

*Jerry Roseman
Director of Environmental Science
Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Health and
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*House Democratic Policy Committee
Hearing on Toxic Schools
April 8, 2021*





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House Democratic Policy Hearing: Toxic Schools

**Jerry Roseman, Director of Environmental Science, PFT Health and Welfare Fund
Virtual | Thursday, April 8, 2021 | 3:00PM**

Good afternoon. My name is Jerry Roseman and I am the Director of Environmental Science for the PFT. I want to thank Representative Fiedler, Chair Bizzarro, and all of the members of the House Democratic Policy Committee for providing me an opportunity to testify about dangerous and inadequate school conditions in Philadelphia's public schools.

My work on behalf of the PFT has long involved access to school buildings and spaces for the purposes of performing direct and independent inspection and evaluation of environmental hazards and failing facility conditions and documenting the dangers identified.

Although hired by the PFT, I am neither a union employee nor union member and, as a public health environmental science practitioner, I see my primary obligation and duty as protecting the health, safety, and welfare of school staff and students – those who are most directly impacted by toxic and crumbling schools. My role for the PFT is to advise them about, and to advocate for, sustainable, system level improvements.

The conditions I continue to see on a regular and routine basis when I assess schools are distressing and simply have no place in an “adequate” school environment. When I see what people are facing in our school buildings, I often have a hard time believing that those we charge with protecting school students and staff are properly doing the jobs we expect them to do and in the way we expect them to do them.

When I see major construction jobs that have to be shut down because of the serious health impacts associated with the project activities; when we hear about a teacher developing mesothelioma after working for 25-30 years in schools with accessible damaged asbestos insulation materials; and when 10 schools had to shut down, in whole or in part, just between September of 2019, the start of a school year, and March of 2020; and when the pandemic forced the closures of all Philadelphia schools, I wonder how much more we can accept without making substantive change.

Readily accessible asbestos materials and unacceptable exposure conditions continue to exist in many spaces in many of our schools – this should not be. Damaged and flaking lead paint and lead paint chips, dust, and debris is still routinely found on classroom surfaces where children can ingest this toxin. Poorly maintained and malfunctioning heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems results in mold growth as well as compromising the ability of students and staff to remain in their rooms and schools when catastrophic failures occur. Water damage and leaks from roofs, plumbing and steam heating systems result in major costly and dangerous impacts to students and staff and compromise building equipment supplies and materials. Construction

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activities are frequently too poorly controlled allowing project activities to place occupants at unacceptable risks to dust, noise, and sometimes even asbestos exposures.

At the end of my written testimony I have included several photos highlighting what I've seen, documented, and brought to the District's attention on many occasions and, I must say, that the existence of these conditions doesn't easily support District statements about the health and safety of all staff and students being of highest priority (to them)— if that were true, these things I see whenever I assess schools would not be present.

I know that all of you listening here today are aware that this is not the first time these types of conditions have been reported, and that these are not “one-off” types of situations.

About five (5) years ago in 2015 – 2017, the School District contracted with Parsons Environment & Infrastructure Group to perform a comprehensive Facility Condition Assessment in Philadelphia's schools – they did so and found, then, that there was a deferred maintenance backlog of 25 years, \$4.5 billion in outstanding maintenance need, and another \$3-\$4 billion in capital investment required to ensure even basic and adequate schools – needed work didn't occur because needed dollars weren't supplied, and we shouldn't be surprised, therefore, that we are now even further behind.

According to the best and most accepted national data provided information and studies from groups including the 21st Century School Fund, the Center for Green Schools, and the National Council on School Facilities, among others – about 7% of the total infrastructure value of a school portfolio must be spent every year to upgrade, maintain, and ensure buildings are safe and adequate for occupancy. The SDP buildings have been valued at about \$14 bn (by Parsons in 2017) and so Maintenance, Operations, and Capital budgets should, collectively, total as much as \$980 million per year (.07 x \$14 bn), at the minimum, to ensure we have adequately safe, healthy, and educationally effective school buildings. We are lucky when our funding levels for maintenance and operations and for capital programming is even 33% - 50% of that number.

I have said many times that school facility conditions are not the most important element of a great, equitable, and high quality education – that pride of place falls to educators, school leaders and others that are responsible for educating our children. Play spaces, technology, class size, educational materials, and supplies, all of these things are arguably more important as well. But, at least adequate facility conditions are a fundamental and foundational need – the base of a Maslow-type hierarchy – on which all else is built.

If our school infrastructure is failing, then: we are placing the health and safety of our children and staff at risk; the District is compromising educational achievement and

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academic opportunity; the District is failing to meet the promises of a socially, racially, and economically just system; the District is eroding public trust and confidence in our public schools; and the District is wasting taxpayer dollars – we have to stop the bleeding and take advantage of a real opportunity to turn this around now by kicking off a sustainable improvement process by engaging in and implementing a participatory data collection and planning effort.

