Across our state, thousands of children attend schools that sit just a few hundred feet from major roadways. In fact, despite EPA guidelines, New York has more students who attend schools near major roadways than any other state in the nation. Every day, these mostly Black and Brown kids breathe in the toxins emitted by cars, SUVs, and diesel trucks, leading to respiratory illness, increased absenteeism, and academic challenges.

For years, the Environmental Protection Agency has known that children who attend school within 500 feet of a major road without proper mitigation are exposed to intense air pollution. These students suffer from more breathing-related medical issues like asthma and research has shown they may perform worse on standardized tests.

Yet, New York has more students who attend schools near major roadways than any other state in the nation. About one-third of New York’s students go to school near highways. New York City operates over 250 schools within 500 feet of a major highway and more than half of the City’s Black and Brown youth live within 500 feet of a major roadway. While some states have outlawed the construction of schools near major roads, New York has not. Nor do we have any laws on the books requiring mitigation of air pollution through air filters or other strategies.

This is part of a pervasive system of environmental racism throughout New York, where communities of color are disproportionately exposed to toxic air, unsafe water, and other adverse environmental conditions. Achieving racial justice in our state starts with removing this burden from Black, Brown, and low-income neighborhoods.

The SIGH Act (S.922/A.5735) will empower New York to protect students from air pollution by limiting new construction of schools within 500 feet of major roadways and limiting the construction of roads near schools. It would also require basic mitigation where these conditions already exist.

The bill requires the New York State Department of Transportation to lessen the impact of roadway air pollution by providing insulation, adequate air filters, and air filtration systems in all schools that are already within 500 feet of a major roadway.

The SIGH Act offers the opportunity to improve the health, educational outcomes, and economic prospects of thousands of New York’s students who have endured the impacts of environmental racism for years.