

**Congressman Bob Etheridge**  
**Testimony on Improving Public School Facilities**  
**U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor**  
February 13, 2008

Good morning, Chairman Miller and Ranking Member McKeon, and members of this committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to present my unique perspective on this vitally important issue.

Prior to my service in the U.S. House, I served eight years as the elected Superintendent of North Carolina's public schools. In fact, I have the distinction of being the only former state schools' chief serving in Congress, so I have rare firsthand knowledge of the importance of quality school buildings to the educational goals we hold for our schools, and the challenges those schools face in inadequate facilities. There really is no substitute for bricks and mortar when it comes to quality schools.

But across my District, school officials are striving to provide first class educational opportunities with infrastructure that has not kept up with the times. Simply put, our schools are busting at the seams. Principals and teachers wage a daily struggle to educate our children in overcrowded classrooms, converted restrooms and broom closets and "temporary" trailers.

For example, Harnett Central High School, up the road from my home in Lillington, deals with these problems every day. Harnett Central has earned a record of high standards and outstanding academics despite severe overcrowding problems. Principal Ken Jernigan and his staff work miracles with these young people with a main building originally designed for 960 people now enrolling 1,395 students and 275 faculty and staff. They have been forced to deploy 22 trailers which create serious safety, security and supervision issues. Approximately 33 buses unload between 7:15 and 7:45 each morning. That leaves less than one minute on the average to unload.

These overcrowding problems are not unique to Harnett Central. According to the 2005-06 Public Schools Facility Needs Assessment by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Harnett County needs \$222 million over the next five years for school construction, renovation and modernization. Nearby Johnston County, where I grew up, needs another \$221 million. And Wake County needs \$1.4+ Billion to provide quality facilities for our children. And those are just three of the counties in my district.

Across North Carolina, local communities are crying out for help with school construction. During my final year as Superintendent, we passed a \$1.8 billion state bond issue that was at the time the largest bond referendum in state history. But even after that historic investment, the most recent Assessment documented that we have \$9.8 billion in unmet school construction needs in my state. It is plain as day that the states lack the capacity to deal with this issue. We need national leadership.

My state is not alone. The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities estimated in 1998 that the average public school building in the United States was 42 years old. The National Education Association's 2000 Report: Modernizing Our Schools estimated total school facility need nationwide to be \$300 billion. Part of the problem we have had grappling with this problem from the federal level is a lack of reliable numbers in real time. I recommend the Education and Labor Committee request an updated report from the Government Accounting Office to provide a comprehensive assessment of this problem.

I have been working for nearly ten years to pass school construction legislation. It was one of the first bills I introduced in my freshman term. This Congress, I have teamed up with Democratic Chairman Charles Rangel and Republican Congressman Jim Ramstad of the Ways and Means Committee to introduce H.R. 2470, the America's Better Classrooms Act. This creative bill enjoys the support of 217 cosponsors in the U.S. House from both parties, including many members of this committee.

H.R. 2470 will provide a federal tax credit to the holders of local school construction bonds to leverage school construction funding of some \$25 billion across the country. Local communities are ready to take action to get these projects rolling as soon as they get the word. In North Carolina, officials estimate, they can begin funding projects within 30-60 days. Other legislative proposals under the jurisdiction of this committee could authorize appropriations through the Department of Education for school construction and modernization. Whatever legislative vehicle is most possible, the need for action by this Congress could not be more clear.

Some people say the quality of the facilities doesn't matter. Tell that to the chamber of commerce when they're trying to recruit new business. Some people say that schools can make do with what they've got. Tell that to the student whose God-given abilities are never realized because his or her schools are so overcrowded he or she never got the individual attention she needed to identify her strengths and weaknesses and nurture her development. Some people say education is too expensive. I say it's a whole lot cheaper than the price of ignorance. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, America cannot afford to turn the blind eye of indifference to the struggles of local schools. Whether we like it or not, the global marketplace is reality. Our national competitiveness depends on effective federal/local/partnerships to make every school a world class learning institution.

That effort begins with school construction. I commend this committee for holding this hearing, and I hope the Congress will pass meaningful school construction legislation in 2008 that the President will sign into law.

I have with me a single red brick that I brought with me to symbolize what our communities need from this Congress. Our communities need as many school bricks as we can get to them. I stand ready to help this committee and this Congress achieve that task.