

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Investing Equitably in School Facilities

By Megan Blanco

Poor indoor environmental quality impairs student health and decreases academic performance, yet many school facilities are in disrepair, creating subpar learning conditions. In a 2020 national survey, half of U.S. school districts reported needing to update or replace at least two building systems in many schools.¹ And when localities alone bear the cost of repairs to their school facilities, poorer districts are least likely to be able to afford them.

Among the most common unmet repair needs are for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, plumbing, interior lighting, roofing, and security. Proper ventilation is of particular concern in managing COVID-19, an airborne virus, yet 30 percent of schools have unmet HVAC repair or replacement needs.²

“Improving the school building may well be the most overlooked means of improving student health, safety, and academic performance,” assert Erika Eitland and Joseph Allen of Harvard University’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health.³ Safe drinking water, adequate lighting, controlled temperatures, ventilation, and removal of toxic substances are basic prerequisites for a healthy physical space. Their absence in schools puts both students and staff at risk.

Schools rely on local property taxes to fix and build schools, but poorer, smaller communities typically lack a sufficiently robust tax base and central office staff to address facility needs. As a result, these communities face a greater repair backlog. Thus, equity should be a guiding principle in state decisions to invest in facilities.⁴ Additionally, businesses

are drawn to establish and expand operations in areas with a high-functioning, well-funded school system because prospective employees often seek employment in communities that best serve their children. When states forgo responsibility, they perpetuate an important source of inequality in educational opportunity and undercut a means toward community vitality and growth.

Most states do not conduct statewide assessments to determine where facility needs are the greatest, yet such assessments are critical in making the most of available resources, including the federal funds newly available for improving school infrastructure.

EMBEDDING EQUITY

In 2017, the **Rhode Island** Department of Education released statewide school facilities data that revealed more than \$2.2 billion worth of deficiencies across the state’s 306 schools. Spurred by the findings, the governor appointed a task force of leaders from the state board of education, office of the general treasurer, state legislature, and experts in construction, pediatrics, education, and business. Informed by stakeholder input and multiple listening sessions, the task force proposed a \$2 billion plan for addressing the deficiencies.⁵

In October 2021, Rhode Island announced a Facility Equity Initiative, a pilot program to fund repairs in five high-needs districts, including hazardous materials abatement. “Providing our students with a safe, modern place to learn is one of our core responsibilities as a state,” said Barbara Cottam, chair of the state board. The state will fully reimburse the project expenses of districts in which minority-owned businesses receive 15 percent or more of the total project cost, thereby covering the local match. All lighting projects will be fully funded by the Office of

Energy Resources. Applications were due November 2021, and \$20 million in awards were announced in January. According to the department of education, these five districts enroll half the state’s students receiving free and reduced-price lunches, 70 percent of its multilingual learners, and 40 percent of all students with disabilities.

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Knowing the condition of school facilities statewide and identifying those that pose the greatest risk to student health is necessary to directing state resources well. However, few states conduct such examinations regularly. Only 11 states have assessed facilities in the last 10 years, 15 reported requiring school districts to conduct assessments, and 21 reported that they neither conduct statewide assessments nor require school districts to do so.⁶

State law requires the **Illinois State Board of Education**, in partnership with the Capital Development Board, to report biennially to the General Assembly on the capital needs of all school districts.⁷ The 2020 assessment found that \$4.6 billion was needed for general repairs and renovations, \$3.4 billion of which related to “health/life safety” needs. HVAC needs ranked highest. Limited funding meant Illinois could not cover all requests for school facility investment. Instead, the state prioritizes projects based on emergency or time-sensitive needs: responding to natural disasters, severe and continuing health safety hazards, and accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

In 2019, the General Assembly allocated \$3.5 billion of a \$45 billion state infrastructure spending plan toward school construction. The same year, the General Assembly directed the state board, along with the Capital Development Board, to create a School Construction Task Force to review the existing School Construction Grant Program and recommend improvements. The task force recommended embedding equity principles in the state’s new Evidence Based Funding (EBF) Formula into the grant program so that communities with great-

er financial need receive a higher state match for overall project costs. “EBF revolutionized the way state dollars flow to local districts, keeping equity at the forefront of funding progress and setting us on a course to correct for historic injustices that have created massive inequities between zip codes,” wrote state superintendent Carmen Ayala in a letter to state leaders.⁸

LEVERAGING FEDERAL FUNDS

The last national assessment of school facility conditions in 2012 estimated that \$197 billion was needed to put schools in good overall condition.⁹ This amount has likely grown as buildings have aged and construction costs increased. While federal COVID recovery investments and interagency partnerships will not cover all school facility needs, states have greater federal support than before.

