurate accounting of all the allocated and spent funds from the previous grant program is needed to better understand the program’s strengths and areas for improvement.
3. Unallocated funds from the previous grant program should be leveraged to provide equity to underserved municipalities. According to the Governor’s 2026-27 proposed budget for DAS school building projects, \$138.5 million in unallocated funds remains from the \$450 million approved by the legislature for school air quality improvements. These funds could be used for reimbursing underfunded districts for the cost of completing 5-year inspections, providing reimbursement for distressed municipalities who applied for reimbursement and were not awarded, or to provide vulnerable districts with funding for air quality monitoring and testing for hazardous air pollutants (HAPs) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs).
4. Require DAS to revisit past grant applications for opportunities to offer special reimbursement grants to municipalities that did not receive funding previously. *Current state law requires a re-evaluation of grant applications that were rejected in 2023 and 2024.*
5. HB 6922 specifies that certain costs, such as routine maintenance, are not eligible for reimbursement. Members of the School IAQ Working Group have advocated for the approval of reimbursement funds in alliance districts for which available funding is a barrier to successful implementation. We encourage you to include language enabling the use of grant funds for operational costs, especially in the case of underserved municipalities.
6. There is a real need for dedicated funding for training and support for the annual and 5-year inspections. CEA supports the use of remaining approved grant funds to provide districts with training to successfully implement key requirements of the law. Without proper training, districts risk falling out of compliance with the state’s school building and HVAC inspection and maintenance requirements.

In closing, we appreciate this committee’s efforts to establish a permanent and reliable funding stream for school HVAC upgrades. This bill confirms the state’s commitment to addressing school IAQ as a long-term funding priority and it should be approved without delay. We remain committed to the successful implementation of these programs and are eager to continue our work with committee members to ensure safe, healthy, and equitable school environments for all students and school faculty.