



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

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Testimony Submission: Democratic Policy Committee

Topic: OSHA Protections for Public Sector Workers

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On behalf of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, I am pleased to offer written testimony in support of OSHA protections for public sector workers. Pennsylvania is one of twenty four states plus DC that does not permit Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) protections for public sector employees, and it is past time for that to change.

It is truly unconscionable that workers who give so much of themselves are not permitted to benefit from basic protections at their workplace to which their private sector counterparts are entitled. Consider this: private sector workers doing a job in a school building would be entitled to safeguards under the law that the educators and school staff in that same building would not be.

You are well aware of the impact the facilities crisis has had on Philadelphia's young people and educators. Decades of neglect that led SEIU worker Chris Trakimas to lose his life after a boiler explosion at FS Edmonds. Decades of neglect that led then first grader Dean Pagan to suffer lead poisoning after eating lead paint chips from his desk. Decades of neglect that led to a [devastating mesothelioma diagnosis for PFT member Lea DiRusso](#), who spent her career teaching in buildings with known, damaged asbestos. Decades of neglect that led Chelsea Mungo, then a fourth grader at Cassidy Elementary, to write to her State Senator and ask why the color of her skin impacted how her school is funded, and shared with him that she feels like she is in prison or a junkyard when she is in what is supposed to be a sacred place of learning.

As Lea DiRusso shared in this [searing and devastating Inquirer profile](#), "It's like holding a grenade in your hand, and you're pulling the pin out," DiRusso said. "Do people not understand that this is deadly? Let me tell you, it is."

And yet, Pennsylvania continues to neglect to address this crisis in a holistic manner by truly investing the needed funding and implementing the urgently needed oversight. Not only that, but basic protections for workers who are in some cases literally risking their lives at their job, are not provided. We work diligently as a union to secure proper

protections for our membership. But this is much larger than that. How can we, as a society, continue to operate in a manner that year after year fails to ensure that students and staff can learn and work in environments free of toxins.

Let me be clear that OSHA protections for workers are not, and cannot be a panacea. Ensuring that workers are protected does not go far enough. Our young people must be protected too. That is why in addition to OSHA protections, we need a holistic plan to address the ongoing facilities crisis. Young children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning, and as [Dean Pagan](#)'s story showed, its impact is lifelong. No child or adult should endure these disgraceful conditions.

The facilities crisis in our schools is a human rights crisis. And it's a crisis that would never, ever be tolerated in a wealthier, whiter school district. The fact that employees are not even entitled to basic protections under OSHA, and the fact that our young people too are without critical protections, is simply unconscionable.

I thank Chair Muth and Senator Tartaglione for their leadership on this issue, and I look forward to not only securing OSHA protections for public employees but to ensuring that a true remediation and renovation plan is in place for our buildings so that every child and educator can learn and work in safe, welcoming environments.