
Revitalizing the American Economy by Improving Education

America's public schools have a list of ready-to-go construction and renovation projects that, with an infusion of federal economic stimulus funds, would work to both quickly stimulate the economy through massive job creation *and* dramatically improve the educational environment for children.

Today nearly 50 million American children attended one of the more than 97,000 public schools across the country. Schools should provide a comfortable and productive environment where children can learn and thrive, yet tens of thousands of America's schools urgently need repairs, renovation, modernization or new construction because of critical health and capacity issues such as leaking roofs, poor classroom lighting and acoustics, inadequate ventilation and other undesirable conditions.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2003 that three-quarters, or about 70,000, of the nation's schools need funds to bring their buildings into a "good overall condition." The average age of a public school building is around 45 years according to the U.S. Department of Education. America's schools are in such disrepair that the American Society of Civil Engineers gave public schools a 'D' on its infrastructure report card in 2005. And the situation will likely grow even worse given the economic recession.

The Impact of School Environment on Learning and Health

Outdated, unhealthy and unsafe school conditions make it difficult for students to concentrate and for teachers to teach. Such conditions can also lead to lower student attendance and reduced teacher and staff retention. For example, the American Lung Association found that American children missed more than 12 million school days in 2000 because of asthma exacerbated by poor indoor air quality. Like a growing number of schools around the country, two-thirds of teachers in the District of Columbia reported poor air quality in their classrooms in a study conducted in 2003 by the 21st Century Fund.

Poor acoustics also creates distractions in the classroom. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) has established minimum acoustical performance criteria for schools, which most classrooms fail to meet. The ANSI standards are based on the fact that: (1) young students can't hear well in a noisy environment; (2) young students do not effectively listen and understand speech in reverberant conditions; (3) children are especially susceptible to ear infections that cause hearing loss for weeks or months; (4) up to 20 percent of the student population has permanent hearing loss from congenital or environmental causes; and, (5) many students are hearing a language different from what is spoken at home. The ambient noise present as a result of lighting, heating and electrical systems, and outside sounds is often too loud for students to be able to listen – and learn – effectively.

There is also a clear link between classroom illumination and student achievement. A study by The National Clearinghouse for Education study found that optimal classroom lighting can improve students' test scores, reduce poor behavior and foster higher student achievement overall.

As important, low-income and minority children are disproportionately affected by poor school building conditions. A 2002 study by the UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education & Access found a difference of between 5 and 17 percentile points in the achievement of students in poorly maintained buildings compared with students in well-maintained facilities.

Stimulating the Economy and Improving Education

Although there is a critical need to repair and remodel existing schools and build new facilities, spending by school districts on construction projects slowed to \$32.9 billion in 2007 from \$36.6 billion in 2006 according to American Schools and University Magazine. Yet the National Center for Education Statistics reports that K-12 enrollment is expected to increase by 3 million to more than 53 million students by 2010.

A National Education Association study published in 2000 estimated the total funding need for public school infrastructure repair and modernization to be \$268.2 billion based on a state-by-state assessment. A national survey of 800 of the 13,000 school superintendents, administrators and other members of the American Association of School Administrators was released in December 2008. Even in this small survey sample size of only 800 educational leaders, the research identified \$6.52 billion in ready-to-go new construction projects and \$4.49 billion in ready-to-go renovation and repair projects for public schools. Almost all respondents (99 percent) identified significant local and state budget gaps that could be filled by stimulus money. As important, 97 percent of school administrators identified short-term projects that could be placed in the bid market in 60-90 days, ensuring that projects will have an economic impact this summer rather than in 2010 or 2011 like many other infrastructure projects such as roads or bridges.

School renovation and construction projects would provide employment for a broad range of workers from architects and specialty contractors to installers and building product manufacturers and distributors. **For example, every \$20 billion of federal stimulus funds invested will generate or sustain 150,000–200,000 full-time construction industry jobs for at least a year. As important, there will be substantial, additional economic benefits as the stimulus funds move through the American construction industry into the general economy in the form of new clothing, cars, homes and other vital consumer spending.**

The dire physical condition of our schools and the significant economic and social benefits that would come from investing in our schools demands that Congress allocate at least \$100 billion of the stimulus package for critical school construction projects across the nation.

A Vibrant New Direction for America

The Obama Administration is in a unique position to set a new path for America through the allocation of federal stimulus dollars. It is critical that a substantial portion of those funds be allocated to upgrade the infrastructure of America's public schools and improve the quality of education. This will also ensure that stimulus dollars have an almost immediate economic impact, unlike many other public works projects that require months or years of planning.

If this nation is committed to high academic standards, we must stop ignoring the impact the physical environment plays in students' health and learning. We must commit to creating safe, productive and healthy school environments where children can learn, grow and thrive. This is an issue that transcends differences in location, politics, race or gender, and will inspire and propel us all toward a better future for America and the world. The opportunity is now.