

TO:House Education CommitteeFROM:Andrew Haas, Superintendent, Windham Northeast Supervisory UnionSUBJECT:Testimony on PCB Remediation at Bellows Falls Union High SchoolDATE:May 8, 2025

Members of the House Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today regarding the impact of PCB Remediation at Bellows Falls Union High School.

I first spoke to you over a year ago on January 5, 2024, on this same topic.

A quick recap: We learned of PCBs at Bellows Falls Union High School on August 10, 2023, 14 days before school opened. Principal Kelly O'Ryan was six weeks into her new assignment. Our Auditorium and gymnasium were deemed unsafe and off limits, and much of the academic area was just below the immediate action level of 300 nanograms per cubic meter. BFUHS is an open-concept building with no walls. The school opened on schedule with students in tents and PE classes outside. For the most part, the weather was kind to us. I was repeatedly reassured by staff at the AOE that there would be dollars to take care of BFUHS. Nothing in writing, but the promise, "We knew we were one more building away from using up the funds, and BF is it."

Since August of 2023, we have learned a lot about PCBs and broken promises. The presence of PCBs threw a huge wrench and delay in our plans to use over \$7,000,000 in ARP ESSER funds to upgrade a 50-year-old HVAC system and renovate our Science Wing, which needed much modernization. I will speak more to the ARP ESSER later.

We now know that PCBs are "grasshopper" chemicals and are more prevalent in the air during warmer months. This meant shutting down the gymnasium during the warmer months the following year. We know that PCBs were used in the fire retardant coatings used on the 74 expansion columns throughout the building. We know PCBs were used when they painted the underside of the gymnasium roof decking. And, we know that the air filters, over 100 of them, throughout the building, are loud and a distraction to student learning.

Throughout this whole endeavor, we have worked closely with staff from DEC and VHB. We have had students from the University of Iowa do additional testing, all with the purpose of finding the best solution that was safest for our students and staff and had the least impact on their educational experience. There have been "highs" and there have been "lows". We have seen a light at the end of the tunnel, but we are still not sure if it is a train or the sun.

Fortunately, we were able to get our HVAC and Science Wing renovation projects underway, albeit late. In December of 2024, with the completion of the HVAC renovation, we were elated to learn that the air presence of PCBs had dropped so significantly, we could turn off and remove the air filters. The silence was the most wonderful sound. However, because of the discovery of PCBs and the delay in starting our projects, we had to apply for extensions for late liquidation on our ARP ESSER grant. We were granted these extensions, but at the end of March 2025, we learned the new administration in Washington had rescinded these extensions. Windham



Northeast Supervisory Union was left unreimbursed for about \$1.1 million; about \$700,000 was due to delays because of PCBs. We are working to reapply, but there are no guarantees.

In addition to the HVAC and Science Wing renovation projects, BFUHS was installing a new roof on the building using a \$2,000,000 bond approved by the voters. We had found 78 holes and tears in the roof membrane. This project was also delayed due to the PCBs and is still not complete. Because PCBs were found in the underside of the roof decking of the gymnasium, we had to work with DEC and VHB on what was the best solution for remediation. The complete removal of the decking and the reinstalling of new materials was the most preferred and recommended method. This would have cost approximately \$4.5 million dollars. However, because we were informed there was no money to support this project and we needed to complete the roof project, we chose the alternative plan to encapsulate the paint on the roof decking for \$4.9 million; this includes both short-term and long-term costs.

The cost to address the 74 expansion columns throughout the building will have an estimated long-term cost of \$3,082,740; \$2,160,240 in the short term. In addition, we just learned there is an estimated cost of \$130,000 annually for periodic monitoring. BFUHS has not budgeted for this cost, and there are currently no funds from the state to cover these expenses.

My ongoing concern is the lack of funding from the state and the potential implementation of a foundational formula, which will impact our overall cost per pupil and result in a significant loss of educational funds. I urge this committee to consider dedicated funding for PCB remediation that does not come at the expense of our students' educational resources.