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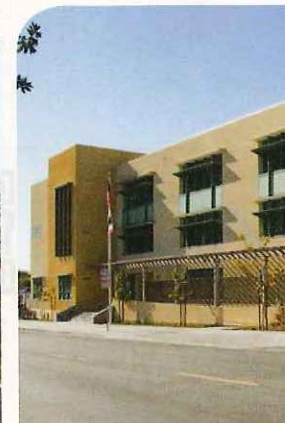
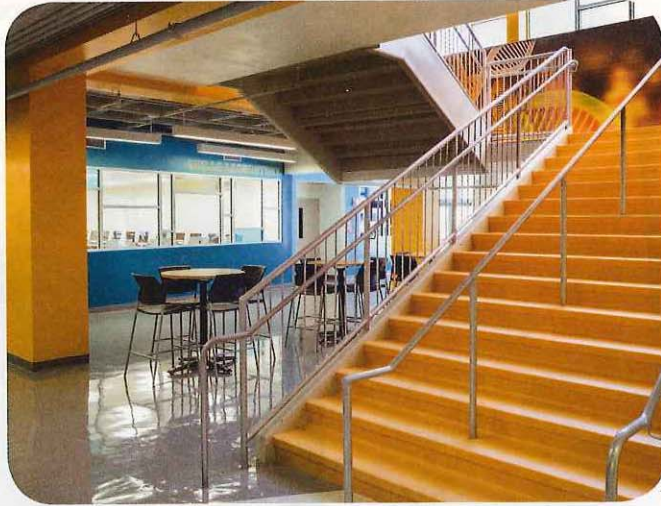
**SPECIAL SECTION**  
**GREEN SCHOOLS**

OCTOBER 2012



## *Fixing* **FACILITIES**

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# Fixing

# FACILITIES

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BY MIKE KENNEDY

**A**bout two decades ago, a consensus began to take root among educators and policymakers that school systems in the United States could no longer afford to ignore the inadequate building conditions that made teaching and learning difficult in many classrooms.

Since then, billions of dollars have been spent, and thousands of modern classrooms have been built to replace decrepit, deficient and dangerous spaces. In 2012, there seems to be no need to debate whether the quality of school facilities affects student performance—most agree that substandard facilities prevent many students from achieving their potential.

But it's one thing to embrace the concept of improving school facilities to provide students a better education. It's quite another thing to spend the money to make the concept a reality. Looking at estimates of the still staggering unmet facility needs in the nation's schools, one could reach the conclusion that the goal of modernizing all U.S. schools is more of a pipe dream than a real possibility.

## RECOGNIZING A NEED

Twenty years ago, the baby boom generation had worked its way through elementary and secondary schools, and many education administrators found themselves in charge of hurriedly built and prematurely aging

facilities that no longer provided a suitable learning environment for students.

An array of voices—the Education Writers Association, the American Association of School Administrators, muckraking authors like Jonathon Kozol—began to shine a spotlight on the deplorable conditions in many U.S. classrooms. *American School & University* began to focus its attention on the issue in 1992; the “Facilities Impact on Learning” series of articles sought to create awareness that the poor condition of school facilities was a national problem.

A 1995 report from the General Accounting Office put a hard number to the school facilities problem—\$112 billion. Although some thought the estimate was too low, the figure was sizable enough to draw attention to school facilities as a national problem.

Other factors also were making it more likely that school systems would put more emphasis on upgrading their facilities:

- Court rulings compelled construction in some cases.
- Enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act meant that some school buildings had to be retrofitted to provide accessibility to people with disabilities.
- The rapid rise of the Internet and the realization that the access it could provide would be a powerful educational tool meant that

*First row, San Diego Unified School District: 1. Normal Heights Elementary School, San Diego; Architect: Zagrodnik + Thomas Architects. 2. Thurgood Marshall Middle School, San Diego; Architects: Joseph Wong Architects and Trillipo Architecture. Photos courtesy of SDUSD.*

*Second/third rows, Miami Dade County Public Schools: 3. iPrep Academy at Felix Varela Senior High School, Miami; Architect: M.C. Harry and Associates. Photo by Dan Forer. 4. and 5. Mast Academy@ Homestead, Homestead, Fla., a remodel of a hospital into the Medical Academy for Science and Technology; Architect: Zyscovich Architects. Photo by Moris Moreno. 6. TERRA Environmental Research Center, Miami; Architect: Silva Architects. Photo by Raul Pedrosa. 7. Carol City Senior High School, Miami Garden, Fla.; Architect: AECOM. Photo by Robb Williamson.*

*Fourth row, Los Angeles Unified School District: 8. South Region Elementary School #6; Architect: Dougherty + Dougherty. 9. Central Region High School #16; Architect: AC Martin Partners, Inc. 10. Cahuenga Elementary School #1; Architect: Harley Ellis Devereaux. Photos courtesy of LAUSD.*



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many learning spaces had to be modified to accommodate the technology.

