

The public education system is one of the most visible and debated issues in North Carolina today. While issues such as test scores, class size and safety receive broad attention from the media and the public, issues regarding the condition of the school system's infrastructure often go unnoticed. The physical condition of the state's public school buildings is critical to the success of other goals, but more than 46 percent of North Carolina's schools will need some form of renovation in the next five years. **As a result, the state's public schools have been given a Grade of C-.**

BACKGROUND

Every five years, local school boards are required to submit their long-range plans to the state Board of Education, where the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) compiles the information into a Facility Needs Survey report. Following the last report from 2000–2001, DPI issued a *North Carolina Public Schools Facility Needs Survey Preliminary Report* in April, 2006, which outlined the condition of existing facilities and evaluated needs for the next five years.

CONDITIONS

Existing Facility Needs

As the state's population continues to grow, many public schools are being stretched to or beyond capacity and facilities are failing to meet the student's basic needs. DPI's Facts and Figures 2005-2006 and April 2006 North Carolina Public Schools Facility Needs Survey Preliminary Report recorded 2,242 public schools (excluding charter schools) in

the state of North Carolina, and determined their general condition by the number of schools reporting needed renovations. These necessary renovations were presented in seven categories: plumbing/air conditioning/electrical, site improvements, interior/finishes, building exterior/structure, building code/life safety, hazardous material/environmental and other renovations.

| Inadequate Feature | Number Schools | Percent of Total Schools ¹ |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Plumbing/Air Conditioning/Electrical | 797 | 35.5 |
| Site Improvements | 695 | 31.0 |
| Interior/Finishes | 696 | 31.0 |
| Building Exterior/Structure | 686 | 30.6 |
| Building Code/Life Safety | 522 | 23.3 |
| Hazardous Material/Environmental | 331 | 14.8 |
| Other Renovations | 483 | 21.5 |
| Total ² | 1,034 | 46.1 |

¹ Based on 2,242 schools

² Schools may have more than one inadequate feature

The report concluded that more than 46 percent of North Carolina’s public schools require some form of renovation over the next five years. Approximately one-third of these needed renovations are considered “highest” priority, meaning they are

needed in less than two years. In addition, 18.7 percent of all needed renovations in the next five years are to replace obsolete facilities—over 190 public schools in the state will be considered obsolete in five years or less.

FUTURE FACILITY NEEDS

Funding to support increased capacity in the school systems has not grown at the same rate as the student body. DPI’s 2006 Preliminary Report noted that the use of mobile units and temporary classrooms in North Carolina’s public schools has increased by 1,500 in the last five years. There are approximately 178,325 students in mobile classrooms—13 percent of all public school students statewide—and more than 260 new schools will be required in the next five years, a 36 percent increase in needs from 2000. On top of the new schools, in order to meet projected enrollment growth, replace obsolete facilities, ease overcrowding (class size reduction) and reduce the use of mobile units, 1,111 of the state’s existing schools will require additions in the next five years.

The combination of new construction, additions and renovations, in conjunction with a 47 percent increase in construction costs over the past five years, indicates total facility funding need of \$9.7 billion over the next five years.

This represents a significant increase from the \$6.98 billion need identified in the 2000-2001 survey.

Grades were assigned for the Public Schools category in three areas. A grade of D was assigned for renovations due to the more than 46 percent of North Carolina’s public schools requiring renovation in the next five years. Due to the importance of maintaining our existing facilities to meet current and future needs, this grade was weighted more heavily than the other two assigned grades. A grade of B was assigned for the percentage of schools in the system that will be considered obsolete in the next five years—190 schools, or approximately 8.5 percent. And finally, a grade of C was assigned in the area of capacity, given that 13 percent of all public school students in the state are taught in mobile classrooms. Therefore, an overall grade of C- was given to North Carolina’s public schools.

POLICY OPTIONS

As the state’s population continues to increase, North Carolina’s public school system will continue to see a surge in enrollment. Without additional funding, existing facilities will continue to age and fall into disrepair—jeopardizing the students’ ability to succeed. The financial pressure created by these conditions, combined with escalating construction costs,

presents a real challenge for the public school system to keep pace with needs while competing for attention and funding.

ASCE strongly supports all levels of governments making primary and secondary education a priority and providing the resources to support the necessary infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support the increased use of school construction bonds;
- Encourage school districts to explore alternative financing to facilitate construction, including lease financing and financing/ownership/use arrangements;
- Encourage school districts to adopt and follow regular, comprehensive construction and maintenance programs;
- Increase emphasis on research and development for design and construction to meet the rapidly changing teaching environment;
- Encourage the use of life-cycle cost analysis principals to evaluate the total costs of projects;
- Consider direct funding for school construction; and
- Ensure that money earmarked for the public school system is used for its intended purpose.

SOURCES

Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina Public Schools Facility Needs Survey, Preliminary Report, April 2006.

Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, Facts and Figures, 2005-2006.

American Society of Civil Engineers, Report Card for America's Infrastructure, 2005.