

Submitted Testimony



HEALTHY SCHOOLS NETWORK, INC.

MEMO

www.healthyschools.org

www.cleaningforhealthyschools.org

www.nationalhealthyschoolsday.org

January 28, 2016

To: New York State Senators and Assembly Members:

Re: Statement of Claire Barnett, Executive Director, Healthy Schools Network

Governor Andrew Cuomo's Proposed 2016-2017 Executive Budget

Advance children's health and education with deliberate interagency collaborations

Thank you for the opportunity to address several key aspects of Governor Cuomo's proposed budget for FY 16-17. As New York's leading advocate for healthy school environments and children's environmental health for the past two decades, we call your attention to several important initiatives and opportunities in the Governor's spending plan.

In particular, we commend the Governor for including a new \$2 million line in the Environmental Protection Fund for Environmental Health. Of this appropriation, \$1 million is to strengthen the existing network of Children's Environmental Health Centers (Centers of Excellence in Children's Environmental Health).

The second \$1M million provides a unique opportunity for New Yorkers to advance the health and learning for all the children across the state. In our 21 year history, we have seen first-hand and worked to address an institutional problem in New York when it comes to children. New York, like all other states, compels all children to attend school, regardless of environmental conditions that can damage their health and ability to learn. In fact, no New York agency takes any responsibility for children's environmental health at school. New York's labor and occupational health programs and services assist school personnel routinely, but are not designed or authorized to help kids and their families. New York funded these efforts to assist workers at well over \$30M last year alone; to date, our state has never supported any prevention, education, or intervention services for children who outnumber school personnel by about ten to one in our schools and child care centers. Clearly, little first graders face the same, if not greater risks, as the first grade teacher.

In effect, environment and health for children "stop at the school house door". Yet there is a robust published literature showing that avoidable and fixable environmental risks common to school buildings such as the use of hazardous chemicals, poor siting, indoor air pollution, growing molds, noise, pests, and poor lighting, and ventilation, adversely impact the attendance and achievement of all children, every year, every week, every day.

... for children ... health ... environment ... education ... communities ... since 1995 ...

Based on well-established science, we believe that state government agencies (Health, Environment, and NYSERDA) need to step up: these agencies hold more keys to major population-wide gains in PK-12 attendance and achievement than the education department does.

Happily, there are important new elements to build on in the executive agencies:

- the Health Department has a new staffed “Children and School Health” section within the Center for Environmental Health. It held its first statewide all-day conference in mid-October and, in response to constituency demands, is gearing up for another.
- DEC has worked well with DoH to advance healthy learning environments as a state interagency opportunity and we believe DEC can and will do more. And,
- NYSERDA is launching a new “Schools Initiative” focused on research.

And there is more in the pipeline: The Child Safe Products Act, when approved, is seeking state funds for implementation and we hope it, too, will lead to significant DEC and DoH collaborations.

The Opportunity: IICE

All these elements taken together provide a very ripe opportunity for Governor Cuomo and the Legislature to formulate and lead an **Interagency Initiative on Children and the Environment (IICE)**, incorporating environmental health, energy, climate, and the reduction of toxics in children’s products, all built with allocations of \$1M from EPF.

The following are some of the child health initiatives that could benefit from the Governor’s new initiative in the EPF. It is critical for both DEC and DoH to benefit from the \$1M, to secure much needed and very deliberate collaborations for the environmental health of our children.

1. At the **Department of Health**, a new Child and School Health Section has just been created. It currently has just 2 employees and is planning a second conference; DoH should also have the ability to issue 1-2 small RFP’s to commission specific reports and pilot studies on children’s health protections. Absent any DoH engagement, after Hurricane Sandy, over 170 schools in the New York area were in or near the storm surge. Many re-opened quickly, not because they had been deemed healthy, but because the Commissioner of Education said all they needed to re-open was heat, light, and communications. Forgotten were the structurally-damaged facilities and the inundated, still-moldy school environments and sick children left behind. DoH is also responsible for oversight of drinking water, radon, and adult occupational health, and has a Public Health Tracking program.
2. The **Department of Environmental Conservation** is critical to helping schools with chemical management (and avoiding the use of high hazard pesticides), with facility siting, and with waste and recycling. Schools proximate to or on known hazardous sites, and the reverse, hazardous facilities moving in next to schools, are completely avoidable high cost risks to children. Also, the Governor has made climate a priority. That is impacting state energy policy, but it should also be contextualized in relation to children who are more vulnerable to the effects of climate than adults (EPA, NIEHS, WHO).

Beyond DoH and DEC, as additional background, it is important to know that **NYSERDA** is developing a new schools-oriented program. NYSERDA’s mandate is energy efficiency, but there is no evidence to date that renewables or efficiencies in energy per se generate attendance or achievement benefits; in fact, to the contrary, there is strong evidence that indoor air usually suffers. Schools need

to be “clean, dry, quiet, have good Indoor Air, and control dusts and particulates” (NRC, 2007), especially resource poor schools serving the highest risk learners. And school staff need training to ensure they can properly operate and maintain advanced technology systems. Fortunately the PSC has just approved NYSERDA’s Clean Energy Fund plan which could allow it to be a leader in how to assist schools and to track impacts pre and post retrofits for lighting, ventilation, and acoustics.

At the **Education Department**, the Regents entertained environmental policies for cleaner, high performance schools in 1995, but The Regents never fully addressed the issues; and even with billions of state dollars in school construction going out the door annually, the Regents have yet to call for improving design and construction standards. A decade long partnership between SED and NYSERDA resulted in advanced school design standards adopted by New York City’s School Construction Authority (2007), but the same standards are still voluntary upstate. The New England states with advanced design standards are now reporting tens of millions saved by constructing better buildings. Further, the Education staff who provide guidance and permits for facility work have been reduced by 50% since 1995, despite being nationally recognized as experts.

Finally, **Healthy Schools Network, founded on January 11, 1995, and still based in Albany**, is a recognized national leader in this field, winning awards from US EPA and assisting parents and school personnel nationwide with environmental issues. We serve on the steering committee of the National Coordinating Committee on School Health & Safety (convened by HRSA), on the national Childhood Asthma Leadership Coalition, and are advisers to the Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS). In New York, we have served on multiple advisory groups convened by the Regents and SED, by NYS DoH, NYC DoHMH, and by NYSERDA.

We also have long championed **New York State’s very high quality green cleaning and green purchasing work**. In terms of climate, it is useful to encourage the use of non-petroleum-based, low-chemical-emissions products such as those already vetted and approved by the state green procurement council (co-chaired by DEC and OGS) and saving the state millions annually in purchasing costs. We strongly encourage the expansion of more high quality work in this area, particularly when it comes to products commonly used in our PK-12 schools and child-care facilities.



Claire Barnett, Executive Director
Healthy Schools Network

