

**Testimony on Bill No. SB 376: An Act Concerning State Grant
Commitments for School Building Projects and Concerning Changes to
Statutes Concerning School Building Projects**

March 8, 2010

Members of the Education Committee:

Our names are Michael and Amanda Gebicki, and we are the parents of a child who became ill during her occupancy in King's Highway Elementary School ("King's Highway" or "KHS") in Westport, CT. In order to protect our daughter's health, her doctors all recommended that she no longer attend school in the King's Highway building - a building with a long history of ventilation and mold problems. We are following her doctors' recommendations and are sending her to a private school in Norwalk, CT. Her symptoms, which included chronic severe sinus infections and pneumonia, have disappeared since she left KHS and she no longer needs to take daily medication for her respiratory issues. We are fortunate that we can afford to send our daughter to private school - other families cannot.

King's Highway has a well-documented history of severe ventilation problems that date back almost a decade. A 2002 "Evaluation of Existing Ventilation Air System for Kings Highway School" found that multiple areas of the school, including common areas used by all students like the gymnasium and auditorium had "no controlled ventilation whatsoever." Carbon dioxide tests, used to determine whether classrooms have adequate ventilation, have regularly documented unacceptable carbon dioxide levels in excess of 1,000 parts per million (3 times more than what is found in the atmosphere) in several KHS classrooms.

Why does all of this matter?

First and foremost, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA"), "HVAC systems that are improperly operated or maintained can contribute to sick building syndrome (SBS)." Not coincidentally, along with its long history of inadequate ventilation, King's Highway also has a long and unfortunate history of teacher and student health complaints with symptoms ranging from bloody noses, eye irritation and persistent headaches to recurring sinus infections, asthma and pneumonia. Such complaints date back well into the 1980s. The asthma rate in our daughter's class was 41% (4 1/2 times the national average) and 52% of the students in her class were absent more than 10 days (an excessive absenteeism rate which is more than 10 times greater than that reported by the CDC for similar northeastern school districts).

Secondly, elevated levels of carbon dioxide caused by poor ventilation have been linked to health symptoms and impaired performance. When carbon dioxide levels reach 1,000 parts per million, as has long been the case at King's Highway, drowsiness, headaches and an inability to concentrate ensue. Studies have shown that high levels of carbon dioxide impair the ability to perform tasks involving concentration, calculation and

memory. Conversely, when ventilation problems were corrected in a 1996 European study involving 800 students in eight schools, test performance improved.

The Westport Public School District is one of the wealthiest school districts in the United States. Westport spends a staggering \$15,600 per student annually. However, it deferred funding essential ventilation improvements at King's Highway multiple times over the last 10 years. This year, after several children and teachers applied for school transfers for health-related reasons, pressure from the community forced the Board of Education to approve over \$2 million to address ventilation issues at the school. Relatively speaking – Westport was lucky – we had the money. Most school districts cannot afford multi-million dollar HVAC repairs or replacements - particularly in this financial climate – and as a result, such districts will continue to defer funding essential ventilation repairs and replacements indefinitely.

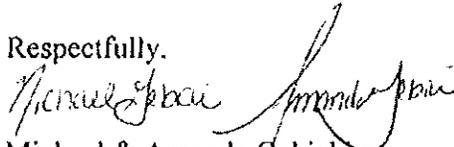
Essential repairs and replacements of HVAC systems are generally not “visible” to the public and expenditures for such important projects are often deferred in favor of more tangible items like textbooks and high-tech “smart boards.” Making costs for repairing or replacing heating ventilating and air conditioning systems in schools eligible for purposes of calculating eligible costs for school building project grants will encourage and enable school districts to make timely repairs and replacements of such systems. As set forth above, maintaining adequate ventilation is an important factor in occupant health and student performance.

While we believe that making costs of repairing or replacing heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems in schools eligible for purposes of calculating eligible costs for school building projects, we also believe that taxpayer dollars should not be disbursed without requiring the recipients of such funds to meet certain minimum standards, like the High Performance Building Standards for State Funded Buildings dealing with ventilation systems.

As representatives of parents of school-aged children in your districts, we strongly urge you all to add language to Bill No. SB 376 that deals with repairs and replacements to HVAC systems and to establish minimum standards that school districts must meet to be funded by the State of Connecticut.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our testimony.

Respectfully,



Michael & Amanda Gebicki

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