

Taking Responsibility for Improving School Facilities

Guidance for creating an effective long-term K–12 facilities plan.

By David Sturtz and Mary Filardo



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In June 2020, just as the nation was in the grips of the first major surge in COVID-19 cases, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report that underscores what district leaders, facility maintenance workers, staff, and students have known for years: A great many of our nation’s school buildings are in poor condition.

The report, *K-12 Education: School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement*, based on a fall 2019 national survey of school districts, revealed that about half of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools.

In most states, school infrastructure spending depends on the wealth of local communities (exceptions are Hawaii, where all funding is from the state; Wyoming, with 67% from the state; and Delaware with 57% from the state).

Because 82% of all capital expenditures for schools are borne by local communities, it is obvious why

district facilities located in high property value communities are in better condition than those in poorer districts where funding is more difficult to obtain, according to *2016 State of Our Schools: American’s K-12 Facilities*, issued by the 21st Century Fund, the National Council on School Facilities, and the Center for Cities + Schools.

According to the report, state financial support for school district facilities varies significantly, from 0% to an average of 18%. The federal government contributes only 0.2% to the total capital spending on school facilities nationwide, with construction funds largely going toward rebuilding schools after natural disasters.

COVID and Disparities

The GAO report stated that schools in 40% of U.S. school districts are in need of major HVAC renovations or replacements—that’s 36,000 schools nationwide. That news is especially alarming during the pandemic when

schools need efficient, up-to-date heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems to reduce the risk of transmission of airborne viruses such as COVID-19.

Efficient HVAC systems offer more than protection from COVID-19. Many studies, including those by the EPA, indicate that improved ventilation rates and decreased indoor contaminant levels improved cognitive function, reduced absences, improved general health, and improved test scores.

The Facilities Master Plan

Prior to making a significant capital investment, school districts and communities need to plan to modernize their buildings and grounds based on the creation of an educational facilities master plan (EFMP). Even if they lack local or state funding, an EFMP can help districts better utilize their facilities and improve the teaching and learning conditions on campuses.

School communities that have a master plan, even though they lack the resources to implement it, can make the case for additional capital funds. Districts must show elected officials and the public at large that a comprehensive dataset has been created to inform the work and that a thoughtful, strategic plan with stakeholder cooperation is in place.

The pillars of an effective EFMP are:

1. The educational vision driving the program for PreK–12 and for non-school community uses.
2. An assessment of the physical condition, capacity, and educational adequacy of each school.
3. An understanding of historic and projected student enrollment.
4. A plan to educate the community on the above-listed data and demonstrate the influence the EFMP can have on stakeholders.

Local districts and states can use a strategic EFMP to make the case for major capital investments that can offer the best returns for the whole community.

Quantifying the Need

We estimate it would take an investment of \$288 billion to modernize the 12,500 schools in the worst condition nationwide. We estimate that districts nationwide need \$54 billion just to address the HVAC needs identified in the GAO report.

It is tempting to think, then, that if we as a country raised \$54 billion, we could improve indoor air quality and significantly reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the schools in most need of renovation. However, we also know that when we start removing old HVAC systems, we will find other systems in disrepair. We estimate that schools would require at least \$39 billion to

cover additional system repairs uncovered by HVAC renovations.

Living up to *Brown*

Our current property tax-funded financing system for school facilities compounds the inequities that persist in our state and local policies and practices, creating separate and unequal conditions in public education. This inequality will not resolve itself; it will take an about-face by federal education and elected officials who take the time to see that the federal government's laissez-faire approach to school funding will sustain the same unacceptable inequalities that it has allowed.

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It is time to live up to the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling and end the segregated funding strategies that make it impossible for the poorest communities to repair and replace their worst school facilities. It is time to demand better provision for our students, teachers, and the schools they occupy. It is time to learn from this pandemic that we are all connected, for better and for worse.

References

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David Sturtz is executive director of assessment services for Cooperative Strategies, based in Dublin Ohio. Email: dsturtz@coopstrategies.com

Mary Filardo is executive director of the 21st Century School Fund and coordinator of the National Council on School Facilities in Washington, DC. Email: MFilardo@21csf.org