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Superintendent Thomas Anderson

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New Bedford Public Schools “ahead of the curve” adding HEPA air scrubbers to classrooms

Schools receive HEPA air filtration units as Phase III of reopening begins

New Bedford Public Schools are being equipped with state-of-the-art HEPA air scrubbers as schools began Phase 3 of students’ gradual return to classroom instruction this week.

Stressing strict adherence to health and safety protocols, Superintendent Thomas Anderson stated “We are effectively implementing our reopening plan with improved ventilation in classrooms with over 600 portable air exchange units, improved window functioning, frequent disinfecting, and clear rules on wearing masks for all students and staff, and appropriate distancing.”

The purchase of the HEPA air scrubbers comes in response to a comprehensive study of airflow over the last 3 months. New Bedford Public Schools engaged with a pre-qualified state contract vendor to assess airflow within its school buildings. The objective of the effort was to establish a complete understanding of each school building's ability to meet and maintain appropriate air exchange and airflow at a healthy level for school reopening.

A district stakeholder group studied the reports. The group included a school committee member, school principals, operations staff and the heads of staff collective bargaining units. Andrew O’Leary, Assistant Superintendent of Finance & Operations, noted, “This comprehensive process puts our district well ahead of the curve in terms of delineating areas needing improvement and addressing them with state of the art equipment,”

Adding that the air scrubbers represent a significant investment to ensure air quality, Mr. O’Leary, said the estimated final cost of the investment is over \$450,000, which is supported by per pupil COVID Relief funding awarded in July.

“Engineers performed a site analysis of 24 sites to review the existing HVAC and ventilation systems. Our month-long review of our ventilation needs has led us to a consensus on widespread deployment of HEPA air purification devices,” Mr. O’ Leary said.

The new air scrubbers come at the start of Phase III of the district reopening plan, October 5. In his weekly video update, Superintendent Anderson stated, “This week we added Cohort B students, 1,070 in B1 and 1080 in B2, in addition to the current 400 students in Cohort A. These totals equal 19% of our total population of over 13,000 students. Our precautions are in place, including strict enforcement of 6-foot physical distancing and mask wearing for everyone.”

The air scrubber units have a four-stage filter system and an airflow rate of 600 cubic feet per minute, according to the manufacturer’s product data.

Speaking on the distribution plan, Mr. O’Leary said, “The first round of 300 air scrubbers were deployed to the older school buildings last week with a second round of an additional 330 units delivered this week for the secondary schools and newer elementary schools, which all have advanced building management systems.”

The work of the district stakeholder group on airflow also drew from recommendations from the Healthy Buildings initiative of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s guidance on facilities reopening. The review process led to recommended steps for each building type, including initial steps such as opening windows and use of box fans, to air "flush outs" mornings and evenings, to modification of mechanical system settings to maximize outdoor air.

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Photo Caption:

HEAP OF HEPA – Paul Corbett, NBPS Manager of Custodial Services, hands Michael Medeiros, NBPS Manager of Maintenance Services a HEPA air scrubber unit for inspection. 630 units are being deployed as part of New Bedford Public Schools COVID response regimen. (NBPS photo)