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TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

PUBLIC SCHOOL FACILITIES: PROVIDING ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUSTAIN LEARNING

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A growing body of research in recent years has tested the widely held belief that there is a relationship between the conditions of school buildings and student achievement. In a 2000 report on school facilities, the U.S. Department of Education summarized that research by concluding that environmental conditions in schools, including poor lighting, inadequate ventilation, and inoperative heating – affect the learning, health and morale of students and staff. Other studies and litigation from states around the country - focusing on class size, lack of science labs, or school safety – have also highlighted the importance of facilities as an essential component of student learning, and have revealed stark disparities between schools in high- and low-income communities.

Obstacles to Adequate School Facilities

Despite evidence demonstrating the importance of quality facilities, a number of obstacles impair efforts to build and maintain schools that are conducive to learning, including: state funding systems that rely heavily on local bonds and provide incentives to build schools cheaply and defer maintenance; a growing number of requirements to support curriculum; and significant enrollment growth. Urban and rural districts face additional challenges due to dense and sparse populations, respectively, and state policies that limit funding specifically for their facilities. As a result of these barriers, countless students across the country, particularly those in urban and rural areas, attend school in substandard facilities that negatively affect their education.

Limited State Funding

Although each state constitution requires the state to establish public schools, the cost of financing school facilities has remained primarily a local responsibility. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), until the 1940s only 12 states provided any funding for school facilities, and even as of 1995 less than a quarter of all funds used for public school construction were coming from states. As a result, the funding and quality of school facilities varies dramatically, and often inequitably, based

on differences in local fiscal capacity. Districts with low or dwindling property wealth, often in urban and rural areas, tend to be constrained the most.

According to the Association of School Business Officials, as of December 2002, eight states offered no direct funding to school capital construction costs. The report also noted that among the states that did provide direct funding, one-third made no adjustments for differences in local input costs or student needs. As a result, many urban and rural communities across the nation struggle to construct and renovate schools.

Building Cheaply and Deferring Maintenance

Many communities around the country employ cost-saving measures in school construction and maintenance, particularly in tough economic times. Unfortunately, these measures can have a negative impact on learning, such as the installation of inexpensive walls that allow noise to permeate between adjacent classrooms. Since most states do not provide funding for maintenance, schools sometimes defer prudent repairs to save money and end up spending more in the long run. For example, hundreds of dollars saved by not routinely replacing gaskets has resulted in unexpected flooding that causes hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages. These local decisions are often driven by state policies that create perverse incentives by funding new construction rather than appropriate maintenance.

Rising Facilities Costs

In recent years, the costs of providing and maintaining adequate school facilities has increased dramatically due to increasing enrollments, aging buildings, and reforms that require more classrooms, such as class size reduction. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, annual spending on facilities nationwide increased from \$17 billion to more than \$36 billion over the course of the 1990s, but there is still a wide consensus about “the sheer enormity of unmet funding needs for school infrastructure.” In 1995, the U.S. GAO reported that it would cost \$112 billion to bring all schools up to good overall condition; estimates by the National Education Association and the Journal of Education Finance in 2000 pegged the cost closer to \$320 billion. A 2006 report from the 21st Century School Fund said that public school districts spent almost \$600 billion in capital expenditures between 1995 and 2004 and argues that many needs have still not been met.

Inadequate Schools in Urban and Rural Districts

As documented in numerous school funding lawsuits, there is a distinct alignment of disadvantaged students and schools with decaying educational facilities. The substandard facilities that plague high-poverty districts are the result of numerous constraints. Rural schools tend to be old and unable to accommodate science and technology curricula, while rural communities cannot afford to build the schools their children need. State facilities funding policies often ignore these realities.

Most urban school districts rely on their local government to provide allocations enabling them to operate. Competing with other needs, such as transportation and police and fire departments, urban school districts can suffer. As a result, urban facilities programs are often underfunded, especially during economic downturns. Furthermore, city governments often have constitutional debt limits that restrict the amount of money cities are allowed to borrow, limiting their ability to fund school construction. Urban school districts also face the challenge of finding space in crowded city landscapes, schools built vertically and sometimes on awkward sites, and the additional costs incurred in this type of construction. Despite these added costs, urban districts often receive no additional state reimbursement for school construction.

Rural districts are often constrained by state school facilities policies that prefer larger schools and economies of scale. For example, some states require a minimum number of students per school or per class as a prerequisite for facilities funding. These policies can force the consolidation of small rural schools. Rural districts with sparse populations are also particularly vulnerable to population shifts. Population loss erodes the tax base, creating taxpayer reluctance to pass bonds to build schools. Major population growth, on the other hand, increases property tax income but requires communities to incur more debt to accommodate new students.

Areas of Improvement

Though sometimes overlooked, court rulings have been a major factor in increasing state funding for school facilities in recent years. Courts in Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Ohio, Wyoming, and other states have expressly determined that adequate facilities are an important component of the state's constitutional responsibility. Subsequent to litigation, some of these states were able to establish comprehensive facilities standards, conduct statewide assessments to determine if their schools met a defined level of adequate facilities, and put into place mechanisms for increasing capital funding. In Alabama, litigation helped get construction spending underway, focused especially on low-wealth rural districts. In New Jersey, court rulings have helped localities obtain state funding for new construction and resolve health and safety concerns.

Today, more than 40 states provide some ongoing facilities funding, with most states prioritizing funding toward districts with less ability to pay. Although federal funding is extremely limited, recent federal initiatives include: providing tax incentives for developers to build schools; offering funding to schools for telecommunication services and technologies; and creating public-private partnerships that leverage additional money for school construction.

Looking Ahead

As more research is undertaken in this area, communities and policymakers will be asked to revisit existing school facilities financing policies. Some states are also exploring high-performance facilities standards, which despite greater upfront costs can

result in long-term cost savings and increased student performance. Although costs should not be the sole determinant of building programs, fiscal constraints will continue to shape the support that is available for the construction and maintenance of schools. Until states, and perhaps the federal government, develop better and more equitable facilities funding systems, ensuring high-quality schools for all students will continue to be a major challenge, especially in low-income communities.

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Useful Resources

Building Education Success Together (BEST), “Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction” (October 2006).

Glen I. Earthman, “Prioritization of 31 Criteria for School Building Adequacy” (January 2004).

Ann McColl and Gregory C. Malhoit, Rural School and Community Trust, “Rural School Facilities: State Policies that Provide Students with an Environment to Promote Learning” (June 2004).

Mark Schneider, “Do School Facilities Affect Academic Outcomes?” (November 2003).

David G. Sciarra, Koren L. Bell, and Susan Kenyon, “Safe and Adequate: Using Litigation to Address Inadequate K-12 School Facilities,” Education Law Center (July 2006).

Catherine C. Sielke, “The State of Funding School Facilities’ Needs in the United States,” *School Business Affairs* (December 2002).

Sound Basic Education Task Force, Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc., “Adequate Facilities For All: Reforming New York State’s System for Providing Building Aid to School Districts and for Meeting Schools’ Urgent Capital Needs” (April 2004).