

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: SCHOOL FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Issue at a Glance

All schools should offer a welcoming and engaging environment designed for 21st-century learning. This includes flexible spaces for personalized learning and small group work; makerspaces that encourage collaboration and project-based, cross-disciplinary learning; facilities for students to pursue athletics and performing arts; and a greater emphasis on technology and learning beyond the school day.

Many schools have not yet achieved all these goals, and unfortunately, others have been found with harmful infrastructure. There are still many schools operating with unhealthy levels of lead in the water, asbestos, mold and mildew, PCBs, radon, rodents, insects, deteriorating infrastructure, and uncomfortable temperatures.

Many are also not adequately built to withstand natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods. While the federal government and states banned many hazardous materials for new school construction in the 1980s, the average school nationwide is approximately 50 years old. School quality impacts recruitment and retention of effective leaders and teachers, student attendance, and the health of the entire school community.

Data suggests that a significant number of school buildings across the U.S. require extensive modernization and/or repair. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that 50% of schools have poor air quality. According to the most recent report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2020, 41% of school districts require repairs to air conditioning, heating, or ventilation in at least half of their buildings. The same report also found that 28% of school districts also require repairs to lighting, roofing, or security systems in at least half of buildings.

According to the 2025 “State of Our Schools” report by the National Council on School Facilities, the International WELL Building Institute, and the 21st Century School Fund, there is a \$90 billion shortfall annually between what is needed to adequately repair and maintain school facilities and what is allocated. Districts are struggling to finance school modernization and repair efforts while also managing rising enrollments and the need for new school construction. The “State of Our Schools” report also found that nationally, local districts are responsible for 80% of capital construction costs, while states contribute only 17%. The federal government contributes only minimal funding for school facilities, mostly through grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) following a national disaster. The extent to which this funding burden is placed on districts poses considerable concerns for equity, considering students in high-poverty areas are less likely to attend districts with adequate funding for building repairs.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association supports the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which states that effective leaders seek, acquire, and manage fiscal, physical, and other resources to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment; the student learning community; professional capacity; and community and family engagement.
- Ensuring safe, healthy, and modern public school facilities that can support innovative teaching and personalization is a crucial component to closing the achievement gap, increasing academic achievement and graduation rates, and ensuring all students have access to effective teachers and school leaders.
- Local, state, and federal lawmakers must increase investment in public school facilities and infrastructure to ensure that they are both safe and well-equipped to meet the demands of a high-quality, 21st century education that all students deserve.
- National Principals Association has a separate policy issue brief on [School Safety](#) with additional recommendations for safety infrastructure improvements.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Require the U.S. Government Accountability Office to continually update the survey, research, and conclusions regarding the physical condition of the nation's school facilities that were last presented to Congress in 2020.
- Encourage the National Center for Education Statistics to collect data on school facility conditions in its annual Common Core of Data surveys.
- Conduct research on school facilities in other countries, such as Finland, where contemporary campuses are built to meet the pedagogical and social needs of students and educators.
- Explore the feasibility of developing national standards on school building conditions, financing, and investment.
- Reinstitute the Qualified Zone Academy Bonds program, which was eliminated by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, to help districts borrow funding at low interest rates to finance school renovation and repair projects.
- Assist schools in conducting risk assessments and provide funding for school safety measures such as intrusion detection, access control, and video surveillance as needed.
- Modify the tax code to create a new private activity bonds category for schools.
- Fully fund Title IV, Part A, of ESSA which may be used by schools for improving the use of technology to personalize learning experiences for all students.
- Provide adequate funding for the E-Rate program to ensure that schools have sufficient broadband capacity to support digital learning in every classroom.
- Reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act to ensure that schools have resources to create makerspaces, upgrade CTE and STEM facilities, and provide professional

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development for leaders and teachers to make school a relevant and engaging experience for all students.

- Fully fund the Full-Service Community Schools Program to improve the coordination and integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Adopt the voluntary guidelines developed by the Environmental Protection Agency to establish and implement environmental health programs for PreK–12 schools.
- Require districts to regularly test for lead in the water of the 90% of schools that do not have their own water supply.
- Approve legislation aimed at reducing lead in schools, including higher fees for lead-based products, surveys of lead-based infrastructure, and funding for remediation programs.
- Expand state tax credits and matching funds for school repair and modernization projects.
- Explore ways to incentivize partnerships between school districts and municipalities to increase efficiency in maintenance and construction.
- Reduce approval processes and/or backlogs that inhibit timely completion of necessary school construction or modernization projects.

Recommendations for District Policymakers

- Conduct regular inspections of school facilities, including testing for lead in the water and the presence of asbestos, and report this data publicly to educators, parents, and the community.
- Engage in long-term and short-term planning that links conditions of school facilities to learning outcomes in deliberate ways.
- Ensure that schools have adequately trained maintenance staff to ensure the quality of school facilities.
- Provide school leaders and teachers with professional development opportunities to help them lead instructional shifts to make school a relevant and engaging experience for all students.
- Pursue partnerships with institutions of higher education, public parks, and recreation centers to ensure students have access to athletic facilities and performing arts spaces.
- Assist schools in creating flexible spaces that meet the needs of students, educators, parents, and community members such as extended learning areas, office spaces, libraries and media centers, and large multipurpose rooms.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Document building hazards within your school and health and safety related complaints from staff and students and communicate regularly with district officials to ensure conditions have been rectified.
- Educate yourself about the condition of school infrastructure in your district, particularly discrepancies between schools, and participate in district-level facilities planning.

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- If your school was built prior to 1980, familiarize yourself with guidance and tools offered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ensure the quality of your drinking water.
- Combine efforts to enhance school climate with reasonable physical security measures by:
 - Assessing the physical security features of the campus, such as access points to the school grounds, parking lots, and buildings, and the lighting and adult supervision in lobbies, hallways, parking lots, and open spaces;
 - Employing environmental design techniques, such as ensuring that playgrounds and sports fields are surrounded by fences or other natural barriers, to limit visual and physical access by non-school personnel; and
 - Ensuring that students are well monitored.
- If you are a school leader wanting to create a makerspace in your school:
 - Understand your students by asking about their interests and hobbies outside of school.
 - Assess current programs to determine where there are gaps and how the makerspace activities will align with curriculum and content standards.
 - Research global issues that may not be taught in current classes.
 - Develop themes that will interest your students and allow them to go deeper with their learning.