4-14-26
Testimony, Chris Young
Senate Education Committee
Topic: PCB Bill

Good afternoon - my name is Chris Young and I have served as a principal in the NEK for the past 24 years, and am currently in my 7th year as the principal at North Country Union High School. My testimony today comes as a result of my direct experience with the PCB legislation enacted in 2021 and its effect on my school community, most notably on the negative impact on time and learning that we experienced as a result of this legislation. It is my hope that my testimony will influence this committee's consideration regarding funding on-going mitigation and remediation work and that you fully fund these efforts for NC and similar schools.

In July, 2024, I was on vacation with my family when the Department of Environmental Conservation called to let me know that our most recent test results were not good, as in, 'you can't use most of your rooms' not good. This was the 5th round of testing, each of which included some form of mitigation efforts, such as installing air filters, opening windows, closing windows, etc; none of which seemed to do us much good since we were over a year into the process and the results seem to be getting worse.

This was also our first experience with testing our air quality when it was hot outside, which in turn warms the building and causes PCB's to be more active and results in higher levels detected. That was the first time that we raised the question regarding whether we can use average test results over time rather than a one-time reading to make decisions as monumental as whether or not students and staff can be in the school building. At that time, we were told by the Department of Health that a one-time exposure was enough of a risk to limit the use of our facility (more on that later).

So, with the power of this law behind them, DEC, DOH, and AOE started to work with us to plan for the fall. One of the initial suggestions was that we simply 'go remote', which Superintendent Collins and I rejected out of hand due to the massive detrimental effect we saw (and continue to see) from COVID. Our rallying cry became 'On time and in-person', and since we didn't have a Macy's to house our 700 students we turned to ways that we could bring mobile classrooms onto campus and create a schedule that moved students in and out of those spaces (along with the few usable spaces in the facility) so that we could maintain some semblance of a safe campus focused on learning. After conducting the engineering studies and working with multiple vendors, we got the multimillion dollar price tag for this program and learned from our state partners that this was too expensive. We pivoted to 6 massive wedding tents, which is what the state could apparently afford for our students. To reach this point required a significant amount of time commitment from many people, this included:

- Weekly PCB meetings with state agencies
- Weekly meetings with agency commissioners and secretaries

- Weekly site-based team meetings with our local association, facilities director, supervisory union, and administrative team
- Daily meetings with contractors
- And much, much more.

We are thankful for all of the attention and support we received from AOE and DEC; they did not want to be in this situation any more than we did, and they did their absolute best to support us through this poorly planned public policy.

Now, please keep in mind that all of this work was being conducted in July and August in preparation for a late August return to school. Neither I, nor any of my administrative team, including all our administrative assistants, did anything except focus on PCB's which meant re-thinking everything about what we would have considered a normal return to school when we left for summer break in June. When we finally arrived at the conclusion that tents would be our best option to bring students back, the real work of making this happen began. This included:

- Running electrical conduit throughout the grounds
- Arranging wi-fi in outdoor locations and in tents
- Building floors (after the tents arrived without any)
- Putting up drywall and wiring for electricity
- Meeting with the fire marshall to determine what type of heating units would be acceptable
- Arranging bus schedules to CCV as a satellite campus
- Moving furniture out of the building and into the tents
- Building walkways so that mobility impaired students and staff could access the new spaces safely
- Creating a new bell schedule with all new locations, including additional space at CCV and the American Legion next door
- Entering all of the new locations into our database so that we could accurately take attendance and account for students.
- Adjusting lessons and activities to account for new spaces and a new schedule

All of these efforts, miraculously, created a relatively safe new 'campus', with spaces that were designed for learning. That said, it was far from ideal:

- We delayed the start of the year by one week to prepare
- Tents were too cold in the morning and too hot in the afternoon
- If it rained, it was too loud to hear
- Only sheetrock walls separated classrooms, so discussion was at a minimum and seat work at a premium
- Security needed to be enhanced given most of our students were spending time in exposed plastic tents
- Students new to the school never received a proper orientation, and had difficulty forming connections in the dispersed campus

- Providing supervision in a completely open campus spread an already thin administrative team even thinner
- New schoolwide expectations had to be created and shared ‘on the fly’

But somehow, we made it work. Students were happy to be in person, staff stepped up and were true heroes to allay the inevitable anxiety that this caused, our school board was open and supportive of all of the human resource and policy changes, and our community supported our efforts to be “On time and in person”. And while I wish I could say that once we got started things were great for a while, that was not the case. Almost as soon as we moved in we began to remind our state partners that while we were thankful to be in school, we only had a few weeks before fall became winter and tents would no longer be an option. This was when we returned to the concept of reacting to a single set of test results, or whether we could consider an average of test results over time. While as a general rule I try not to be cynical, it was not surprising to me that by October, the policy had shifted and we were allowed to use an average over time to determine occupancy rather than a single test result. I can only hope that this was well-thought out and not just a consequence of not having literally ANY other option for NC students and staff. To be honest, it still makes me angry to think about how much time and money was wasted when we reacted to a single set of test results in July and how much better off we would have been if we had been allowed to use an average over time just two months prior. Regardless, we were allowed back in, and began undoing all of the work that went into our tent city, as well as restarting the school year in the middle of October.

Needless to say, this experience has been personally and professionally draining, and more importantly has impacted my ability to do my job providing a safe and healthy learning environment for my staff and students, who have all been nothing short of wonderful throughout this ordeal. And while I would love to wash my hands of PCB’s, pun intended, they are with North Country forever, or until we can demolish and rebuild our school. That is where your work lies. We recently received the draft of our corrective action plan and have three options:

1. Remove PCB’s using hand tools at a cost of approximately $21 million
2. Remove PCB’s using machinery at a cost of approximately $16 million
3. Remove PCB’s by demolishing the building at a cost of approximately $12 million

As you do the math, consider that if we choose options 1 or 2, we are also required to monitor in perpetuity whether the removal was effective. The 30 year cost for this monitoring is approximately $12 million, and does not include the cost of mitigation if PCB’s remain, nor any other cost associated with renovating a 60 year-old building whose operating systems are at the end of their useful lives. Also, while Option 3 is the least expensive, it leaves us without a school and now that we have the first school built in the last half century in Vermont, we have an idea of what that will cost.

So, committee members, I urge you to at least take responsibility for the legislation you passed that has caused irreparable academic, social/emotional, and financial damage to North Country students and staff - we simply can't get that time back. This responsibility includes, at a minimum, continuing to fund the on-going mitigation, remediation, and monitoring costs at NC and other schools such as Twin Valley who are already in the midst of the program. What I ask from this committee is not the minimum but rather to do what is right for NCUHS and make the school system whole by providing funding to build a new PCB-free school so that future generations of students and staff can be confident that their long-term health will not be compromised by simply being in our building.

Thank you for your time and hard work representing Vermonters.