



Date: March 6, 2023  
To: House Committee on Education  
From: Stephanie Phillips Bridges, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Support for Climate Modifications for School Buildings, HB 2638

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Hudson and Wright, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Stephanie Phillips Bridges, and I am a Policy Analyst with the Urban League of Portland and I respectfully submit this testimony in support of House Bill 2638. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

When there are climate and environmental emergencies, Black communities are hit the hardest because of the neighborhoods we live in, and the risks associated with our neighborhoods. Nationally, for Black populations, this is especially true as we are "75% more likely to live in close proximity to oil and gas facilities, which emit toxic air pollutants; as a result, these communities often suffer from higher rates of cancer and asthma. Researchers have found that Black children are twice as likely to develop asthma as their peers."<sup>1</sup> We also "face greater vulnerability to wildfires compared to predominately White communities (PLOS ONE). Native Americans, for instance, are 6 times more likely to live in areas most prone to wildfires."<sup>2</sup> And lastly, "Black households with incomes between \$50,000 and \$60,000 experience overall pollution burdens equal to those felt by White households earning \$10,000 or less."<sup>3</sup>

Two years ago, we saw how climate and environmental emergencies impacted Oregonians and the Black community. In 2021, Oregonians experienced several emergencies simultaneously, including the COVID pandemic, wildfires, poor air quality, and extremely hot and cold temperatures. The state was not equipped structurally to accommodate such extremes. There was a lack of resources to support our most vulnerable Oregonians during each emergency, leaving many struggling to adapt or even die as each emergency arose. USA Today reported in an article in August 2022, "about 800 people died in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia during that heat wave, which hit in late June and early July 2021."<sup>4</sup> In Oregon, temperatures in every county nearly reached or surpassed 100 degrees, with some counties reaching 117 degrees. Most buildings in Oregon lack cooling systems as this was not a construction requirement since the highest temperatures fluctuated between 80-99 degrees for decades. Over the last decade, Oregon's weather has become unpredictable, and the highest temperatures have remained in the high 90s-100+s degrees. "Once-in-a-lifetime systems like the extreme heat in 2021 will likely occur more frequently"<sup>5</sup> as stated in an OPB article in December 2021. The heatwave severely impacted people in low-income areas which are predominantly home to people of color. The heatwave and lack of resources for relief led to 3 deaths of African Americans all in the Portland Metropolitan area, Jerome Ollison, James McKinley Dutton, and Ashlyn Maddox. Their deaths and the many others lost in the 2021 heatwave were both tragic and preventable.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, America's Dirty Divide: How Environmental Racism Leaves the Vulnerable Behind, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Medium, Environmental Racism by the Numbers, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> National Geographic, The Origins of Environmental Justice and Why it's Finally Getting the Attention it Deserves, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> USA Today, Pacific Northwest Heat Wave Suspected as Cause of 14 Deaths in Oregon - Officials Say, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> OPB, 2021 Delivered 'Warning Signs of Things to Come' for Pacific Northwest Summers, 2021.



As we face these emergencies, we are finding more steps and solutions are needed to adequately prepare our homes and buildings, this includes school buildings. School buildings not only provide space to educate our youth throughout the year, but provide emergency shelter for air, heating, and cooling needs as emergencies arise. In an article about Roseburg schools by KEZI 9 last fall, it was reported that “85% of classrooms in the district do not have central air conditioning”<sup>6</sup>, and the superintendent of the Roseburg Public School District, Jared Cordon, stated “it is accurate that our school facilities are deficient in many ways, including our heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems.”<sup>7</sup> KOIN 6 reported in late summer last year that “half of the school buildings in Portland are nearly 100 years old and there is no built-in air conditioning in most of the Portland school buildings.”<sup>8</sup> We know more schools across the state need building upgrades for air conditioning, heating, and ventilation systems as well. Without these upgrades, schools are dangerous for students and staff.

We can address these safety concerns with HB 2638. HB 2638 will direct district school boards to ensure that buildings regularly used by students have proper heating, air conditioning, and ventilation systems to provide temperatures within an acceptable range for learning and safety. Not only will this protect our youth attending school from dangerous temperatures and air quality conditions but make these spaces a valuable resource when the community needs shelter during emergencies. If we do nothing, our schools will be dangerous for our students and staff during climate and environmental emergencies.

Please pass HB 2638, Oregon's youth and communities are counting on you to provide relief and support during the emergency climate and environmental events that are to come.

Respectfully,

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<sup>6</sup> KEZI 9, 85% of Roseburg Public School District Classrooms Do Not Have Central Air Conditioning - Officials Say, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> KEZI 9, 85% of Roseburg Public School District Classrooms Do Not Have Central Air Conditioning - Officials Say, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> KOIN 6, 100-year-old PPS Buildings No Match for 100-degree Heat, 2022.