

## Legislative Article for The Other Paper

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### Environmental Health Standards and Vermont Schools

Enacted in 2000, the School Environment Health Act (Act 125) gave rise to a program called Envision. As described on its home page, Envision “helps schools identify, prevent, and problem-solve potential environmental health and indoor air quality issues by providing a model environmental health management plan and policy... and gives schools the tools, training, and technical assistance to create and maintain a healthier school environment.” The program was, and remains, voluntary in nature.

In 2012-2013, a survey of Vermont’s 325 public schools resulted in 70 responses. Only 6 respondents reported having an environmental health management policy in place. Only 17 reported having an environmental health management plan in place. Only 1 reported having both a policy and a plan in place, while 46 reported having neither. In Spring 2016, in answer to my inquiring at the Health Department as to what environmental health standards we have on the books right now for schools, the response was concise: “Nothing.”

Well, this scenario struck me as just plain wrong and I set upon my research.

I met with the attorney in Legislative Council recommended by the Health Department personnel as the “best bet” on this issue. He pointed me to material from other states where substantial work has already been done regarding environmental health standards for schools... the results of which have been in place for quite a while and which, frankly, are “weighty” with detail and quite prescriptive. Impressive, but over the top, I thought.

I set up meetings with the Facilities Manager at Winooski and the Superintendent at South Burlington. I wanted to get a sense of the “reality” in a smaller district with fewer resources and a larger district with more resources than many. I explained to both that my inclination was an Envision-like program, but changing from “voluntary” to “required” the matter of having a policy and a plan in place. And if a school or district did not have a policy and a plan by a date certain, then by default, they would “live with” the model policy and plan as shaped by the Health Department.

Why “required”? It seems to me that sixteen years of “voluntary” has not worked so well and we’re talking about the well-being of children and the adults who work with them. What was the reaction to my overall concern and the notion of “required” from these two meetings? Great input and great support. The South Burlington Superintendent pointed me, for further input, to the Facilities Director at the Williston schools and the air quality/energy efficiency specialist at the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA). I set up meetings with both.

I had again, great input, great encouragement from both. The bottom-line observation from the VSA specialist was that we have schools out there which “should be bulldozed.” I honestly thought I had misheard, but I had not. The Williston facilities person took me on a lengthy tour of one of their elementary schools... classrooms, gymnasium, kitchen spaces, attic, up and down and all around... showing me, explaining to me the “why” of the \$20 million bond passed for work to begin this year. It was he who pointed out the need for trained, knowledgeable facilities people on staff. Personnel can have all good intentions, but if they do not know what they need to know, it is a set-up for problems.

And so, there is draft legislation almost ready to introduce regarding environmental health policies and plans for Vermont schools. It speaks to environmental conditions, including radiation; hazardous materials, toxic substances, pesticides; green cleaning; mold; air quality inside and outside; noise exposure inside and outside; drinking water quality; and “other health hazards.” It also includes a section speaking to the training of facilities personnel. This is very important business and I hope for a good hearing.

There is so much I could tell you about this topic. If you would like to talk about it or any other legislative issue, please do not be shy. Contact me by email at [mftownsend@comcast.net](mailto:mftownsend@comcast.net), by phone at 802-862-7404, at my home at 232 Patchen Road, on the street, or at Trader Duke’s from 8:30 to 9:30 on Saturday mornings.