

**Testimony of Ralph Scott
Parents for Nontoxic Alternatives
to
The Honorable Mary Cheh, Chair
Committee on Government Operations and the Environment
and
The Honorable Vincent Gray, Chair
Committee of the Whole**

Regarding Bill 18-564 (Healthy Schools Act of 2009)

March 26, 2010

Thank you Chairwoman Cheh and Chairman Gray for developing pioneering legislation on this crucial topic and for the opportunity to testify today.

I'm Ralph Scott with Parents for Nontoxic Alternatives, a nonprofit organization working to reduce the exposure of children to environmental health hazards.

Toxic chemicals and biological substances are ubiquitous in our environments, including in our schools, where they can harm the health of occupants, especially children. Lead, a potent neurotoxin found in school paint, dust, and drinking water, causes decreased IQ and learning and behavior problems. These outcomes, to say the least, are not why children go to school. Biological threats, such as insects, rodents and mold, cause or exacerbate asthma, the top reason for school absences. Liquid pesticides used to control pest infestations can also trigger asthma attacks and cause adverse neurological effects and certain cancers. Safer, healthier and more effective alternatives exist. Radon, an odorless, radioactive gas, is the number two cause of lung cancer in the US, after cigarette smoking and ahead of exposure to second-hand smoke. Radon kills some 20,000 people in the US annually according to the EPA. Asbestos, another widely used building material, causes lung cancers, too. Some cleaning products contain irritating, toxic and carcinogenic ingredients, although safer alternatives exist. So-called air fresheners, that do not freshen air, also contain ingredients that are unhealthy and can irritate lungs, cause permanent damage to the olfactory system. These devices are designed to deliver their active ingredients directly into our lungs. By masking odors such as drifting tobacco smoke, gas leaks, sewage, pest infestations, and mold, they can prevent the discovery of environmental health threats.

It's not easy to be aware of and control exposure to the many toxins in our environments, but one place where we can and should do so is in our schools where children spend a huge part of their lives before age 18. These are spaces we can regulate, staffed by government employees whose job it is to care for the development of their students.

The "Environment" section of the new draft of the DC Healthy Schools Act wisely adopts EPA's excellent Tools for Schools approach for environmental asthma triggers. We deeply thank you for including this strategy. However, the Tools for Schools

program contains provisions that address an even broader range of environmental health hazards, including lead, radon, mold and excessive moisture, pests, pesticides, hazardous cleaning products, air fresheners, ventilation problems, PCBs, storage of hazardous substances, overall building maintenance, safety issues, and more. We urge you to consider explicitly including these other hazards in this legislation.

Addressing environmental problems in schools should not be the job of DCPS or the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (OPEFM) alone. Every school is unique, each with its own set of maintenance problems and its own associated cluster of environmental health issues. Therefore, each school needs its own environmental assessment to identify the specific hazards that exist and its own plan to address problems and prevent future recurrences. This, in turn, necessitates every school having a dedicated cadre of healthy school leaders to carry out and oversee this process.

Tools for Schools recommends that each school designate one or more "Healthy School Coordinators" responsible for working with a "Healthy School Committee" of other school staff (including teachers, nurses, administrators, maintenance staff, food service personnel, and even parents) to assess current and potential environmental health problems in their school building by using the walk-through checklist found in the Tools for Schools Kit or a similar assessment tool. Based upon the assessment, the coordinator and other school staff would develop and implement a "Healthy Schools Management Plan" and update the plan regularly based on changing conditions and needs. Each school's regularly updated management plan would be available to school families and the public on paper and online. A requirement that each school create such a structure and process should be added to the Act. Beyond their role in ensuring thorough and appropriate maintenance and remediation of environmental health risks in each school, such healthy school committees are likely to be incubators of parent and staff involvement, collaboration and leadership development that could carry over into other areas of school improvement.

There also ought to be a central DCPS resource to ensure that each school actually has a properly functioning coordinator and committee and that can provide expert technical support and information to these committees. We urge that such a resource be required as part of the legislation. The District Department of the Environment has deep and broad expertise in indoor environmental health risks, and the Act would benefit greatly from a broader advisory role for DDOE to DCPS, OPEFM, and the local healthy school committees (beyond the energy and recycling roles the Act currently envisions).

Finally, school parents and the public should have a right to know about problems and remedial actions in a timely manner via easy access to the findings and actions being taken at every school. The Act now requires results of drinking water testing for lead to be maintained on a public web site, but all the results of any environmental assessments and all remedial measures taken should be made available to the public on DCPS web pages.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'm happy to answer any questions.