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HEALTHY SCHOOLS NETWORK, INC.

153 Regent Street, Ste. 1050
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
T 518-462-0632

www.HealthySchools.org
www.CleaningforHealthySchools.org
www.NationalHealthySchoolsDay.org

Testimony of the Healthy Schools Network Submitted to the Joint Legislative Hearing on the Environmental Portions of the Executive Proposed Budget for New York State Fiscal Year 2023-24

February 14, 2023

Thank you Chair Senator Liz Krueger, Chair Helene Weinstein, Chair Peter Harckham and Chair Deborah Glick, and members of the Senate Finance, Assembly Ways & Means, Senate Environmental and Assembly Environmental committees, and all committee members.

My name is Claire Barnett, and I am the founder and Executive Director of the New York Healthy Schools Network. I regret that I am unable to appear before you in person, but welcome and appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony in response to the Governor's proposed environmental funding in the 2023-24 Executive Budget.

As a Network with scores of state and national partners, we are prioritizing the twin crises of COVID and climate which hit vulnerable communities disproportionately. Through various programs, state agencies including NYSEERDA, the Department of Environmental Conservation and the State Education Department are developing programs to address these concerns. We particularly appreciate those aspects of Gov. Hochul's 2023-24 Executive Budget proposal that directly address the need to make schools in New York healthy places for students to learn. These investments are more important ever as we both prepare schools for the impacts caused by the climate crisis, and work together to recover from the devastating impact the Covid pandemic has had on the lives of school age children.

Education, as you know, is a social determinant of health, while closed schools undercut learning. COVID has left a scar on a generation of students as we work to recover. Making it even more difficult is the fact that most schools in NYS and nationally are neither climate ready nor prepared for the next epidemic.

New York should ensure that our public schools are designated, funded, and operated as Critical Infrastructure for children and communities, to ensure that to the greatest possible extent, schools can provide continuity of essential services to all children including those with disabilities, that children and families will not endure months of school closures ahead, and or that schools can reopen quickly and safely post disaster.

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We support the Governor's proposal to keep maintain the \$400 million funding level for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). Among the Fund's categories, we support the \$4 million appropriation for Children's Environmental Health Centers. We see the **need for this maturing network to host regular public meetings and to provide data** on its interactions with K-12 and child care facilities (ex., who was helped and how, issues addressed, schools that have declined assistance by complaint and by region, status of parent-help referral network, etc.), and interactions and engagement with the parallel occupational health clinic network hosted by the NYS DOH. We would like to see more information about the important work taking place at the various centers, as they have much to teach and can serve as models for additional child-center intervention and outreach.

We urge EPF, and other state funding, to address the following program concerns, including **adding staff and other resources to DEC** to address products in schools.

- **School chemical cleanouts** and the **need for DEC to have staff and funds** adequate to ridding public schools of highly toxic and hazardous chemical products in store rooms. This issue has both health and climate impacts. We have seen the impact of severe storms on some schools. Following Superstorm Sandy, for example, schools were reopened before they completely clean and safe for children. This includes the presence of toxic chemicals stored, often inappropriately, that were released as a result of flood waters and other hazards.
- The need for schools to rely on the state's highly successful **Green Procurement** program, to save money and to reduce the use of toxics products; DEC and OGS **should establish a web portal** for public schools' use.

We are looking forward to seeing new draft regulations on **lead in school drinking water**, pursuant to the 2021 bill you passed and was subsequently signed into law, so schools can begin the essential task of remediating to ppb lead.

- The need for the **NYS DOH school environmental health program to provide the same generous access to** education and information on school environments for parents and communities as it is providing behind closed doors in sessions for school leaders. Schools must be operated as if children matter and a priority put on demonstrating how many children DOH's decade old program has actually assisted and how many local schools have in fact implemented facility changes do to the DOH efforts.

In addition, there is the NY Grown Food for NY Kids proposal to increase state support for providing children with healthy New York grown food in school.

All these programs, if presented as a combined initiative with your support and leadership, would offer New York families and our children an exciting path to a healthier future in the years ahead.

In conclusion, we thank Governor Hochul and legislative leaders for your demonstrated commitment to the health and education of our state's children and for your leadership in successfully championing the landmark \$4.2 billion Clean Water Clean Air Green Jobs Bond Act which includes local school districts as eligible entities.

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Our organization enthusiastically supported passage of the bond act and worked with allies and state agency representatives to make sure that bond act resources could be used to address school and classroom environments. We particularly focused our outreach on the education community and were able to help build a broader coalition of support for this historic measure. In addition to supporting the state's exciting commitment to the development of an electric school bus fleet, we focused on including support for funding renewable energy and the increased resilience in classrooms and school facilities.

To help public schools use the Bond Act funds expeditiously and to stay open, we urge funding for new staff at State Education to help schools implement US EPA and NYSEERDA guidance on making school facilities more resilient to wetter and warmer weather and to pandemics that will plague every region in NYS. In addition, SED, with DOH, should reassess how schools currently address in-school infections and produce a new up to date, comprehensive Infection Prevention and Control policy for district & schools to adopt that will require actions to promote cleaner air, cleaner water, and cleaner facilities in all public and private schools.

Let's be clear: Climate Justice is Education Justice. In April 2022 we convened our second annual national summit to address these issues. The conference report was issued in August and it is my pleasure to share [COVID, Climate, Children, and Schools](#) with you now. A prime focus of the summit was schools in low-income communities and communities of color. Schools in these communities face disproportionate funding issues as well as elevated disasters risks. For them, disasters are often a fiscal and a mental health nightmare. Our summit reports focused on the injustice and inequity of unprepared schools and the devastating effects on children and youth.

We look forward to working with you to achieve a healthy future for New York's children and their schools in 2023.

Sincerely,

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Claire L. Barnett, MBA
Executive Director, Healthy Schools Network
cbarnett@healthyschools.org, (m) 202-543-7555

cc: Board of Directors

