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STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, TRANSPORTATION, AND TOURISM
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

ON
GAO'S REVIEW OF FEDERAL EFFORTS TO
REDUCE ASBESTOS HAZARDS IN SCHOOLS

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our work on Federal efforts to reduce asbestos hazards in schools. Our comments will be based primarily on information presented in our August 31, 1982, report¹ on the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) actions to address the potential health risk associated with asbestos-containing materials that were sprayed on walls and ceilings to fireproof, insulate, soundproof, and decorate schools built or renovated between 1946 and 1972. Before getting into the results of our review, let me provide a brief background of federal actions to deal with asbestos in schools.

In March 1979, EPA launched a technical assistance program to encourage voluntary identification and correction of asbestos hazards in schools. Shortly thereafter the Congress enacted the Asbestos School Hazard Detection and Control Act of 1980. The

¹Asbestos in Schools: A Dilemma (GAO/CED-82-114, August 31, 1982).

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Department of Education was charged with administering this act, which was to establish a program for controlling asbestos in schools that would provide financial assistance to school districts to detect and abate asbestos hazards. In May 1982, EPA issued a rule, under the Toxic Substances Control Act, requiring that schools be inspected for asbestos and that employees and parent-teacher groups be notified of asbestos presence.

In December 1981, at your request and at the request of the Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee's Subcommittee on Labor Standards, we initiated a review to assess the progress of federal efforts to reduce asbestos hazards in schools. The objective of our review was to identify the effect that these federal efforts were having on getting states to inspect schools for the presence of asbestos-containing materials and correct asbestos problems in the schools. We reviewed the actions of school districts in 10 states and the District of Columbia.

The most important conclusion of our report concerned the serious dilemma EPA created for school officials by (1) requiring all schools to be inspected for asbestos and parents and employees to be notified if asbestos is present and (2) not specifying when asbestos is hazardous enough to warrant abatement.

In essence, when schools are inspected as required and found to contain asbestos, school officials must decide what to do about the asbestos. Our review found that the lack of definitive federal criteria has resulted in states and localities using

different criteria in arriving at their decisions. For example, the Houston Independent School District, which found asbestos in 115 of its 232 schools, decided to take no abatement action until EPA determines under what circumstances asbestos is considered hazardous. In contrast, the State of Florida required that public schools remove all friable (readily crumbled) asbestos materials, except where impractical.

Other school districts took a more flexible approach to abatement. For example, the State of Massachusetts and the San Diego Unified School District developed separate numerical scoring systems for measuring potential asbestos hazards and assessing which abatement method was appropriate for each school. EPA has expressed doubts about the systems' reliability because many of the factors used in these systems are the same ones EPA found unreliable in its tests.

Still other school districts responded to public pressure. For example, both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia school districts abated asbestos conditions they did not consider hazardous because of media and parental pressure.

Our report concluded that until EPA develops more specific criteria about when asbestos poses a serious problem requiring abatement actions, school officials may continue to overreact and spend money needlessly or, more importantly, underreact and expose school occupants to hazardous asbestos conditions.

We did not make any recommendations in our report because EPA was doing research on the asbestos issue and expected to validate what it believed to be a promising quantitative measure for

assessing asbestos exposure and to issue guidance based on this measure.

This measure has since undergone validation tests, and it has been shown to be an unreliable indicator of asbestos exposure. In March 1983, EPA published a document entitled, "Guidance for Controlling Friable Asbestos-Containing Materials in Buildings," that provides information on asbestos used in buildings and describes in qualitative terms the types of conditions under which asbestos may pose a health risk and the kinds of actions, such as enclosure, encapsulation or removal, that might be considered for reducing or eliminating asbestos exposure. The guidance does not contain any quantitative measurement criteria that defines when the presence of asbestos-containing materials in a school building presents an unreasonable risk to health.

EPA's current program does not include any requirement that abatement actions be taken. Thus, the decision about whether or not the presence of asbestos-containing materials in an individual school presents a significant risk requiring abatement action will continue to be a highly subjective decision for local school districts.

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Mr. Chairman, this completes my prepared statement. We shall be glad to answer your questions.