The PFT, and its organizational partners, have long advocated for more money for schools in general and for improving school facility conditions specifically. The PFT has helped organize and support the Fund Our Facilities Coalition and, on their behalf, I have worked to put together plans and priorities for the steps that should be taken to ensure we can engage in sustainable school improvement. The PFT, and other stakeholders, have also tried to work with SDP leaders and managers to develop collaborative plans and efforts but, unfortunately, with much too little success. A change is needed. A change that involves additional financial and human resources, to be sure, but one that also must improve governance, transparency, accountability, and public participation.

As an experienced public health environmental science “expert” practitioner, as a life-long Philadelphia resident and product of the Philadelphia public schools, and as one with a professional, political, and personal commitment to protecting, strengthening, and improving our schools I am proposing the immediate implementation of the following elements:

- **Implement Major Increases in Transparency & Data Sharing** – those of us working with the SDP well know how difficult it can be to get information and data, especially in a timely way, from the District. The District needs to immediately begin a process, in collaboration with its stakeholders, to make all data and information more available and usable.
- **Establish a Real Facilities Environmental Advisory Committee** – following the lead poisoning of Dean Pagan, a 1st grade student at Comly ES, from school-based lead paint exposures, the District agreed to establish a Lead Paint Facilities Advisory Committee including representatives of the PFT, SEIU-32 BJ, CASA, the Philadelphia Healthy Schools Coalition, and other public stakeholders.

That committee met regularly, functioned to review and help improve lead paint assessment processes, worked with the District to develop priorities and approaches for addressing lead paint hazards, and created educational materials and public outreach and communication efforts.

The Lead Paint Committee was a success story and District leaders and managers promised to expand the Committee’s functions and activities to include oversight and

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participation related to facility conditions and environmental hazards more broadly, not just those related to lead paint.

Unfortunately, and without warning or discussion, the District decided to create their own Environmental Advisory Committee, using a very different structure that does not allow for, or permit, real oversight, participatory planning, priority setting, or solution development.

The District should live up to its promises and representations and immediately agree to work in collaboration with the Facilities Environmental Advisory Committee as previously agreed.

- **Establish “the ABCs” for Buildings:** We must set “Adequate Building Conditions”—the minimally acceptable environmental health standards that should be met by all of our schools buildings.

- **Address the most critical environmental health threats in our schools** with an action plan to remediate them in the fastest way possible.

- **Develop a “Master Plan” for our schools:** Most large school districts across the country have a Facilities Master Plan to prioritize and ensure schools are healthy and safe. The Philadelphia School District, however, does not. We need to change this.

At the heart of all of these measures is the need to change the District’s long-standing approach of promising transparency, input, and collaboration but failing to follow through on its promises as a way to ensure that stakeholders have a real voice in all of the above and that for each of the listed elements coordinated and cooperative action is taken.

Thank you.

Attachments

APPENDIX

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SELECTED PHOTOS (2017 – 2021)



Photo 1-- ES Classroom — Antiquated classroom unit ventilator, damaged/flaking lead paint, and obvious signs - and damage associated with - moisture and water intrusion.



Photo 2 — ES Classroom — Extreme water damage resulting in severe deterioration of lead paint - flaking with dust and debris on materials



Photo 3 – Occupied “Cafetorium” (gym and lunchroom) — Kids sitting and eating underneath severely damaged lead painted ceiling



Photo 4 – ES Closet — Food and books stored where lead paint is flaking with dust and debris on materials

