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Repair school building inequality

State needs funding solution to fix \$32.6 billion in outmoded facilities

Iris Salters

What would happen if you didn't take adequate care of your home or business – for 10, 20 or even 50 years? And when the building became too deteriorated, if you simply moved into a shed in the back yard?

Not a pretty sight.

So why do we, as taxpayers who own public school property worth billions of dollars, let thousands of students learn in dilapidated school buildings?

This spring, scores of districts will seek voter approval for projects to ensure that schools meet basic health and safety codes as well as the demands of current and future technology.

Voters finicky with fixes

But voters are a finicky lot. In one community, they'll reject a bond proposal that would pay to fix a leaky roof, while the neighboring district will give the go-ahead to erect new buildings with athletic fields or aquatic centers outfitted with water slides and zero-depth pools.

It's not always fair or easy to explain why students in one district learn in a portable trailer on the playground while other students learn in gleaming classrooms with the latest technology. But a primary reason is the differences in value of taxable property – which varies across communities, as does the amount of tax generated from those properties.

The need for repairing old buildings or constructing new ones is great. One report pegged the total need at about \$8.7 billion. The same report, released in May 2005 by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan and the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, estimated the value of all public school buildings and related infrastructure, including athletic facilities, at about \$32.6 billion.

While Proposal A of 1994 shifted most school funding from local property taxes to state sources – and, in turn, increased equity in the way Michigan funds the operation of its public schools – it did nothing to ensure that all students have equal access to adequate educational facilities.

In Michigan, there are schools built at the turn of the century – the 20th century, that is. We also have state-of-the-art facilities where any parents would be proud to send their children in the 21st century.

In 2004, the Saline school district opened a \$89 million high school. The facility features 13 science classrooms/laboratories, a television studio and mobile computer labs that can move from classroom to classroom. Students also enjoy access to two gyms, an eight-lane swimming pool and other amenities for athletes.

School building inequities

Meanwhile, students in Detroit, Benton Harbor and many other communities can only imagine the kind of facilities that Saline students have. In Benton Harbor and Plymouth, school buildings date to the early 1920s. In Detroit, many schools are more than 60 years old.

The Legislature must address these inequities. We need a comprehensive state response to the problem of school facilities funding, an idea supported by the Citizens Research Council and MSU's Education Policy Center. Many policy options exist – from minor modifications of current policies to the state assuming complete responsibility for financing school facilities.

While school infrastructure is critical, it's not enough for school districts to have beautiful buildings. An attractive high school with state-of-the-art science labs or an impressive football stadium doesn't guarantee that students will learn more or better. Schools need to have teachers and other caring adults – bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, classroom aides and food servers – who are fairly compensated and adequately appreciated to thrive.

Who wants to move into a neighborhood where the local schools are in disrepair or unable to accommodate computers and other technology?

We need to make sure that the facilities that we collectively own – classrooms, libraries, auditoriums, athletic fields and gymnasiums – are safe places for students to learn and grow. Protecting our investments, in our buildings and in our students, is prudent and makes good fiscal sense.

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Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written for The News on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The News.

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