

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee
FROM: Mark Tucker, Superintendent, Caledonia Central Supervisory Union
TOPIC: *Impact of PCB Remediation on Schools*
Date: January 5, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the *Impact of PCB Remediation on Schools*.

As many of you know from previous testimony and memorandums, I am a seasoned PCB warrior. This is not a title I sought, but one that was thrust upon me by virtue of my service to one of the first schools – Cabot – to undergo PCB testing in July 2022. Eighteen months of experience has taught me very little about the underlying science of PCBs – I purposely have left that to the scientists - but it has left me with a number of unanswered questions about the practical implications of navigating a process that has nothing to do with education. I attribute this knowledge-deficit to the genesis and nature of the initiative as it has unfolded.

We received first word of the Cabot airborne testing results in late August 2022, just five days before school was scheduled to open, and the news was grim. In a hastily arranged meeting with DEC staff, I was told that the test results indicated that the gymnasium was unsafe for occupancy by students in grades PreK-6. A second space, the student art room in one of the campus satellite buildings, was also deemed to be unsafe for use by students in PreK. This last was not a real issue, because we never take PreK students into the art room for instruction, but the gym recommendation was problematic for both practical and PR reasons. The practical reason was the loss of the gymnasium for PE instruction for grades K-6 when the weather turned cold; the PR reason was that it made no sense for us to tell families the gym was unsafe for students in grades K-6 but safe for students in grades 7-12. It took me and the Principal about 5 seconds to decide that we would not take that confusing message to the community, and we closed the gym to all students.

This was the first example of our exposure to a process that was implemented with no input from schools, with no prior warning that we might lose access to spaces as a result of testing, and with a certain level of tone-deafness to the real-world implications of a process that was not test-driven before implementation and, in Cabot's case, flawed from the start. The first round of testing at Cabot occurred in mid-summer when the HVAC system was off (think, stagnant air), and the test results were alarmingly unrepresentative of the real-world conditions in the gym when the students are on campus. A subsequent series of testing under operational conditions showed airborne levels below the Immediate Action Levels that led to the partial closure recommendation, and we reopened the gym for use by students in all grade levels except PreK.

I want to pause here to emphasize how desirable it would have been to have had more time to prepare, more time to provide input on the process (anything greater than zero would have been nice), and thus, possibly, resulting in a smoother implementation of the testing protocols at Cabot School. Perhaps the hastily implemented testing program did not allow time for DEC to seek input from the schools; I don't blame DEC for this, but it is true nonetheless.

It has been clear to all of us in the field since this initiative was first launched that it was poorly planned, underfunded, and under-resourced. I think the record has established these facts. But faced with the legislative mandate to go forth and test, DEC did exactly what it was asked to do. Given the rushed implementation of the program, it is no wonder that mistakes were made. Given the lack of time to

coordinate with the schools, it is no wonder that the initial reports from DEC were long on technical details but bereft of actionable guidelines that would have helped us to communicate with our communities. Reassuring statements such as, “it is safe for your child to be at school,” the number one concern of families, were left to the school to parse from a technically-dense report. Simple acts such as sorting the data tables to highlight which areas of the campus were a concern and which could be ignored did not start happening until I complained. The nomenclature used by the engineers to identify tested areas did not match the room and space nomenclature of the school. Resolving these and any other deficiencies arising from the reporting turned out to be our responsibility.

It should be apparent to all that the technical language of science is as foreign to us in the schools as our ed-speak probably is for the scientists, but there has never been an opportunity to address this because DEC is busy trying to keep up with the testing mandate and we still have schools to run. This is analogous to what happens when I go to Quebec – I don’t speak French and so I make all the natives speak English to me.

I don’t pretend to understand what goes on inside of DEC as they navigate this process from the technical side. As I said a minute ago, I don’t blame DEC for the difficulties of *implementing* an unplanned program, per se, but the process itself is difficult. Everything that I think I know about PCB testing, mitigation, and remediation has resulted from discovery along the way. There is no such thing as a guidebook, a *PCB Testing For Dummies* book, that illustrates for the scientifically unlearned what happens from day-one to day-X when you are done. As a result, I have been advising my Boards using a communication recipe comprised of two-parts fact and one-part supposition . . . and sometimes the suppositions have been wrong, sending me back into the kitchen to try again.

Cabot is just one of the three schools in CCSU that have PCB issues. We are lucky, in a way, that the airborne testing at Cabot, Danville and Twinfield did not require us to close any instructional classrooms, but that doesn’t mean this has not disrupted the three schools. In Cabot’s case, the disruption comes in the form of trying to align the gym remediation project with the wider school construction needs of the campus. I have described this in another setting as the PCB and School Construction rail lines intersecting without the benefit of proper switching mechanisms. The impact is not as great in Danville and Twinfield, beyond occasional inquiries from the Board and community members about the status of the projects there. It is difficult to explain why no action has been taken given that we know what the problems are and how to address them.

