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To: VT House Education Committee Members  
From: Caty Sutton, Superintendent, Hartford School District  
RE: Testimony on PCB Abatement in the Hartford School District

May 8, 2025

First, thank you so much to the members of the VT House Education Committee for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the community members of the Hartford School District.

I provided you with testimony earlier this year, when I outlined our experience of navigating the situation regarding PCBs in the HSD to date, which involved three of our schools in the district undergoing state testing for PCBs, with one of them, our middle school, testing negative for PCBs at the immediate and school action levels, and two of them, our career and technical center (HACTC) and our high school, testing positive at the immediate action level and at the school action level, requiring that we relocate three of our programs at the career and technical center, with one off-site location (Culinary Arts) and two relocated within the district and on-campus.

Since my last testimony, our main concern continues to be the lack of funding to support our efforts to fully abate the PCBs, and the complexity of the problem we are facing. As written, Act 74 relies on air quality testing to determine the scope of contamination; this defies science and all logic related to how we must address this issue to ensure our community that our students and staff are safe from this hazard. Throughout the extensive testing of air quality and further testing of bulk materials, we know that the source of the PCBs are materials- adhesives, caulk, paint, etc. We also know that because PCBs are chemicals, they behave differently than a mineral contaminant that can be removed and solve the problem. In our case, substrate sampling of bulk materials have indicated that the PCBs that were used in these source materials have extensively leached into the concrete blocks that compose the walls of our buildings at the high school and in the HACTC, with contamination 1 inch to 5 inches below the surface of these blocks, compromising the material. The only way we can fully remove this hazard is by removing these blocks, as we cannot conceivably shave off an inch or more of concrete block from our walls.

It should be noted that using air quality sampling to determine if a PCB hazard is present is a foolhardy enterprise. Throughout the past year, for example, areas of our schools that are composed of the same materials and built at the exact same time have produced different air quality results, which is easily attributable to either the ventilation efforts that were present in those spaces at the time of the testing, the temperature or the humidity at the time of testing, or whether or not the related materials have been recently damaged. We know that PCBs are chemicals, and we know that they “outgas” at different rates depending upon conditions. Either way, we cannot state to our community that because we had strong fans in the areas that tested negative, our students and staff members are safe in those areas; we must remove the hazard, and in order to do this, we must remove the source materials and the materials that are impacted by the permeation of the hazard.

So, we are currently in compliance with Act 74 as it is written, which is dependent on air quality sampling, but we are faced with the significant challenge of assuring our community that we are effectively mitigating and abating these harmful chemicals in our schools, and cannot say with a straight face or with any integrity that our community is safe when we have not removed the source of the problem.

As we know, construction costs are only going to increase. We are at a pivotal point when we need to determine what the most financially responsible decisions are for our community, and do not think we are operating as responsible stewards for our community by “kicking the can down the road.” We know that, based on our own pilots and the experiences of those districts who have been navigating these challenges before us, that strategies such as encapsulation or ventilation are not effective, and certainly will not be effective long term, as we are also well aware that if we were to engage in this effort, these spaces would need to be monitored in perpetuity. We cannot afford to wait to address this hazard in our buildings, and we will not move forward with any action that has been proven to fail- the health and safety of our community is too critically important to bet on mitigation that we know is not effective.

We have already incurred the costs of moving forward with testing in the last building in our district that was on the testing schedule, as again, we could not say to our community that because the state was not moving forward with testing, we were not going to ensure that we were aware of and would address any hazard that was indicated in that learning space. We were told that we would be reimbursed “only if funding is available,” and to date, have not received any reimbursement from the state since the state moved from paying for related costs upfront to a reimbursement model. To date, we have spent \$424,662.49 out of our local budget, all of which are unanticipated costs that are being incurred by our taxpayers to address this hazard in our schools.

On behalf of our community, we implore you to help to support our efforts to keep our schools safe and healthy for our students and staff by allocating funding to abate this harmful chemical.

Thank you for your time today and for the opportunity to speak with you.