



**AFT Pennsylvania**  
*A Union of Professionals*

**AFT Pennsylvania**  
**President Arthur Steinberg**

*Testimony to the  
PA House Democratic Policy Committee  
Hearing on Toxic Schools*

*Thursday, April 7, 2021 | Virtual*

Thank you, Chairman Bizzarro, Vice Chairperson Fiedler, and distinguished members of this committee for allowing me to testify today.

I am Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. I am proud to appear today on behalf of our 36,000 members and 61 locals to discuss one of the gravest topics in our Commonwealth, the safety of our schools.

In addition to my role in our statewide union, I am Chief Trustee of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Health and Welfare Fund, where I work closely with my two fellow panelists. The work that we, especially Jerry Roseman, have done out of necessity is why we have the quality of the data from Philadelphia Schools presented today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed much-needed light on the safety of students, educators, and staff in our school buildings, but this discussion long pre-dates last March.

Due in large part to the efforts of our union and members of the Fund Our Facilities Coalition, of which Rep Fiedler and Senator Hughes are founding members, it would be easy for many to assume that toxic schools are just a Philadelphia problem. I am here to tell you in no uncertain terms that this could not be further from the truth.

In January 2020, an elementary school gym in Scranton was closed after damaged asbestos was discovered, and the sink in the nurse's office of another elementary school was turned off due to lead contamination.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, Healthy Schools Pennsylvania released a report concerning radon, water and lead testing, indoor air quality, artificial playing surfaces, cleaning products, construction and renovation projects, and asthma rates, among others from public school districts in Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Washington, and Westmoreland counties. It found that 34% of the districts tested for mold in at least one of their school buildings, and asthma rates in 22 school districts exceed the state average.<sup>2</sup>

For those of your colleagues who claim to be fiscally responsible, there are long-term economic savings to be had from the abatement of toxins from schools. A 2009 study of the social and economic benefits of lead hazard control suggests that each dollar invested in lead paint hazard control results in a return of \$17-\$221.<sup>3</sup> And that's just lead.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wnep.com/article/news/local/lackawanna-county/asbestos-unsafe-lead-levels-found-in-scranton-schools/523-55352902-2a7c-4bdc-aa89-e2e6c6aaffe1>

<sup>2</sup> Buford, M., Holmes, C., Mariko, H., Mehling, M. Naccarati-Chapkis, M. (2018). *The State of Environmental Health in Southwestern Pennsylvania Schools*. Healthy Schools PA: Pittsburgh, PA. [\[Download Here\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> Gould, E. (2009). Childhood lead poisoning: conservative estimates of the social and economic benefits of lead hazard control. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 117(7), 1162-1167. [\[Download Here\]](#)

The Pennsylvania Department of Education published the results of a School Facilities survey in 2014 in which of the nearly twelve hundred school buildings represented, over seventy eight percent of them were built before 1980.<sup>4</sup> It is assumed that any building constructed prior to 1980 used asbestos-containing materials, and those constructed prior to 1978 used lead-containing materials. And the older the building, the more likely there has been damage or decay that have provided vectors for contact with people.

Air pollution from energy production, like oil and gas extraction, coal mining, and oil refining cause significant economic damages to large swathes of communities across old industrial states like Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.<sup>5</sup>

And that is to say nothing of the air quality in individual school buildings.

The most glaring issue our team found while preparing for today's testimony is the sheer lack of information and data about toxins in schools across the Commonwealth. While we have done an excellent job in Philadelphia, where PFT is one of two teachers' unions in the nation that employes an environmental scientist, the vast majority of our 500 districts do not collect and/or publicize their issues with toxins in schools.

We hope to work with the members of this committee to build a reporting regime for all Pennsylvania schools, which a robust statewide dashboard and data collection program.

At the end of the day, students, their parents, our educators, and the staff who enter our schools each day have a right to be safe from toxins like lead and asbestos. The first step toward ensuring their safety is building an understanding of the state of each school building in our Commonwealth.

Thank you again for allowing us to offer our thoughts and for holding a hearing on such an important issue. I'll be happy to take any questions you might have.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://aiapa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/School-Facilities-Survey-2014.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Jaramillo, P., & Muller, N. (2016). Air pollution emissions and damages from energy production in the US: 2002–2011. *Energy Policy*, 90, 202-211. [\[Download Here\]](#)