

Testimony of Rep. Ben Chandler
Before the Committee on Education and Labor
At the hearing on “Improving Public School Facilities”
February 13, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to commend the Committee for holding this hearing to address the condition of our public schools. This hearing is about more than just bricks and mortar, it is about providing our children with a safe and healthy learning environment and the technological resources they need to compete in a global world.

The U.S. Department of Education tells us that modern, functional school facilities are a precondition for student learning. Study after study links student performance with building conditions. Many of our schools are in poor health, stemming from old and outdated buildings. The average public school building is over 40 years old and often contains hazards such as lead-based paint, asbestos, poor lighting, and ill-functioning heating and cooling systems. To compound these problems, one-fourth of our schools are overcrowded from trying to cram today's student population into yesterday's classrooms.

The needs of our public schools do not stop with buildings. In today's world, technology is a vital component to a quality education. In classrooms across the world, interactive whiteboards make learning come alive and computers connect what our children learn in history class to what is going on the world today. This technology sparks their interest; it transforms math from mere numbers into exciting, future-driving fields like architecture and engineering.

These technological capabilities exist, but only for a fortunate minority. U.S. schools average one computer for every four students. While some schools are fully equipped with computer and Internet access, many fall far below that average. My own state of Kentucky has made significant improvements in this area in the past few years. We are now among those leading the nation in Internet access with 100% of our schools linked to high-speed broadband connection. But what good is Internet access without computers? Even in Kentucky, where the state average is fewer than four students per computer, there are still numerous schools where as many as 15 to 20 children must share one computer. Schools like this can be found in every state. Given the conditions of our children's learning environments, it is no surprise that our students are struggling to compete in this ever-globalizing world.

Our federal government has an important role to play in preventing our children from falling behind. While our public school system is administered by the states, the education of our children is a national priority. Our federal government has validated this numerous times in the past decade through the creation of programs like No Child Left Behind, Head Start, and the Federal School Lunch Program. While Congress has recognized that educational excellence is vital to the economy and national competitiveness, too often we have failed to provide these programs with the funding necessary to make these goals a reality.

I believe it is time that Congress invests in our school infrastructure. That is why I have introduced H.R. 3021, the 21st Century High-Performing Public School Facilities Act. This bill invests in matching grants and low-interest loans to schools for construction, repair and

modernization of school buildings and educational technology. This bill also provides funds for teacher technology training, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, and energy-efficient facilities - all of which are vital to our kids' educational environment.

Each passing year, it is more costly for states to provide schools with the money they need to make basic, essential improvements. With rising gas prices and a slowing economy, states need our help. This is why the federal government must act now.

We must provide our children with safe, modern buildings in which to learn. We must provide our children with computers. We must provide them with cutting-edge facilities and technology so they can create the machines and ideas of tomorrow – we must equip them to build the future of our country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today as you address this important matter.