Through the American Rescue Plan’s (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, Congress provided schools with \$122 billion in one-time, supplemental funding to respond to student needs arising from COVID. In a recent survey, 38 percent of secondary school principals and 29 percent of students said it is critically important for federal funding to be used for school infrastructure.¹⁰

Analysis by Georgetown University’s FutureEd finds that districts have committed to spending nearly \$15 billion from ARP on facilities and operations, with \$5.7 billion earmarked for upgrading HVAC systems and \$2.8 billion for “repairs that prevent illness,” which includes lead abatement, mold and mildew removal, and replacement of leaking roofs.¹¹ Yet due to supply chain challenges, increased costs, and workforce shortages, districts are struggling to expend funds on identified projects by the September 2024 deadline.

In a May 2022 letter, the U.S. Department of Education indicated it would consider requests from states to extend the window of spending for up to 18 months for construction-related ARP expenses.¹² ARP also directed \$7 billion toward a Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund, which gives states’ executives great latitude in deciding which K-12 and higher education expenses to address.

The White House Lead Pipe and Paint Action

Plan, released in December 2021, established the Cabinet Level Partnership for Lead Remediation in Schools and Child Care Centers. Under the initiative, the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Health and Human Services will collaborate to reduce lead exposure in 400,000 schools and child care facilities.

In April 2022, the White House released its Action Plan for Building Better School Infrastructure, which called for increased support and guidance from the federal government to states for addressing school infrastructure needs. The plan directs that \$500 million from the Department of Energy go toward increasing energy efficiency in schools. The funding can be used to address school building deficiencies such as leaky walls and windows and to make repairs to HVAC systems and lighting. The Department of Treasury also issued guidance on how states can use \$350 billion in ARP state and local fiscal recovery funds for school infrastructure. The Inflation Reduction Act, signed into law on August 16 further allots \$50 million to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions at schools in low-income and disadvantaged communities.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

To examine state efforts to improve school infrastructure and develop a shared vision for providing every student with a physically healthy learning environment, state leaders can ask the following:

- What is our vision for a healthy school facility? What elements should we track?
- Do we know the state of our school facilities, the repairs needed, and the costs associated with these repairs?
- Is there a regular state-led process for assessing the state of school infrastructure, and how do we share these assessment results publicly?
- Are there communities with a backlog of repair needs and less available local funding? How can we direct state funds to school infrastructure needs equitably?

When factors like classroom temperatures and air quality are improperly managed,

outcomes can include decreased student attendance, comprehension, and test scores and increases in preventable conditions like asthma and the transmission of communicable diseases.¹³ While some state boards hold direct authority over school facilities and others have an oversight role, all state boards can call attention to the harmful effects of unsafe learning environments, build consensus toward improvement, and ask about inequities in funding.

Megan Blanco is NASBE’s director of safe and healthy schools. This publication was supported by the Joyce Foundation.

NOTES

1 U.S. Government Accountability Office, “K-12 Education: School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacements,” GAO-20-494 (Washington, DC: GAO, June 2020).

2 Debbie Alexander and Laurie Lewis, “Condition of America’s Public School Facilities: 2012–13,” NCES 2014-022 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, March 2014).

3 Erika Eitland and Joseph Allen, “School Buildings: The Foundation for Student Health and Success,” *State Education Standard* 19, no. 1 (January 2019).

4 Alexander and Lewis, “Condition of America’s Public School Facilities”; Mary Filardo et al., “Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction” (Washington, DC: Building Educational Success Together, 2006).

5 Seth Magaziner and Ken Wagner, “Recommendations of the Rhode Island School Building Task Force,” December 13, 2017.

6 GAO, “Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacements.”

7 Illinois General Assembly, Public Act 093-0439.

8 Illinois State Board of Education, memorandum from Dr. Carmen I. Ayala, February 28, 2020.

9 Alexander and Lewis, “Condition of America’s Public School Facilities.”

10 National Association of Secondary School Principals, “NASSP’s Survey of American’s School Leaders and High School Students,” web page, <https://survey.nassp.org/2022/>.

11 Bella DiMarco and Phyllis W. Jordan, “Financial Trends in Local Schools’ Covid-Aid Spending,” (Washington, DC: FutureEd, July 7, 2022).

12 Roberto J. Rodriguez, letter to Daniel Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, May 13, 2022, [https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/AASA_Blog_The_Total_Child\(1\)/AASA_Response_Letter_5_13_22.pdf](https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/AASA_Blog_The_Total_Child(1)/AASA_Response_Letter_5_13_22.pdf).

13 Eitland and Allen, “School Buildings.”

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