# TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF HOUSE 2042

AN ACT RELATIVE TO IMPROVING ASTHMA IN SCHOOLS

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE

JUNE 26, 2015

# My name is XXX and I am here as a concerned parent who is also representing the Parent’s Teachers Organization (PTO) for the City of XXX. I wish to express our support of H. 2042, “An Act Relative to Improving Asthma in Schools.”

H. 2042 would require public schools with an asthma prevalence of 20% or higher to develop an environmental health committee and an indoor air quality management plan in order to eliminate physical and cognitive barriers to children’s learning, growth and development. Additionally, the bill would require asthma-prevalent public schools to purchase cleaning products that meet environmental standards and are approved by the Environmental Protections Agency.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH, 2009), asthma affects more than 7 million Americans under the age of 18 and is considered the most prevalent chronic disease among children in the United States. Further evidence indicates that asthma rates in Massachusetts are among the highest in the nation. Although asthma development is partially linked to genetics, research also suggests a strong correlation between worsening symptoms of asthma and environmental exposures, especially after initial diagnosis.

The Health Resources in Action (HRIA, 2014) indicates that pest problems, poor ventilation, mold, moisture, and chemical exposures are among the leading air quality problems that can trigger asthma symptoms. Massachusetts contains some of the oldest schools in the US, with 47% of its educational buildings being built before 1960 (MAAP, 2015). Thus, it makes sense that there is a greater incidence of pediatric asthma occurring as a result of these environmental hazards. Data shows that an unhealthy school environment can cause several problems related to asthma, including possible asthma emergencies, increased absenteeism, and decreased student and teacher productivity (American Lung Association, 2015). The HRIA, for instance, indicated that between 2006 and 2010, 41.1% of MA students missed school at least once within a 12-month period because of asthma related symptoms.

Over the past decade, great strides have been made to address the incidence of chronic illnesses within the state of Massachusetts. One great accomplishment occurred in 2012 with the establishment of the Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund (PWTF). This grant provided more than $42 million to support prevention strategies that decrease risk factors of preventable diseases and improve the management of chronic illnesses, including pediatric asthma (HRIA, 2014). More specifically, the PWTF allowed for improvements in air quality initiatives in schools and early childcare settings.

Despite recent advances in asthma management, there is still a great need for improvement. Because the quality of the environment plays such a large role in the incidence and control of asthma symptoms, it is imperative that we work to improve air quality and reduce the burden of asthma within our schools.

House 2042 would implement necessary environmental quality improvement measures within Massachusetts’ schools, thus promoting productivity, growth and development for students. As previously stated, the legislation would require public schools with a high prevalence of asthma (20% or more) to develop an indoor air quality management plan. This plan is composed of various preventive measures to ensure adequate air quality, including routine maintenance activities, periodic building evaluations and inspections, and appropriate reparations to ventilation equipment. Additionally, all involved parties must receive proper instruction and education on carrying out the corrective steps for improving air quality.

The second aspect of the legislation relates to the development of an environmental health committee, comprised of the school’s superintendent, custodial director, pest management coordinator, school nurse, a teacher, and a parent. H. 2042 states that the committee shall be trained with expertise to assess current school building conditions and operations, sponsor activities to raise awareness about asthma and environmental triggers, and develop a quality management plan, as mentioned above, to ensure the health of students, teachers, faculty and staff. The legislation also permits the committee to secure financial assistance through grants or other revenue sources. This is where the Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund would be put to good use.

The members of the committee are essential to meeting the goals of this legislation. With proper training and education, the members will be able to identify problems and develop methods for air quality improvement. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) argues that a school nurse is fully qualified to “identify trends and abnormal illnesses that may be the result of environment toxin exposure” (McDowell, Bryner, & Chau, 2014). With a specific set of skills, the school nurse is an essential component to the committee. Medaglia, Knorr, Condon, & Charleston (2013) suggest that the school nurse can help to reduce asthma triggers by “limiting outdoor activities on days when the ambient air quality is poor” (p. 913).

Finally, the legislation would require public schools with a high incidence of asthma to use and purchase cleaning products that meet health standards and are approved by the Environmental Protections Agency. HRIA (2014) suggests states, “Cleaning products and procedures used for cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting childcare environments directly impact the air quality of these settings.” This legislation would ensure safer indoor air quality by providing access to environmentally preferable cleaning products and educating about the benefits to using these products.

Evidence has shown that environmental hazards are linked to the onset or progression of asthma symptoms. In recent years, the United States has increasingly shifted its focus to preventive care and management of chronic illnesses. Environmental health falls under the category of prevention and should be given adequate attention in legal matters. Therefore, I urge you to vote in favor of House 2042, and help eliminate the barriers to the learning and development of children.

Thank you to the members of the Public Health Committee for your time and consideration. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

# References

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