

School Infrastructure

Poor conditions in public schools adversely affect student achievement, teacher productivity and retention, according to a survey commissioned by the 21st Century School Fund. The survey conducted by Mark Schneider, a professor of political science at the University of New York–Stone Brook, found that after controlling for demographics, students at schools with the best facilities performed better on standardized tests than those in schools with the worst facilities.

The survey of teachers, also revealed a litany of complaints about school buildings—lack of repair, mold, poor indoor air quality, overcrowding, rooms used inappropriately as classrooms, inadequate wiring for technology, too few electrical outlets, uncomfortable classroom temperature and more.

The condition of schools also had an impact on teacher morale and retention, according to the survey. Among teachers who rated their facilities as average or worse, more than 40 percent said these poor conditions led them to consider leaving their school and almost 30 percent were thinking about leaving the profession entirely.

In December 1993, the Michigan State Legislature passed what is now known as “Proposal A.” On March 15, 1994, voters approved our current method of funding public education.

Proposal A accomplished three objectives. It substantially reduced property taxes; assured local districts a minimum level of per pupil funding to meet state performance standards; and brought equity for Michigan’s students.

What Proposal A did not do is address the infrastructure needs of schools across Michigan. Capital financing is the unfinished business of Proposal A.

In 1974, Michigan initiated an equalization aid formula for school building construction, but the program was terminated in 1980. **Since then, local school districts have had to rely on local property taxes to finance major school construction.**

As a result, property rich districts are able to construct adequate facilities with the relatively low tax rate and low ratio of debt to total taxable value. Property poor districts are much more limited in the facilities they can afford. They must levy high property tax rates and assume high levels of debt to pay for them.

This issue is critical to the future of public education in Michigan. We must take steps to lift all public schools in Michigan into a 21st Century learning environment. There are approximately 1.7 million children who attend our public schools. Every one of these children deserves an equal education.

Michigan is now one of only eight states that has no state tax, grant or subsidy support for school construction funding. Some Michigan children attend school in buildings that are state-of-the-art. Unfortunately, many of our children attend school in buildings that are in a state of disgrace.

A debate over whether to give school districts more autonomy over its bonding money has begun in the Senate Education Committee. Under current law, school districts are supposed to use this bonding money, called "sinking funds" to pay for long-term infrastructure needs. However, school districts that have sinking funds want to be able to expand the use of funds to pay for projects such as technology upgrades and buses.

The expansion would prevent the districts from paying interest on short-term costs, such as technology and buses, and would not result in increased taxes, since districts would still have to ask the voters if they want to increase property taxes.

School District Sinking Funds Senate Bills 54 and 367

Senate Bill 54 (Whitmer, D-East Lansing) and Senate Bill 367 (Kuipers, R-Holland) would reduce the maximum rate and term of a tax that a school district may levy (with voter approval) to create a sinking fund for the purchase of real property and the construction and repair of buildings; and permit the use of that fund for the purchase of school buses or technology for school buildings.

The Senate Education Committee has heard testimony on Senate Bills 54 and 367, but has taken no action.

AFT Michigan supports Senate Bill 54 and 367 because:

- Districts could use the newly dedicated sinking funds for the **purchase of buses or for technology purposes.**
- **If the voters gave their approval,** the bill will enable districts to save any general fund dollars currently spent on these items and return them to **funding classrooms and other operations.**
- The expansion of sinking fund usage will **prevent the districts from paying interest on short-term costs,** such as technology and buses.
- **Districts will still have to ask voters for approval.**

House Bills 54 and 367 will not solve the public school infrastructure crisis, but will be a small step in the right direction. The Senate Education Committee has heard testimony on Senate Bills 54 and 367, but have taken no action. Please contact your State Senator urging support of House Bills 54 and 367.