

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

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Our schools are caring, creative, and equitable communities that empower all children to build on their talents and passions to grow into engaged citizens and life-long learners.

April 26, 2022

Vermont Senate Finance Committee

RE: Allocating Financial Reserves for PCB Mitigation

Libby Bonesteel - Superintendent Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

Thank you for allowing me the time today to testify on this important issue. Because of the lack of federal action, you are debating incredibly important financial issues that will directly impact nearly all of Vermont's families. I thank you for taking these issues on.

My testimony today focuses on allocating money towards PCB remediation. Burlington School District's experience with PCB contamination in their high school prompted this legislative body to enact a law mandating PCB testing in every school building in the state.

I speak for my fellow superintendents, for the Vermont Superintendents Association, and I can say with confidence, Vermont's principals and school boards in my testimony today.

The Department of Environmental Conservation has released a schedule this week that will see all public and approved independent schools in Vermont built before 1980 tested over a two year time frame. There will be nearly 400 schools tested. The testing will begin within a few short weeks.

The House is proposing, based on the pragmatic recommendations of the Department of Environment Conservation, that the testing timeline be extended by two years until 2026. They are not proposing to delay testing - it will still begin this month. DEC has determined that in order to support schools and communities to the best of their ability, with the staff that they have, a two-year timeline is not practicable, and may not be feasible. VSA has testified in support of extending the timeline.

Last year, the General Assembly established a requirement that schools be tested for PCBs and appropriated funding to do so. With that action, the State appropriately embraced an initiative to make schools safer.

A critical, essential action is now necessary. The General Assembly should act to appropriate funds to support school districts when actionable levels of PCBs are identified. School districts

did not enact the testing requirement, nor have they budgeted contingencies in the event that PCBs are found. Remediation costs are unpredictable and could vary widely from school to school.

What is predictable is the reaction that we can expect when PCBs are discovered. School communities, parents and the community-at-large, will justifiably demand immediate action. While I commend the Burlington School District's ingenuity and creativity, very few communities outside of Burlington have an empty department store that can be converted to an appropriate learning environment for students. School administrators have been told that should actionable levels of PCBs be found, we will close off portions of a building and move students around while mitigation is taking place. This is simply not a reality—many schools, including mine, do not have the space and community concerns of a hazardous material in our school will overcome any attempt at shuffling students. In addition, without a funding source for mitigation measures or renovation of a building not meant for school children, schools could be closed indefinitely while school boards and administration determine which programming to cut in order to find funding. We learned during the pandemic that virtual learning is simply not what the vast majority of students need to maintain a healthy diet of learning, activity, and mental wellness. After the past two years, education has reached its capacity in handling yet another crisis of this magnitude.

With respect to the presumed competition for resources between the one time need for PCB remediation and the demands to provide one year funding for universal school meals, I will speak for myself in saying that I appreciate your unenviable position. If you have to make a choice, and I hope that you do not, because feeding students is imperative, I can say this - the discovery of PCB contamination without the funds to remediate has the potential to once again create a huge disruption in the educational process. PCB remediation is a “one and done” use of funds, while covering the costs of universal meals for the upcoming year, leaves the General Assembly to find an ongoing source of funding beginning with FY2024. Based on MRPS internal math, should a universal meals mandate be put to Districts to fund after next year, my district will need to find \$400K-\$600K/year in order to fund universal school meals. This would be done in one of two ways: significantly increasing taxes or decreasing teachers/programming by the same amount of money. For perspective, this amount is equivalent to four-six teachers. This bill cannot be considered without a future funding source.

Testing for PCBs is happening. Unhealthy levels of PCBs will most likely be found which will cause significant disruption. Please take action to be certain that this session does not adjourn without allocating a dedicated funding source for PCB remediation.