- The push among educators for fewer students per class meant that school systems had to build more classrooms.

- Improvements in energy-efficient building systems and a growing embrace of conservation and sustainable design strategies persuaded many school systems to upgrade their facilities and take advantage of those techniques.

Overriding all these factors was the nation's strong economic condition. Because school construction his-

out about 5,700 projects in more than 1,180 buildings. More than 290 new small schools or charter school organizations were created, and 25 large high schools were converted into campuses containing smaller schools.

The program also paid for upgrading accessibility in dozens of schools and installing Internet access in classrooms.

With the added capacity, the city reduced the numbers of campuses that were considered overcrowded. "The percentage of overcrowded buildings has dropped by 11 percentage points at the elementary level, 24 points at

campuses this summer as it continues to carry out a \$19.5 billion construction effort that began 15 years ago.

Since the first of several bond proposals was approved by voter in 1997, Los Angeles has built 129 new schools and completed more than 24,000 modernization projects. The additional space has enabled the district to reduce the number of schools that operated on a year-round schedule from 227 in 2002-03 to just three in 2012-13.

In Chicago, since a capital improvement initiative began in 1996, the district has spent more than \$5.5 billion on school construction. The most recent program, dubbed Modern Schools Across Chicago, provided \$1.2 billion, primarily from tax increment financing, for school construction. It resulted in 24 new buildings and three renovations, the district says.

### Thousands of modern classrooms have been built to replace decrepit, deficient and dangerous spaces.

torically has been a local responsibility, districts typically needed to persuade voters to support a bond issue to pay for upgrading facilities, and voters in many districts were receptive to sizable construction proposals.

#### SIGNS OF PROGRESS

The evidence of the inroads that have been made in improving school facilities is easy to find by starting at the top. The three largest districts in the country—New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago—all have allocated billions of dollars in the last decade or so to school construction and renovation. The fourth- and fifth-largest districts—Miami-Dade County and Clark County, Nev.—have bond requests on the ballot in November seeking hundreds of millions of dollars for facility improvements.

In New York City, the school system is in the midst of a \$11.2 billion capital improvement program—one that follows on the heels of a \$13 billion effort from 2004 to 2009 that added thousands of new classroom seats to the nation's largest district.

Projects paid for in the 2004-09 capital plan added 63,000 seats of new capacity to the city's vast school system. The school system carried

the middle school level, and 23 points at the high school level," the capital plan states.

The followup capital improvement plan, for 2010-14, is somewhat smaller than its predecessor, but the \$11.2 billion the city is spending in those years will continue the needed upgrades to improvement learning spaces for students.

The city divides its \$11.2 billion capital plan, as amended earlier this year, into two categories: \$4.5 billion for capacity (new facilities), and \$6.7 billion for capital investment (upgrading existing facilities).

Planned spending includes \$3.5 billion for new capacity—the city's education department estimates that this funding will enable it to construct enough classrooms to add 31,574 seats to the school system. Another \$750 million is allocated for replacing facilities whose leases will expire while the 2010-14 is being carried out. School officials had expected to spend significantly more in this category, but they have found that a higher than expected proportion of landlords have been willing to renew leases on reasonable terms.

The nation's second-largest district, Los Angeles Unified, opened 20 new

#### NEEDS UNMET

The progress made in the last 20 years upgrading school buildings is undeniable, but it's equally clear that the billions of dollars spent haven't been nearly enough to eliminate inadequate education facilities.

The American Society of Civil Engineers in 2009 awarded a grade of "D" to the nation's public school infrastructure because of the inability of education institutions to keep up with the demand for facilities improvement.

In addition, an examination of which districts were carrying out building upgrades in the 1990s and 2000s indicates that affluent areas were more likely to be the beneficiaries of increased spending.

