

# Report: California's Ailing K-12 Facilities Need Funding Fix

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## FULL TEXT

The University of California's Berkeley campus issued the following news release:

With forecasts of a super wet California winter, findings released today by UC Berkeley's Center for Cities and Schools may set off alarms: More than half of the state's K-12 public school districts fail to meet minimum industry standards for annual spending on maintenance and operations, or on capital improvements like new roofs.

Center researchers took a look at 93 percent of the conventional K-12 districts in the state between 2008 and 2012, the most recent year for which data is available. They found 57 percent of the 879 districts examined fail to meet benchmarks in capital improvement spending, and 62 percent failed to reach the standards for basic maintenance and operation in that period.

Approximately 2.2 million of California's 6 million K-12 students attend these struggling schools.

"This trend signals costly long-term consequences for the state as accumulated facility needs risk becoming a health and safety crisis," according to the analysis, which notes that more than two-thirds of the state's public school buildings are more than 25 years old.

Down to the last dollars

School operating funds come largely from local property tax and state transfers such as those from California's Local Control Funding Formula, under which the state provides funds per student, adjusted based on their grade level and school demographics. Meanwhile, capital budget funding comes from locally imposed development fees, and both local and statewide general obligation bonds. Generally, these budgets are separate.

At this point, California has allotted most of the \$35 billion in statewide school construction bonds approved by voters since 1998, leaving public school districts to cover almost all of their facility costs on their own, according to the report. Maintenance and operations span everything from daily custodial care, security and utilities to regular repairs, while capital investments come into play when a school needs a new roof or heating system.

"Given the ongoing underinvestment in school facilities...and the tremendous differences in local taxable property values per student across the state, California must bolster ... its role in the state-local funding partnership for K-12 school facilities," concludes the report.

California's public schools' facilities financing has long been a contentious issue, with stakeholders on all sides trying to hold the line, or alter the funding formulas. With an eye on keeping California's debt to a minimum, Gov. Jerry Brown has suggested the state reduce its facilities funding, and that local institutions increase theirs.

Focus on the future

The center report, "Going It Alone: Can California's K-12 Districts Adequately and Equitably Fund School Facilities?" calls for the following reforms:

- \* The state Legislature should establish stable, dedicated funding for K-12 facilities
- \* These funds must be distributed equitably, adjusting for local we
- \* School districts should have board-approved, district-wide master plans that assesses facility conditions and identify spending priorities to support student education and health, and to protect facility assets.

\* A basic, statewide inventory of all K-12 facilities is essential to assess school conditions, and to detail district spending to better respond to facility needs and for public account

The report is co-authored by Jeff Vincent, deputy director of the Center for Cities and Schools in Berkeley's Institute of Urban and Regional Development. The center conducts policy research, engages youth in urban planning and cultivates collaboration between city and school leaders to strengthen communities. Liz Jain, a graduate student in Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy, worked with Vincent on the report.

Just to meet minimum standards

Vincent and Jain find that meeting industry benchmarks would require California school districts to spend at least \$1.4 billion in additional funds per year to bring all up to the spending standard in maintenance and operations, and in capital renewals.

They describe their estimate as based on conservative assumptions about existing square footage per student across the state and refurbishment costs. Vincent says getting schools beyond a basic standard of repair - to fully modernize, expand and/or build new facilities - would require significant additional funds.

Industry spending benchmarks for school facility maintenance and operations is 3 percent of the facilities' current replacement value (CRV), and 2 percent of their CRV for capital improvements. The benchmarks are generally accepted in the building sectors, but not codified by any California entities, says Vincent.

"These minimum standards...will simply keep existing school facilities in a steady state of repair," he and Jain write in their report.

Uneven spending

While districts spent \$5.7 billion a year on maintenance and operations between 2008-2012 overall, researchers found the level of spending varied dramatically. Districts meeting the benchmark spent an average of \$1,571 a student per year, but those missing the mark spent \$822 a year per student.

For capital expenses, districts spent a cumulative total of \$6 billion a year in the 2008-2012 timeframe, with 18 percent spending more than \$1,500 per student per year, and 46 percent spending less than \$500 per year per student.

The report also finds that districts with more low-income students tend to have lower taxable property value than wealthy districts, so they tend to draw disproportionately from their general operating budgets to pay for facilities maintenance and upgrades. This reduces spending on educational programs in the less affluent districts and threatens educational equity, the researchers say.

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