

**Testimony of Congressman Dave Loebsack  
Provided to The Committee on Education and Labor  
U.S. House of Representatives  
“Modern Public School Facilities: Investing in the Future”**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McKeon, and my fellow Education and Labor colleagues. It’s an honor to sit on the other side of the dais today to testify on an issue of great importance to our nation’s children, families, and communities. I’m pleased to share this panel with so many of my colleagues today. Mr. Etheridge is the only former state schools chief serving in Congress so I know he understands these issues well. I know that our country’s students deserve better. They deserve to learn in safe environments where they can grow and thrive.

Unfortunately, our public school facilities are not always safe and more often than not, they are in disrepair. The US Department of Education documented in 1998 that the average age of public school buildings is 42 years. At 42, it’s reasonable to expect that a school facility, subject to daily wear-and-tear, will begin to deteriorate. In older buildings, we’ve seen problems with lead paint, and asbestos. We’ve also seen somewhat newer buildings experiencing problems with mold, and poor indoor air quality.<sup>1</sup> These examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Problems vary region by region, state by state, and even district by district.

In Iowa, 46 percent of schools are in rural areas. These schools serve close to 170,000 students. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> District of Iowa, which I represent, 41 out of 65 school districts are rural, and rural education and school facilities are of particular concern to me. According to a recent report by The Rural School and Community Trust, between the 2002-2003 and the 2004-2005 school year, enrollment in rural

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<sup>1</sup> Building Educational Success Together (BEST). Growth and Disparity: A decade of U.S. Public School Construction. October 2006

schools increased by 15 percent compared to a growth of 1 percent for all public schools nationally. In 2006, there were almost 10 million students attending schools in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, while enrollment has increased, high need and rural Local Education Agencies face significant resource shortages. These schools can least afford to make the needed repairs and renovations to ensure that students attend have an environment where they are safe, and able to excel in their studies.

Despite growing need, federal funding has been largely unavailable to leverage local spending. In Fiscal Year 2001, Senator Harkin successfully worked to secure \$1.2 billion for public school repair and renovation. This funding had a dramatic effect on schools across the country. However, it happened only once, and was not enough to cover the extensive repair and renovation needs across the country.

The tremendous growth in school construction over the past decade is heartening, however not all of the investments have been equal. According to a 2006 report by the BEST coalition, the per-student investment made in the most affluent school districts to repair or construct schools, was nearly double the amount of the per-student investment, made in the most disadvantaged school districts. The BEST report also found that students in school districts with predominantly White enrollment benefitted from about \$2,000 more per student, in school repair and construction spending, than their peers living in schools districts with predominantly minority enrollment.<sup>3</sup>

We are lucky in Iowa. Since 1998, Senator Harkin has secured \$116 million for the “Harkin Grant” program which has helped over 260 school districts across Iowa. Dr. Paula Vincent, the Superintendent for the Clear Creek Amana School District in Iowa, will elaborate on the benefits of these

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<sup>2</sup> Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program. Why Rural Matters 2007: The Realities of Rural Education Growth. October 2007

<sup>3</sup> Building Educational Success Together (BEST). Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction. October 2006

grants later in the hearing, but I do want to point out that these grants are a perfect example of how modest federal investments can significantly improve and modernize school facilities. They are also a perfect example of how modest federal investments can leverage significant state resources. Since 1998, these grants have leveraged \$900 million in construction funding.

Unfortunately, not all states have these programs, and many schools, especially those in rural and high need areas, will suffer. That is why I have introduced the Public School Repair and Renovation Act of 2007, the House version of a bill by Senator Harkin, of the same title. I want to thank my colleagues on this committee, Congressman Hare and Congressman Sarbanes, for their support and co-sponsorship of this legislation.

This legislation will take much needed steps toward ending the inequality of funding for schools. The bill provides a total of \$1.6 billion in funding to all states through a formula, based on their most recent Title I allocations, which means that states receive funds based on the number of poor children they serve. The grants are then awarded on a competitive basis to districts and schools that are struggling the most, those in rural and high need areas. States also have the discretion to require matching funds from the local districts increasing the potential for more than just the federal investment.

Finally, the bill requires GAO to report on school facility spending and provide the first estimate since 1995 for the costs needed to bring all schools to a good overall condition.

As districts plan for the modernization of school facilities, I am hopeful they will look closely at the health needs of students, teachers, and administrators. According to the GAO, almost two-thirds of

schools have building features, such as air conditioning, that are in need of extensive repair or replacement leading to air that is unfit to breathe in nearly 15 thousand schools.<sup>4</sup>

Air quality is increasingly important when we consider the growing trend in which students and faculty spend 85 to 90 percent of their time indoors. The concentration of pollutants indoors is typically higher than outdoors, in some cases by as much as 100 times.<sup>5</sup> The significant concentration of pollutants can agitate and increase the likelihood of health problems.

A large and growing body of research demonstrates that green school technology can lead to increased health, learning ability, and productivity. This includes improved test scores, attendance, teacher retention, and satisfaction.

Putting green technology into schools can greatly reduce harmful emissions, lower energy costs, and have an extremely positive impact on our local economies. The average energy savings of a green school over a conventional school is around 33 percent, and the water savings is around 32 percent. In total, the financial savings is estimated at \$70 per square foot, with a \$12 per square foot savings going directly to schools.<sup>6</sup>

As we begin to connect the dots between the environment, a student's learning ability, and the health and well-being of both students and faculty, we must once again direct our attention towards the schools that are least able to afford improvements to their facilities. Yesterday, I introduced the GREEN Schools Improvement Act to address these issues. Like the Public School Repair and Renovation Act,

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Kats "Greening America's Schools," October 2006. Government Accountability Office Report # HEHS-95-95.

<sup>5</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency, "Indoor Air Quality," January 6, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Kats, "Greening America's Schools," October 2006.

funds are distributed to all states, and grants are then targeted to high need and rural Local Education Agencies.

This bill has three objectives. It will help leverage local funds to make greatly needed green improvements, renovations, and repairs while ensuring support for local businesses, stimulation of local economies, and creation of local jobs.

The bill also provides grants to States that have a significant number of high need and rural local education agencies to develop guidelines, standards, and best practices for future energy improvements. The guidelines and standards will again, ensure support for local businesses and resources.

Lastly the bill, similar to the Public School Repair and Renovation Act, will charge the Government Accountability Office with performing a study on the current state of public school needs for repair and renovations. It will also examine the potential to meet this need with energy efficiency, renewable energy, and environmental health improvements.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on the importance of federal support for school modernization. I hope that the Committee will continue to examine this issue very closely, and I look forward to working with you on both my legislation, and on the proposals of my friends and colleagues who share the panel with me today. The bottom line is that there is a need; students deserve better; and we can and should do more to leverage local funds to fix America's crumbling school infrastructure.

