

Testimony of Diane L. Ethier

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Subcommittee of the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program

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Raised Bill No. 7096 – An Act Concerning Pesticide Applications at Schools and the Use
of Environmentally Sensitive Cleaning and Maintenance Products in Schools

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and other members of the Education
Committee:

My name is Diane Ethier and I represent the CT Foundation for Environmentally Safe Schools (ConnFESS), a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting policies, practices and resources that protect school occupants from environmental health hazards. By advocating for healthy indoor environments in CT schools, ConnFESS has been working to improve the health of students and staff in order to improve attendance, performance and productivity. The reduced use of pesticides and the use of environmentally sensitive cleaning/Green Clean products and practices are two critical steps to cleaning up indoor environments. Outdoor pesticides become indoor air quality (IAQ) problems when they are tracked indoors and get embedded in carpets and when they drift indoors and into ventilation systems during application.

CT school children and employees need to be guaranteed a safe school environment, free of preventable health hazards. Pesticides can exacerbate asthma and other existing health problems and cause new health issues to develop. Lawn chemicals used on school playing fields have been shown to impact development and lead to behavioral disorders. Toxic chemicals in school cleaning products can not only cause rashes, headaches and dizziness, but can also lead to long-term health problems such as cancer and lung disease.

Industrial strength cleaning products used in many schools pose a particular risk to children of all ages, especially those with sensitive airways and other health issues. However, these toxic cleaning products also present a significant threat to custodial staff who handle them directly. One custodian uses an average 194 pounds of chemicals a year, 25% of which are hazardous substances. NIOSH reports that 12% of work related asthma is the result of exposure to cleaning products. Every year 6% of custodians are injured by a chemical exposure and 20% of these injuries are serious burns to the eyes or skin.

The primary purpose of reducing the use of pesticides and toxic cleaning and maintenance products is to improve IAQ and protect the health and safety of all school occupants. Since July 2003, PA 03-220: An Act Concerning Indoor Air Quality in Schools has required boards of education to adopt and implement an indoor air quality program. In CT, exemplary IAQ programs in Ridgefield and Old Lyme have already begun the process of reducing pesticide use and replacing toxic cleaning products with “environmentally sensitive products” as part of their indoor air quality management plans.

To ensure effective implementation of "Green Clean" legislation, ConnFESS recommends that:

- school districts be required to use environmentally sensitive products that are rated green by an independent, third party such as Green Seal. Many manufacturers and retailers are using terms such as "environmentally safe", "green" or "non-toxic" to boost sales. Some of these claims are true; most are not. (See page 7 of Guide To Green Cleaning for more information.)
- product specifications developed by CT DPH and DEP should be open to public comment prior to adoption and these specifications should at least meet or exceed the specifications adopted by the States of New York and Massachusetts.
- full scale implementation should not begin until after the state has adopted specifications.
- CT DPH and DEP should establish reasonable deadlines by which time school officials must be in compliance. We suggest a transition of at least 50% of all cleaning products used in public and private schools to environmentally sensitive at the end of the first year of implementation and 100% by the end of the second year.
- a state training program for school staff on green cleaning products and practices should be developed. This is essential to ensure that custodians know how to successfully use these new materials and procedures. A Green Clean approach includes both the purchase of environmentally sensitive products as well as best cleaning practices such as using walk-off mats and trash cans at entrances to reduce dirt and litter. (See page 3 of Guide to Green Cleaning.)
- school officials be required to report on their progress in reducing the use of toxic cleaners and maintenance products both when they report to the state on actions taken to implement an IAQ program (Section One of PA 03-220) and when they conduct the 5 year inspections and evaluations for facilities that meet the criteria spelled out in Section Two of PA 03-220.

Governor M. Jodi Rell's April 16, 2006 press release on Executive Order #14 states "By using environmentally-safe cleaning products, we will take several steps forward: we can create and maintain sanitary conditions in state facilities, we can minimize the potential for harm to our state employees, and we can improve indoor air quality." It is time to afford the same protection to CT school occupants. Numerous studies show a school cannot offer its children a quality education if the building has poor IAQ. In a review of scientific literature on this topic, the United States Department of Education published a report in 2004 that stated there is strong evidence that student health, performance and attendance are adversely affected by indoor pollutants. A key factor in raising student achievement is the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. Another 2004 study concluded that the quality of a school facility is an important predictor of whether teachers will leave their current position and/or the teaching profession.

ConnFESS is very encouraged to see that Raised Bill No. 7096 addresses two of the most significant ways to improve IAQ in schools. We thank the members of the Education Committee for focusing in on these issues and for this opportunity to testify.