This regulatory saga has unfolded over many months – 18 for Cabot, 12 for Danville and Twinfield – in a process that is opaque but also very formulaic. We have known for many months the sources of the PCBs in all three schools. In Cabot, we learned that the main problem in the gym is PCB-infected ceiling paint, but we also learned that gym mats were saturated with the residue of flaking paint. All we have been allowed to do in that second case is to wrap the mats in plastic, label them hazardous, and move them to an area in the gym that is beyond the reach of the students. In Danville, one of the PCB sources is abandoned stage lighting equipment left in a back corner of the auditorium stage, but we have not been given permission to remove that equipment. In Twinfield, the engineer found a container of discarded oil in the HVAC attic that is infected with PCBs, but we have not been allowed to dispose of that material, either. You may now be asking “why?” and the answer is simple – the regulatory process follows a defined sequence of identification, investigation, and reporting that takes months to complete; at the end of this reporting cycle is, presumably, an official instruction that allows us to remove material that we already know should be in our buildings. But don’t ask me when we will reach that endpoint.

Given what we know about our PCB-source issues, the question is why does it take so long to get to the action stage? I suspect this is partly, or mostly, due to two factors: 1) the level of detail required by the regulatory rules (again, not DEC's fault) demand lengthy documents, full of technical details that take time to write, and then are subject to cycles of review and editing before DEC can sign off, and 2) all of these projects are competing for the same limited pool of consulting engineers who are responsible for everything from airborne testing to Corrective Action Planning. I am very happy with our consulting engineer, and I have learned as much or more about this process from him as I have from DEC, but he is spread thin across the State. I know that some of the sites he has worked on had more immediate and pressing issues with closed classrooms. But to the extent that this resource constraint may force prioritization of attention, it nonetheless leaves us with obvious and unresolved issues in my three schools. In the meantime, because we have not been able to do *any* remediation in any of the three schools, we are stuck in a quarterly airborne testing cycle that is required by DEC to ensure that the airborne levels have not jumped up above immediate action levels in the buildings. This repeated testing is being paid for from the remediation fund.

Finally, let's talk about remediation money. My biggest challenge is at Cabot, where the process has evolved to the point where we have been presented with a Evaluation of Corrective Action Alternatives (ECAA) document. I could spend 15 minutes explaining all the alternatives, but I won't. The bottom line for us is that the most efficacious alternative is also the most expensive – to tear down the gym building and replace it with . . . something. Cabot doesn't need a full-sized gym because we no longer host local high school basketball – Cabot players have joined Twinfield in a member-to-member arrangement going back four seasons. But, we do need *something* to replace the building, and I have proposed to the Board that they replace the demolished gym with a smaller, multi-use building containing a fitness center for students to use during the day and available to the wider community at night, along with space to move the Plainfield Health Center satellite clinic from the main school building into new space. A community-focused building such as this falls squarely into the conceptual realm of the Community School model, something that Cabot has been doing for a couple of years now, to the credit of our Principal, Becca Tatistcheff and to the praise of the AOE.

The projected cost to tear down the building is \$866,000. The replacement cost is unknown because we have not reached the point in the process where we can even discuss a replacement with DEC. There is a projection on record for replacing the building at \$3.8M, but that assumed a one for one replacement of the existing building. I am not an architect but I have to believe we can do better on a different building, a rectangle without a domed roof.

Two questions remain. First, I don't know when we will have an approved ECAA, as it is now in round two of edits by the engineer. Once that is finalized, we will finally be able to negotiate with DEC to select the alternative, and if it is "tear down" – and it should be – then that discussion naturally leads to "replace with what." At *that* point, assuming we agree, the school can seek a design for the replacement building and then, ultimately, DEC will encumber money for the project.

Tearing down without replacement is not an option – the two go hand in hand as far as I am concerned. But I will tell you I have already sensed some reluctance from certain quarters within DEC to the idea that Cabot would get \$4.8M to address its PCB remediation in the gym. And that \$4.8M is clearly a big chunk of the remaining dollars in the PCB fund. With no additional funding source identified it now feels like a race to get what we need before others exhaust the fund.

When will this all come to an end? After I pleaded with our engineer for some relief on this process for Danville and Twinfield, he managed to get DEC to agree that the ECAA step for Danville was not needed, since there really are not alternatives to choose from; I am hoping to see a CAP for Danville in the coming weeks, and if that happens there is an outside chance I will see Danville resolved before June 30th when I retire. Twinfield is delayed because of some additional testing of a drain system in the HVAC attic that is suddenly a concern because of questions as to whether any of the PCB-infested oil in the attic might have leached into the drainage system. I don't understand why this was not considered before now, but on the off-chance that we have been leaching PCBs into the soil outside the school where the drain discharges, god help us.

So, maybe the day will come when I will understand this process from start to finish. I won't be around to see the final resolution of Cabot. It breaks my heart to leave that school in this state, but I can't seem to make the process move any faster than it is.

Thank you,
Mark