



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Jerry T. Jordan, President

Testimony re: School Facilities Crisis

Presented before Joint Committees of Finance and Children & Youth

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Good afternoon, I am Jerry Jordan, President of the more than 13,000 member Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Thank you Councilmembers Gym and Green for hosting this important joint hearing and for your leadership in our collective fight for healthy schools. I appreciate the connection and collaboration between both the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Children and Youth. It is critical that moving forward, we enact a multi-faceted approach to the ongoing facilities crisis that we have, collectively, spoken out about for so long.

In addition to systemic disinvestment and severe underfunding, pervasive and significant failures in District oversight, governance and management of buildings has resulted in the erosion of public trust and confidence in District leadership and management. Our young people, the majority of whom are Black and brown and experiencing poverty, have had to endure conditions that would never, ever be tolerated in wealthier, whiter school districts.

There are several issues I would like to address today: an **overview** of the problem; concerns with **transparency and process**; and the need for **investment**. These three issues are precisely why the PFT founded and continues to lead the Fund Our Facilities Coalition: to identify the concerns and outline real, workable solutions to this ongoing emergency. We have secured millions of additional dollars in local and state funding as a result of our collective efforts. Further, we have secured some adjustments in the process. But we're nowhere where we need to be yet.

An Overview

In our May "Scope and Solutions" report, we examine, through photos, data, and analysis, the various unconscionable conditions that are permitted to exist in our schools each day.

Conditions outlined in the report include the following:

- Overall Conditions
- Lead in Water
- Lead in Paint

- Asbestos
- Ventilation
- Roofing Issues

The report specifies examples of these concerns and specific deficiencies in addressing them. The report also delves into significant process based concerns regarding the District's handling of these toxic conditions.

I encourage you to look through the report if you have not yet because it provides a comprehensive look at exactly what we are facing, and what must take place to move us forward towards equity.

Transparency and Process Concerns

It remains deeply disturbing that, despite ongoing efforts to engage in a collaborative effort to address the facilities crisis, the District continues down a path of obfuscation, mismanagement, and half-truths.

I have said many times that the District did not create the facilities crisis. But their responses, or lack thereof, have **perpetuated problems** that could, and should, have been fixed years ago. And community trust has been shattered.

In my testimony in favor of Councilmember Green's Oversight Bill (210685), I shared a series of letters outlining a host of process based concerns. Today, I am re-sharing those letters and also adding Dr. Hite's most recent response. **It is galling to me that, in response to more than forty elected, union, and community leaders, Dr. Hite and the District continue to double-down on their misguided and frankly unsafe approach to addressing the facilities crisis.**

There are a host of unresolved process based concerns that continue to call into question the entire management structure of the District's facilities department, and codify even further the need for the implementation of Councilmember Green's oversight bill.

These deficiencies are clearly outlined in the letters, and include, but are not limited to the following:

- The District's refusal to provide our Director of Environmental Science with regular access to buildings as he has had for nearly forty years.
- And the District's refusal to implement protocols that have either been in practice for years or protocols that have been agreed upon, or protocols that we have outlined that are best practices.

This negligence has led to very real consequences in our school buildings. In the letters, we highlight absolute crisis situations that languished for far too long and are emblematic of issues that we are seeing District-wide. To say the response the Coalition received is inadequate is an understatement.

Funding

Let me make something clear: we believe that, given the influx of federal funding, we are at a critical inflection point in our facilities fight. And that means getting us to the point where our schools are no longer poisoning students and staff. **Let me repeat: we have the funding now to get us to this very, very baseline point.**

But let me also be clear: to get us to the point that our children deserve, and in fact to which they are constitutionally entitled, we need a massive influx of federal dollars. The Build Back Better bill sets the stage for this influx, but does not provide sufficient funding. The PFT remains steadfastly committed to fighting for federal funding, and we believe that a **Green New Deal for Public Schools is an absolutely essential next step.**

In the Philadelphia congressional delegation, we commend Congressman Brendan Boyle for his leadership on this initiative, and we are all in to secure its passage.

Overarching Themes

These three overarching points are important and can help us identify solutions, but let me close by reminding you what this is all about: human beings.

Human beings-- young people and their educators and school staff--who are, day in and day out, being subject to devastating conditions that are, in fact, life threatening. We are talking about students sitting in classrooms with chunks of the ceiling falling down. We are talking about staff walking into classrooms with their entire room full of steam and condensation. We are talking about entire classrooms enduring either bitterly cold or blistering hot temperatures. And we're talking about mold. Lead. Asbestos. And yes, lead poisoning. Mesothelioma.

It's simply unconscionable, and each and every one of us should be absolutely disgusted that in the year 2021, this profound level of inequity, racism, and injustice is allowed to persist in even one school building.

There are solutions. Now, we need and demand the political will to make it so. I thank you for holding this hearing, and am happy to answer any questions you may have.