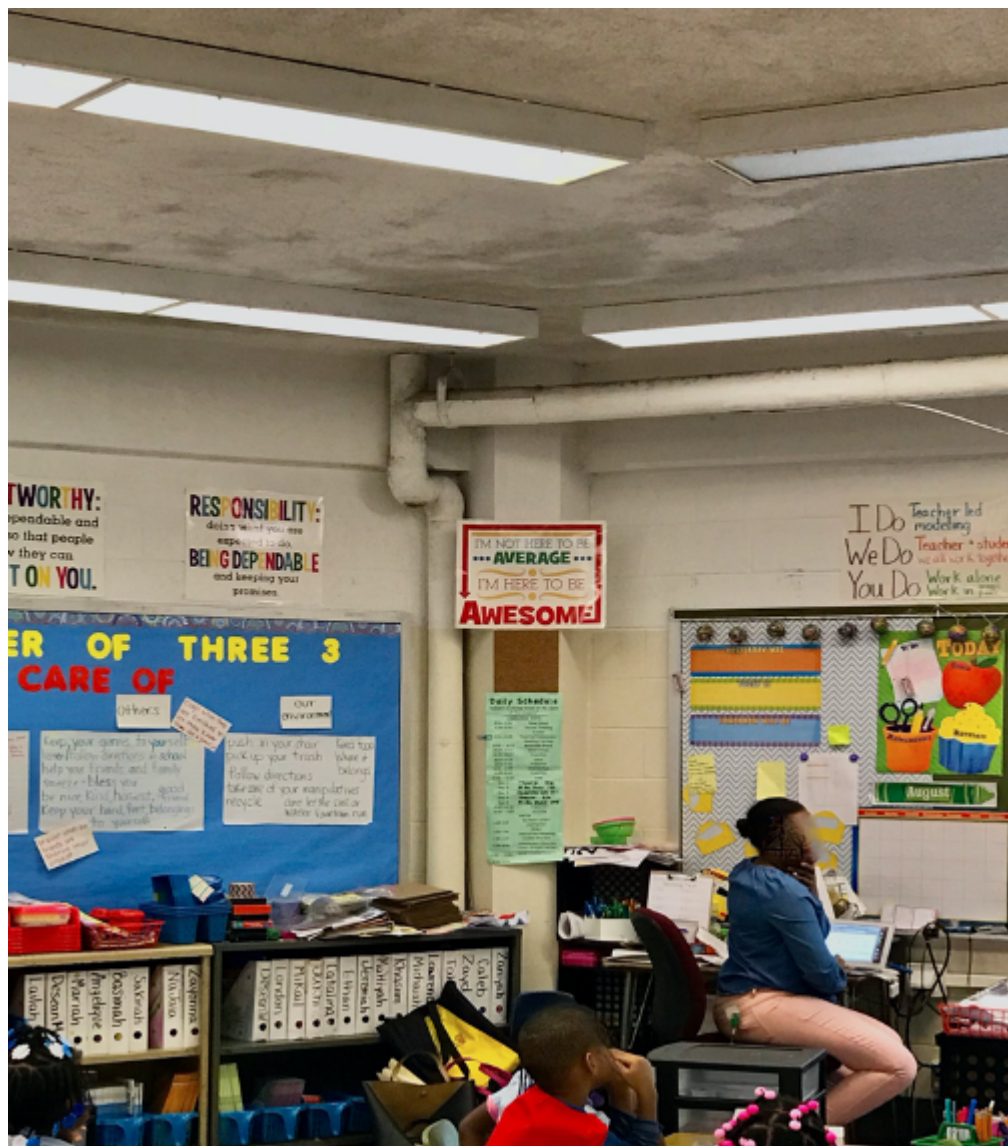


Photo 5 – Mold Growth on Ceiling and Wall of Occupied ES Classroom
(close up of above) — According to Classroom Teacher This Condition Had
Been Present for Several Months — Associated with HVAC System
Problems



Photo 6 – Close up (of photo above) of Mold growth on ceiling



Photo 7 – Mold Growth on Wall of Occupied ES Classroom — According to Classroom Teacher This Condition Had Been Present for Several Months — Associated with HVAC System Problems



Photo 8 - **ES Bathroom** – Mold growing on ceiling and ductwork



Photo 9 – ES Classroom — Repeat flooding from malfunctioning classroom unit ventilator resulting in extensive damage and mold growth to newly installed flooring — the original flooring was replaced for the same reason just a few weeks earlier. An example of what happens if the “root causes” are not addressed and also issues related to inadequate governance, oversight, and management



Photo 11 - ES Library – Newly renovated (needed to be closed down because of a major leak and mold situation)



Photo 12 - ES Library – Newly renovated (needed to be closed down because of a major leak and mold situation).



Photo 13- ES Library – Mold growth and damage to cabinets from ongoing and unrepaired steam leaks



Photo 14 - ES Library – Mold growth on ceiling associated with ongoing and uncontrolled steam leak



Photo 15 – HS —Room 211 [High School English Classroom] – 1st year English teacher described the above conditions as existing for several months [since the beginning of the school year]. The floor tile is an asbestos-containing material



Photo 16 – ES – Classroom Unit Ventilator - Typical *inside* condition of the CUVs [dirty, rusted, leaking, & deteriorated with mold & bacterial slime]



Photo 16 – Boys Bathroom (ES) — Filthy conditions - leaking on floor and ceiling - deteriorated/damaged and missing insulation on piping presenting a burn hazard from very hot heating pipes



Photo 18 – Bathroom — Accessible, damaged asbestos insulation between urinal and sink — this condition is present in multiple locations



Photo 19 – Bathroom (close-up of above) — Showing damage to asbestos insulation