

The Walls Are Cracking: The Struggle to Provide Quality Public School Facilities

The importance of the condition of school facilities to student learning should not be overlooked.

By Brett A. Geier, Ed.D.



The excitement that permeated Bloomington Public Schools was palpable when two bond issues for facility construction and renovation were passed within six years of each other (2001 and 2007). The approval by the constituents in that small rural farming community in southwest Michigan affirmed the mission developed by everyone in the school community and instilled tremendous pride.

More than \$14 million was bonded in 2001 for a new high school and major renovations to three elementary

schools. In 2007, the electorate approved a \$5 million bond issue to renovate many of the recreational facilities the school system provided, such as a new synthetic turf football field, an eight-lane rubber track, and playgrounds for the elementary schools. A few academic learning areas were addressed, but they were not the primary focus of the 2007 project.

School district officials felt fortunate to have their constituents' approval to increase the debt levied against them in a period of economic decline, especially since the community struggled to provide middle-class employment.

State of Facilities

During the past several years, public school districts across the United States have suffered massive reductions in their general operating revenue. To ensure that those reductions would have the least effect possible on student learning, administrators reduced their spending in noninstructional areas, such as maintenance, renovation, and construction of new school facilities. They reasoned that maintenance and construction projects could be deferred to future years. However, the importance of school facilities to student learning is often overlooked.

According to Castaldi (1994), "the importance of skillful teachers cannot be overstated. On the other hand, a skillful teacher working in a well-designed and highly functional school building, supplied with a wide array of electronic and visual teaching aids, can achieve a level of instructional effectiveness that far exceeds what is possible when the necessary 'things of education' are not provided."

Rachel Gutter, director of the U.S. Green Building Council's Center for Green Schools, amplifies that concern: "We have a moral obligation. . . . 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” (Elliot 2013).

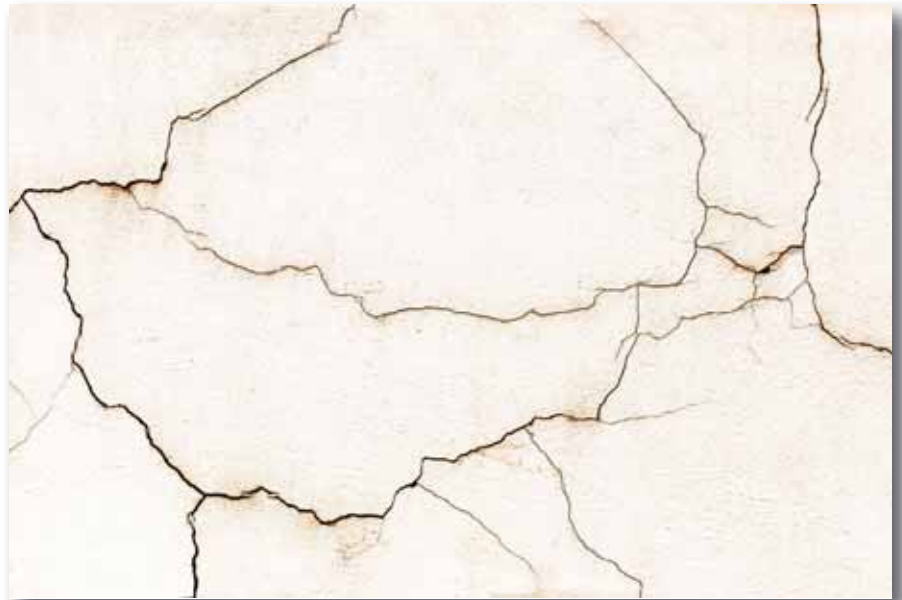
According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2000), the average year of construction for public school buildings in the United States is 1959. In many cases, districts are simply trying to bring current facilities back to their original condition. That aspiration is admirable; however, the effect is minimized when you consider that the schools are being renovated simply to attain the level of quality they had when they were built 50 years ago. The Center for Green Schools (2013) estimates that the nation would need to spend \$542 billion over a 10-year period to modernize its educational facilities.

Although bringing school facilities up to a “good” standard is a commendable goal, the districts with modern facilities that promote learning as a function of the building provide an environment for high-quality teaching and learning. The students who attend outdated, run-down schools are forced to continue their education in adequate-at-best facilities.

Research indicates that many features of a school building, such as poor air quality, lighting, and acoustics, can decrease the students’ capacity for achieving at the same rate as their peers in schools with better learning environments. Unfortunately, it’s a case where the students in the neediest communities suffer because their communities cannot afford to support upgraded facilities and programs.

Funding Facilities

The methods by which school districts obtain funds for facility maintenance and construction vary, but, for the most part, the responsibility lies with state and local entities. State governments with the authority to appropriate funds for public school maintenance and construction have been conservative over



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the past few years as a result of the recession. For example, in Florida, a large portion of revenue allocated for public school capital outlay projects comes from the Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO) program. PECO revenue is raised from the gross receipts of tax revenue from utilities. Over the past two legislative cycles, the Florida legislature provided no revenue from PECO, which caused many school districts to defer maintenance and postpone construction projects, putting facility needs further behind schedule.

In contrast to state responsibility for public school facilities is the local community’s obligation to maintain building quality. Michigan is one state that does not assume responsibility for school facility condition but places that burden on the local community. When local school districts need revenue for building maintenance or construction that exceeds their capacity through the general operating budget, they must appeal to the district’s constituents

to increase the debt retirement levied on the total taxable value.

That system raises inequity issues, as a millage formula is used. A district that has higher property values than another district can raise more funds with a lower tax. Michigan, as a state, accepts no responsibility for maintaining its public school facilities, and the mechanism it does have promotes wealth discrimination.

For a nation that has declared a state of emergency for its public education system, the United States falls woefully short in providing quality facilities to enhance programming needs to compete in a global economy. Educators must take the lead in stressing the importance of quality facilities and must persuade local constituents, as well as state legislators to allocate funds for that objective. Following are some strategies educators can use to promote facility renovation or construction:

1. **Develop trust within the community.** The community must believe that those charged with

implementing the school's mission are doing everything possible to maximize expenditures in support of the school's mission. That includes transparency with all budget practices and procedures.

2. Provide regular information updates to the board of education so board members can speak intelligently about ongoing concerns, needs, and plans to rectify them.
3. Invite parents and community members to participate in events at district schools so they can see the facilities firsthand. Those activities may include academic nights, science fairs, drama productions, athletic events, and senior citizen gatherings.
4. Invite lawmakers to school and district activities to demonstrate

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the importance of providing schools with appropriate revenue for facility maintenance and construction.

5. Promote pedagogy and curriculum that are sensitive to helping each student attain his or her maximum potential. Educators should amplify that they are maximizing educational opportunities with the resources allotted to the school.
6. Embed service-oriented projects into the general curriculum that

seek to improve the quality of life in the school and community.

7. Be vigilant about refinancing debt with lower interest rates to save taxpayers money and to let the community know how much money you are saving.
8. Ensure that current facilities are maintained as efficiently as possible to mitigate the perception that "they don't take care of what they have now."
9. Establish grassroots efforts among various constituent groups (e.g., academics, athletics, band, etc.) to support facility improvements.

All students deserve to learn in safe, secure, modern, healthy environments. It's time to focus on ensuring that they have the facilities they need.

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