
EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

Wednesday, February 13, 2008
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Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing on “Modern Public School Facilities: Investing in the Future”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “Modern Public School Facilities: Investing in the Future.”*

Good morning. Welcome to today’s hearing on “Modern Public School Facilities: Investing in the Future.”

All of our children deserve a modern, safe, clean and healthy place to learn, regardless of what neighborhood they live in. But today, the unfortunate reality in many communities is that schools are literally crumbling.

A number of estimates over the years have revealed the magnitude of the problem.

In 1996, the U.S. Government Accountability Office said it would take \$112 billion to bring schools into “good overall condition.”

In 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics put that figure at \$127 billion, concluding that 75 percent of schools were in various stages of disrepair.

In 2001, the National Education Association said the U.S. would have to spend \$322 billion to bring all schools to the point where they are “safe, well-constructed” and have “up-to-date technologies.”

In 2005, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave U.S. schools a ‘D’ on its national infrastructure report card.

Most recently, in 2006, Building Educational Success Together said that previous studies “grossly underestimated” the need for school improvement and new construction.

According to BEST, “There continue to be millions of students in substandard and crowded conditions,” particularly in schools serving low-income and minority students.

It is common sense that substandard conditions in our schools make it harder for teachers to teach and children to learn.

Research bears this out, consistently finding a relationship between facility quality and student achievement, independent of other factors.

It's not just learning that suffers; children's health can suffer, too.

A 2004 study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education found that poor environments in schools, primarily caused by indoor pollutants, do "adversely influence the health, performance, and attendance of students."

The 1996 GAO report found that almost 30 percent of U.S. schools have unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory ventilation.

The Environmental Protection Agency and the American Lung Association have reported that asthma accounts for more than 10 million missed school days per year. Since one of the key factors in student learning is time spent in class, this is a problem both for children's health *and* their academic achievement.

Finally, schools in disrepair can adversely affect entire communities.

Poor school quality directly lowers residential property values and can reduce a community's ability to attract businesses. Meanwhile, investment in school facilities brings money into local economies through job creation and supply purchases.

We all agree on the urgent national priority of providing every child with a world-class education – because it is the right thing to do and because our continued economic vitality depends on it.

It is clear that we cannot satisfy that priority unless we help states and school districts improve the physical condition of their school buildings and facilities.

In fiscal year 2001, Congress provided \$1.2 billion for emergency school repairs.

But beginning the following year, with President Bush's first budget, the federal government has provided almost no direct aid to help states and schools pay for school construction and repair. It has remained this way during the entire Bush administration.

It would be wise for us to increase federal investments in school facilities regardless of the nation's economic health. But I would be remiss if I did not point out that the weakening economy adds more incentive for Washington to act.

As state and local tax revenues shrink, states and cities will look to make up that budget shortfall by cutting spending. Budget cutbacks will harm essential services, like education, and they will also exacerbate the economic problems we're seeing.

We can help mitigate the economic damage by investing in school construction projects that will create jobs and inject demand into the economy.

This morning we will hear more about the scope of the need that schools face and the implications of substandard facilities for children's learning and health.

We will also hear proposals for giving the federal government a role in helping schools make much-needed repairs and renovations and build new facilities.

We must invest in making every school a place that communities can be proud of and where children will be eager to learn.

I thank all of our witnesses for joining us, including a number of colleagues who have made the time to be here today. Congressman Chandler will discuss his 21st Century High-Performing Public School Facilities Act, legislation I was proud to cosponsor.

We'll hear from Congressman Etheridge, who along with Chairman Rangel has introduced the America's Better Classrooms Act.

We'll also hear from two outstanding members of this committee, Congressmen Holt and Loeb sack, and from Congresswoman Hooley, head of our Green Schools Caucus.

Thanks to all of you for being here. I look forward to hearing your ideas about how we can address this important national priority.

Thank you.

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