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73 Highland Avenue, White River Junction VT 05001
Catherine van Eyck-Sutton, Superintendent

802-295-8600

April 14, 2026

To: Members of the VT Senate Education Committee

From: Caty Sutton, Hartford School District Superintendent

RE: Testimony on H.542

Dear Members of the VT Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with testimony in relation to H.542. For the record, my name is Caty Sutton, and I am the Superintendent in the Hartford School District, which serves students at the Dothan Brook Elementary School, the Ottauquechee Elementary School, the White River Elementary School, the Wilder School, the Regional Resource Center, the Hartford Memorial Middle School, the Hartford High School, and the Hartford Area Career and Technical Center (HACTC).

I am here today to provide you with as complete an understanding as possible of the situation that the PCB testing program has presented for the Hartford community. I recognize that you will hear from others today and this week on the same topic, so I will do my best to be concise in relaying the absolutely impossible financial and emotional burden that this program has placed upon our students, educators, and families in our district. Our community does not deserve and must not suffer from a program that unduly, and with great prejudice and inequity, places the burden and responsibility of PCB testing and remediation on the humans who happen to reside and attend school in a community that happened to be next on the list to be tested before the testing pause occurred last year.

Since our first air sample test results indicated that we had learning spaces in our largest facility, which houses our Career and Technical Center and High School, contained levels of airborne PCB contamination that exceeded the state's School Action and Immediate Action Levels two years ago, we have had to relocate our Culinary Arts Program off-campus, relocate two of our Health Sciences Programs within HACTC that had to be customized and repurposed, vacate office spaces, and at the start of this school year, when test results indicated that 12 of our classrooms in the High School's "B wing," our academic wing, were above the Immediate Action Level, relocate 12 learning spaces just weeks before the start of school.

Needless to say, every time we wait for testing results, we hold our breath and hope that we don't have to displace students and staff, yet again, and that the emotional toll of the uncertainty that remains our reality does not continue to erode at morale, let alone the retention and recruitment of staff and students.

The human resources that have been used to address this ongoing issue cannot be overstated. I began my work in the district as Interim Superintendent last year, and have spent countless hours problem-solving with our Director of Facilities, our Director of Finance, our Assistant Superintendent, the Principals at the High School, the Directors at HACTC, the Hartford Board of School Directors, various consultants and lawyers, educators who have had to recreate learning spaces off-campus or in different classrooms, not to mention the countless forums we have hosted so our students, educators, families, and community members can get the information and reassurance they need and must have that our facilities are healthy and safe. I have spent time presenting written testimony on several occasions, and every time we get new test results, I prepare to go on yet another local press tour. My colleagues and I are very expensive amateur PCB experts who would much rather spend our time on what we were hired to do: educate and serve our students.

Continuing to experience the fluctuations in testing results is an exercise in futility. Depending upon the temperature, season, humidity, wind direction, and many other factors that are unidentifiable, according to air sampling results, we may have elevated levels of PCBs in one space that mandates that we vacate those areas and displace students and educators, and levels that do not require any action on our part in the adjacent room. We have followed the state's recommendations to place Air Purifying Units (APUs) in learning spaces such as our Culinary Arts Program, have operated those units continuously and throughout long stretches of time, with very little impact on PCB levels. In fact, and as noted above, that program remains off-site and in a location that had to be fully outfitted for that program, including purchasing and outfitting commercial equipment and digging lines to allow for Internet access.

With all of this debate related to Act 73 and Education Transformation in the state, we are spending all of our time trying to understand and analyze the calculus of how to weigh and balance our priorities in attending to PCB remediation amongst the backdrop of what is yet to come. We passed a \$21 million dollar bond three years ago to address deferred maintenance in the district, with dollars earmarked for upgrades to infrastructure in the High School and at HACTC. Do we move forward with that work, knowing that we will need to remediate and abate hazardous PCB materials at an added 12-13% cost to that project work? Do we demolish the building and do the only thing that will fully address the issue to remove the hazard and find a way to fund a new building that will easily exceed \$100 million dollars?

To elaborate on the above, because of the ongoing uncertainty in relation to funding and PCB-related costs, this year the district locally funded a third party estimate of our Hartford High School and Hartford Area Career and Technical School facilities so we can better understand the market value and what it would cost to fully remove the PCB source materials; we were provided with an estimate of \$104 million, which only includes the construction and not the

architectural or planning work, which is typically around 12-13% of that cost, or any contingency, which is typically another 15%.

If there is one guarantee, it is that the cost related to whatever we decide to do will far exceed expectations.

Currently, we have just received a draft of what the state refers to as the Evaluation of Corrective Action Alternatives (ECAA). The consultant who we hired to put that draft together, Fuss & O'Neill, must provide a number of options, or alternatives, for our School Board's consideration. One of the options we know will be included is to increase ventilation by using APUs in the affected learning spaces. If we select any option other than demolition and construction of a new building, which is the only way to fully remove the hazard, we will need to conduct air sample testing in perpetuity, as we are bound to quarterly testing as long as we have detectable materials in our facilities; this is a cost that is over \$100,000 a year and continues to increase (20% this year alone). Will the state continue to pay for that annual cost? Will the state maintain and update the APUs, which are incredibly loud and disruptive to learning and sound like an airplane is landing in our classrooms? Will the state pay for the abatement of the hazard when we inevitably need to considerably renovate one of these spaces?

As far as the funding we have received to date from the state, we have received \$308,079.94, which includes the first round of testing, through the relocation of programming, ongoing testing, and the current development of the ECAA. Since the state paused testing and had not completed testing all of the facilities in our district, we also had to use local funds to cover the cost of testing the last facility that the state had not tested and refused to pay for, which was another \$26,191.53; we did not feel like it was a choice to test the last facility, but rather that we must do so in order to ensure that our community knew that we will continue to do whatever we need to do to provide our students with safe and healthy learning environments. Current outstanding expenditures total \$135,000, with FY26 quarterly air sample testing and the ECAA process amounting to \$129,972, and while we have been told that these costs will be covered by the state, we remain concerned about the laborious, confounding process and what the future will hold, particularly if additional schools and districts are added to the current schools and districts who are still trying to address the many costs that come with being identified as a school that contains levels of PCBs that are beyond the state's threshold.

In a meeting this morning with the Department of Environmental Conservation, we were informed that while our quarterly air sampling will continue to be funded by the state through next year, whatever option our board selects in relation to the ECAA to abate and remediate the PCBs in our schools will not be funded by the state unless the legislature includes this funding in the state budget. So, where will that funding come from?

It is not fair, and it is not right, that our community is faced with bearing the financial burden of a program that none of them had anything to do with, and will now potentially be faced with incurring, in perpetuity, in their annual tax bill. It is not fair that we do not know if and when state funding will be available to pay for associated costs that are completely out of our control. It is

not fair that we have to inform candidates for our positions that we have PCBs in our buildings and we do not know what the future will hold. It is not fair that the bond that our community passed is not being used to address the deferred maintenance in our buildings that desperately needs to be attended to because PCB testing indicated elevated levels in our buildings. Most of all, it is not fair that our students and families and educators have to continue to ride the emotional rollercoaster that twists and turns every time the state conducts their quarterly air sampling tests and we wait for the results and hope that our facilities are safe and healthy and we can afford to keep them that way.

Please do the right thing, and ensure that those of us who are in the position, one that we did not place ourselves in, are not forgotten and are made whole; it is the only moral alternative.

Thank you,

Caty Sutton
Superintendent
Hartford School District