

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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The 2016 State of Our Schools Report: Funding Is Bad; Equity Is Worse

The *2016 State of Our Schools Report* had a few very important top-line findings. The first is that every year the report projects a \$46 billion shortfall to keep our schools healthy and safe for our kids. Even more disturbing than that, though, is that the money that we do have to direct toward school facilities isn't distributed equitably. What that means is that millions of students, especially those in low-income communities, attend schools that are crumbling, that are unsafe and that actually impede learning and a 21st-century education. Fully 47 out of the 50 states—because we took a state-by-state look in this report—fail to meet the standards for investment to keep schools in a place where they support the most basic aspects of learning and health. And what we know and what this report draws attention to is that the way the system is set up creates persistent and inherent inequities, and that ultimately this conversation around the quality of our school facilities is directly related to equity in our education system.

The Staggering Depth of the Crisis in Our Schools

It has deep roots in a variety of different underlying causes, but a big part of why it's been so easy for us to ignore what is really a massive challenge that we face, let alone a massive category of infrastructure, is the extent to which the issue of school facilities funding has been politicized at the federal level. And in this report we don't make any attempt to point a finger at any one layer of our government: federal, state, or local. But what we do say is the sum total of our efforts won't get us to where we need to be, and what we also say is if we believe that the federal government's responsibility in terms of education is really ensuring equity, well then they've fallen asleep at the wheel on this task. It's been 20 years since the federal government published a comprehensive inventory of K-12 public school facilities, and at the time that report—which was issued by the GAO—concluded that half of schools in the United States had indoor air quality issues, and more than 15,000 schools in the United States had air that was actually unfit to breathe. And then they dropped it for the last 20 years, and I'm not exaggerating. We work in developing countries where they do inventories on the condition of their schools every single year. In Mexico they can not only tell you which schools don't have running water, but they can tell you of those schools how many have students who have the responsibility to lug the water back and forth to their classrooms. And we're looking at a data set that's more than 20 years old. On top of that many states have data sets that are extremely lacking. We allow ourselves to ignore this challenge because we don't see the extent of it, and not seeing is both literal and metaphorical. Water safety is a huge issue in schools, and we have no sense—because of our limited insight into the conditions of the school facilities—we have no sense of just how pervasive the problem

is. But just like we know that lurking across these hundred thousand K-12 public schools there are thousands of schools that still have air that's unfit to breathe, we know that there are likely thousands of schools that have water that's unfit for drinking. And that's not acceptable. It's not acceptable given the fact that our most vulnerable citizens attend these schools every day and we turned a blind eye because so many of these problems are literally invisible and they're easy for us to keep invisible in terms of our public dialogue.

Embarrassing: Our School System Needs Government Oversight Now

When we talk about infrastructure, we're talking about the massive amount of school buildings and grounds that are embodied by all of our K-12 public school facilities across the United States. The scale is really rather tremendous. We're talking about 100,000 schools. We're talking about even more buildings, and no one has really ever counted them across the nation. We're talking about 7.5 billion gross square feet and 2 million acres of land. One of the other findings of the report is that K-12 facilities account for nearly a quarter, 24%, of state and local infrastructure investments, which makes it the largest category of public infrastructure after roads and highways. And yet there isn't a single employee at the federal government who's charged with paying attention to school facilities issues. And by and large our support at the state level is also rather deficient when compared to the size and scope of what we're dealing with in this massive category of public infrastructure.

How We Manage to Keep Ignoring This Massive Problem

We haven't appointed people to take responsibility for this at the federal, state, and in some cases even local levels. But it's also that a lot of the reasons why we believe that these issues aren't part of the public dialogue is because the most likely candidates for bringing these critical matters to our attention, the parents and the teachers are either, one, as parents, unaware of the issues—because they simply aren't in their children's schools; they don't have the luxury perhaps to come to the PTA meetings; they don't drop their kids off or pick their kids up from school; they're just not deeply engaged at that level of their children's education and therefore are simply unaware of what's happening inside the buildings—or because the parents who do speak out, and for that matter the scores of teachers who have attempted to speak out on these issues over the years, are systematically silenced and told that if they further complain about these issues that they're going to lose their jobs. And it's not because the administrators sitting on the other side of those threats are bad people. It's, I believe, because they understand that we are going to identify these problems, call them out into the open, and we simply won't have the solutions in place and the funding in place to address them meaningfully.

We Need Better Policies to Remove Entrenched Inequity

Policy has to be a part of these solutions, policy at the state level in particular. Right now we've put a disproportionate burden, particularly for capital improvements—so for new construction or major renovations—the capital improvement budget for schools is totally separate in 99.9% of the scenarios from the maintenance and operations budget, and what the report concluded is that where capital costs in particular are concerned, we put an enormous burden on local communities. 82% of the share for capital costs

across the country for school facilities is put on communities, on localities. Only 18% of capital costs are covered by the states, and 0%—or rounded to 0%—of those costs are covered by the federal government. What that means is that inequity is embedded in the system. And that's where I think policy in particular needs to play a role. States not only need to think more creatively about how to get more money into the pipeline, but they need to get a lot more active in thinking about how they spread that equity around. A handful of states have, but for the most part what happens is these local communities are never going to be able to borrow or raise the money that they need to support those capital-improvement costs, and it puts them in a vicious cycle because when they don't have money to cover their capital costs they're forced to continuously and forever dip into their maintenance-and-operation budgets, which are the same budgets that pay teachers and purchase computers. They're forced to make emergency band-aid repairs from a budget that's already stretched too thin; and in kicking the can for the bigger repairs that need to be made, those repairs become more costly over time. This kind of inequity is embedded in the system and it cannot simply be addressed by adding more money. It has to be addressed by ensuring that the money that's in the system gets distributed equitably—so it's both more money and better distribution of the funds that exist.

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