A coalition of groups advocating for better school facilities, Building Educational Success Together (BEST), looked at the issue in a 2006 report, "Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction 1995-2004."

"Overall, the schools in poor condition 10 years ago received the least investment in their facilities, even as the nation's schools have seen record spending in school facilities," the

BEST report says. "...Although the plight of students in the country's most decrepit school buildings has not been entirely ignored, federal and state policies to address the problems have been inadequate. The scale, scope and distribution of school construction spending need to be better understood and monitored."

That report came before the economic collapse of 2008 led to devastating budget cuts for education institutions.

The Council of the Great City Schools, which has 65 large urban districts as members, estimated in October 2011 that those 65 school systems have a total of \$100.5 billion in facility needs—\$20.1 billion in new construction, \$61.4 billion in repair, renovation, and modernization, and \$19.0 billion in deferred maintenance.

An earlier report for the American Federation of Teachers provided a nationwide needs estimate. The December 2008 "Building Minds, Minding Buildings" report on school infrastructure funding needs in each of the 50 states estimated that \$254.6 billion was needed to ensure that all students were taught in a space that was "safe, healthy and educationally appropriate." The needs ranged from \$325.7 million in Vermont to \$25.4 billion in California.

The researchers compiled a similar analysis in 2001 that estimated nationwide school facility needs at \$266 billion. The lower number in the more recent study provides evidence that some progress has been made—estimated needs in New York, for instance, dropped from \$47.6 billion to \$21.2 billion, and in Ohio, where the state began a program to assist local districts with school construction, facility needs declined from \$20.9 billion to \$9.3 billion.

But the overall picture, the report concludes, is that "there still exists an enormous and disturbing school infrastructure funding need in almost every state and across the country."

The study calls for more federal involvement in school facility funding,

## BIG BALLOT ISSUES

In most jurisdictions, bond elections are the most direct way for school districts to get the money they need to fix their facilities. Four years after the collapse of the U.S. economy made it a risky proposition to ask voters to increase their taxes, several large school systems have placed sizable bond requests on the November ballot.

- Miami-Dade: The 345,000-student district is seeking approval of \$1.2 billion in bond to make repairs and renovations at all its 390 schools. The bonds also will enable the district to upgrade its technology and improve campus safety and security.

- Clark County, Nev.: The 311,000-student district is asking voters to approve a \$669 million bond request that would enable the district to renovate or replace existing facilities. The money would cover just a small portion of the \$5.3 billion in facility needs the district has identified.

- Houston: Voters are being asked to approve a \$1.9 billion bond proposal. It would enable the 200,000-student district to rebuild or renovate most of the district's aging high schools. Some of the money also would be used to remodel several elementary and middle schools and upgrade campus technology.

- San Diego: Approval of a \$2.8 billion bond request would enable the 132,000-student district to repair and replace aging facilities, and enhance technology and school security.

"The nature and scope of school infrastructure funding need calls for a new federal/state/local partnership with the federal government assuming a strong leadership role," says the AFT report.

### FEDERAL ROLE

Federal involvement in education has increased in the years since the "No Child Left Behind" reforms were enacted, but historically it played a minimal role in funding school construction or modernization.

The 2009 federal stimulus package approved by Congress in response to the economic collapse months earlier did not include direct funding for school construction, but did provide financial benefits for education institutions pursuing facility improvements. The most notable of these—Qualified School Construction Bonds—provided school systems with tax credits so that they could construct facilities without having to pay interest on the bonds.

Education advocates have been

trying since at least the mid-1990s to establish an ongoing federal program to subsidize school facility construction and renovation. The proposals have gone by various names—The Partnership to Rebuild America's School Act, America's Better Classrooms Act, the 21st Century Green High-Performing Public School Facilities Act and the Fix America's Schools Today Act—but they all sought to provide federal funds to help districts pay for school building upgrades, and they all have been unable to make through Congress.

The most recent attempt at federal legislation was introduced last year as the Rebuilding America's Schools Act. Backed by the Obama administration, the proposal would provide \$25 billion to modernize K-12 public schools nationwide and \$5 billion to upgrade community college facilities.

That bill, like its predecessors, has been unable to emerge from the gridlock in Congress. ■

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### ON THE WEB

To read an exclusive sidebar about voters in New Jersey deciding in November whether to approve a \$750 million bond proposal for the state's higher-education facilities, visit [ASUmag.com/exclusive](http://ASUmag.com/exclusive).