

SCHOOLS

2010 Report Card for Pennsylvania's Infrastructure

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Information on the infrastructure of our public and charter schools is just beginning to be more available as more districts participate in the Department of Education's facility surveys, and statistics indicate the state of school buildings is overall good. The 2007-08 report from the Division of School Facilities rated fewer than 6% of schools in Poor Condition, with 28% rated as fair, 36% good and 29% excellent. However, a clear picture of Pennsylvania's school infrastructure can only emerge with greater participation in surveys. Currently only 55% of school districts and 44% of Career and Technical Centers report information to the DOE.

BACKGROUND

Schools have existed in the commonwealth since the founding of Pennsylvania as a province in 1682. Early schools were associated with churches and synagogues established by immigrant settlers. Local and state funding mechanisms were established and local governments were provided a framework to administer free public education in 1831 with the Common School Fund Act and the Common School Law of 1834. When the 1834 law was enacted, the formula for educational funding required county taxes to provide at least twice the amount of revenue received from the state. Since then, the funding formula has changed many times, as have the state laws governing the administration of public education.

CONDITIONS

The Pennsylvania DOE has published facility survey reports for the school years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. These reports provide information regarding the status of the commonwealth's school facilities and projected future construction needs, and contain information requested by the DOE from all school districts, career and technical centers and charter schools. The surveys are voluntary and Web-based.

Two charter schools, 274 school districts (55 percent of the total number of school districts) and 32 career and technical centers (44 percent of the total number of career and technical centers) participated in the survey for the 2007-2008 report.

The survey questions provided information in three areas: condition and capacity of existing facilities and long-range planning.

Pennsylvania DOE, Report on School Buildings, School Year 2007-2008 – Rating of Building Conditions (Excellent to Poor)

Condition	CTCs	Charter Schools	School Districts	Total
excellent	15	0	500	515
good	15	0	620	635
fair	17	1	476	494
poor	1	0	102	103
Total	48	1	1698	1747

Pennsylvania DOE, Report on School Buildings, School Year 2007-2008 Data Estimated Construction Costs Based on Long-Range Facilities Plan

Estimated Construction Costs Based on Long-Range Facility Plan, State-wide				
Year	New Construction	Building Additions	Renovations	Total
2007-2008	\$657,156,649	\$392,985,398	\$672,868,352	\$1,723,010,399
2008-2009	\$589,481,177	\$243,567,195	\$596,377,484	\$1,429,425,856
2009-2010	\$473,599,883	\$160,354,085	\$562,791,820	\$1,196,745,788
2010-2011	\$130,251,804	\$113,352,194	\$283,013,421	\$526,617,419
2011-2012	\$63,732,093	\$99,567,246	\$311,797,405	\$475,096,744
2012-2013	\$389,000,000	\$85,440,453	\$372,731,257	\$847,171,710

POLICY OPTIONS

The following is the current policy employed by the Division of School Facilities at the Pennsylvania DOE:

Section 7-731 of the Public School Code of 1949, as amended, requires Department of Education approval of plans and specifications for all public school construction or reconstruction, and for ordinary repairs or maintenance work of a value greater than \$15,000 for any second, third or fourth class district.

The primary funding of school construction is provided by short-term loans, grants and general obligation bonds managed by local school districts, career and technical centers and charter schools. For the school year 2007-2008, more than \$200 million in short-term loans and more than \$3 billion in general obligation bonds were incurred by public schools and centers, adding

to the total from short-term and general obligation of more than \$22 billion. Not all of short-term and general obligation funds are used by public schools exclusively for building and infrastructure improvements.

Additional assistance is provided by the Pennsylvania State Public School Building Authority. The authority is a public corporation created by an act of the 1947 General Assembly for the purpose of financing the construction and improvement of public school facilities. The authority finances projects through the issuance of bonds, the principal and interest of which are paid by the annual lease/loan payments collected from public schools.ⁱ For the school year 2007-2008, nearly \$69 million in bonds was incurred from public schools and centers, increasing the total to more than \$472 million.

Further assistance is provided to public schools by the Pennsylvania Governor's Green Government Council Green Schools Planning Grants. Since the inception of the program in 2005, 22 public schools have received grants. Public schools also receive funding from the Early Childhood Capital Investment Fund, which provides low-interest loans to school districts in order to increase the availability of early childhood educational learning opportunities. These loans may be used for construction costs, to renovate an existing facility, for needed equipment and furniture or any combination of these. The School Design Clearinghouse provides case study documentation of recent school construction projects which have met cost efficiency and design standards established by the DOE.ⁱⁱ

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pennsylvania sections of ASCE encourage the state of Pennsylvania to:

- Publish regular updates of the Department of Education (DOE) report *Condition of America's Public School Facilities* to ensure a clear view of conditions nationwide;
- Expand federal tax credits to support increased use of school construction bonds;
- Continue and increase federal grants for high-poverty, high-need school districts;
- Encourage school districts to explore alternative financing, including lease financing and financing/ownership/use arrangements to facilitate construction;
- Encourage school districts to adopt regular, comprehensive construction and maintenance programs;
- Increase the emphasis on research and development for design and construction to meet the rapidly changing teaching environment;
- Establish a federal, multiyear capital budget for public works infrastructure construction and rehabilitation similar to those used by state and local governments;
- Encourage the use of life-cycle cost analysis principles to evaluate the total costs of projects; and
- Consider direct federal funding for school construction.

The work the Pennsylvania DOE and local agencies have performed has made it possible for information about the state's schools to reach an audience; prior to 2007, the data simply did not exist within cogent, concise reporting that was freely available to the public.

In addition, the Pennsylvania sections urge the Commonwealth and the Pennsylvania DOE to continue to refine their condition assessment surveys and develop the infrastructure necessary to allow other commonwealth departments, local public schools and the general public access

to the information supporting the reports on school facilities. They should also increase the participation and response by local school systems that are provided condition assessment surveys; and work with other departments in the commonwealth government that administer funding to local school systems and analyze the effects based on condition survey responses.

SOURCES

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- ASCE Policy Statement 452: [Investing in America's School \(PS 452\)](#)
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