



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of March 11-15, 2013

In·fra·struc·ture

By UCLA IDEA

1. An underlying base or foundation especially for an organization or system.
2. The basic facilities, services, and installations ...

The “underlying base” and “basic facilities” of America’s schools are crumbling. According to *State of our Schools*, released by the Center for Green Schools at the U.S. Green Building Council, the disrepair of America’s schools will take \$270 billion to return elementary and secondary school buildings to their original conditions, and \$542 billion to get them up to date.

The Green Schools report, the first in almost 20 years on the conditions of school facilities, concluded that there’s a huge need to modernize buildings for student and teacher health, safety and educational performance. Even with this report, it’s hard to know the full extent of the problem because there has not been a large, comprehensive survey of school facilities since the first Clinton administration. However, when a closer look is taken, serious problems quickly appear. It doesn’t take much probing to turn up examples of students learning in classrooms with leaky roofs, no air conditioning or heating, broken pavement, infestations and more.

“Schools are the backbone of our communities, and it is unacceptable that we would allow any of our children to show up in classrooms that compromise their ability to learn. We must do more,” said Rick Fedrizzi of the U.S. Green Building Council.

So why do facilities matter? According to Maureen Berner, who has studied student learning in buildings deemed to be in poor condition, “Kids who study in a rotten environment where the toilets don’t function and windows are broken and the paint is peeling on the walls are going to do worse.”

Just as important, the quality of school facilities communicates to students how the state values different groups of people. Reflecting on the dilapidated conditions in her school a few years ago, a California student told researchers:

It make you feel less about yourself, you know, like you sitting here in a class where you have to stand up because there’s not enough chairs and you see rats in the buildings, the bathrooms is nasty, you got to pay. ... And that just makes me feel real less about myself because it’s like the State don’t care about public schools. If I have to sit there and stand in the class, they can’t care about me.

The *State of our Schools* report recommends more information-gathering. This is a good first step. California and other states need better data to identify and publicize the most pressing facilities needs. “When we talk about a quality education, we talk about the ‘who’ and the ‘what’—teachers and curriculum—but we don’t talk about the ‘where.’ That needs to change,” said Rachel Gutter, director of the Center for Green Schools.



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Page 2

Of course, school facilities are just one of the weak links in a chain of public responsibilities. Schools are joined by other infrastructure systems, including transportation, energy and healthcare. Taking a broader perspective we can look beyond counting the amount of vulnerable highway bridges, electricity blackouts, children lacking preventative medicine, or vermin crawling and ceiling tiles falling in schools. These are not *competing* interests, but each is a piece of an unconscionably wasteful neglect of the nation's general welfare. Infrastructure, whether it's highways or schools, must be made robust, sufficient, and, as underscored by the new report, energy efficient.

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