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Why American Public Schools Are In Ruins – Literally

Crumbling buildings are crippling student success. America needs an infrastructure overhaul.

By **Bob Hellman** | Contributor March 12, 2025, at 8:00 p.m.

An abandoned school room in Draper, Utah.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Department of Education announced it was reducing its workforce by about half, firing more than 1,300 workers from the agency that manages many aspects of K-12 and higher education across the country. President Donald Trump, on the campaign trail and since his inauguration, has signaled that more cuts could be coming, including shuttering the department altogether.

No matter the full scope, drastic cuts to the department could also deal a significant blow to America's public school infrastructure, which faces a crisis that's been building silently for decades but has become increasingly impossible to ignore. The deteriorating state of our schools is one of the biggest threats that undermines the potential of the next generation.

Entering an average U.S. school building today can be a disheartening experience. Too many classrooms suffer from inadequate ventilation, unreliable internet connectivity and insufficient insulation, making them too hot in summer and too cold in winter, which impairs student concentration and learning. Schools in more than half of the school districts in the U.S. require significant repairs or replacements of entire buildings, according to a 2021 report from the American Society of Civil Engineers. The association gave the nation's school infrastructure an unacceptable grade of D+.

More than one-third of public schools use portable buildings because student enrollment exceeds the capacity of their existing facilities, and nearly half of those portables are in poor or only fair condition. The average school building in America is nearly half-a-century old, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Almost 4 in 10 schools were built before 1970. Too many are ill-equipped to meet the demands of contemporary education and to prepare students for the future economy.

Studies from the National Center for Education Statistics have demonstrated that improved facilities lead to better academic outcomes. Students in modernized schools perform up to 20% better on standardized tests compared to those in poorly maintained buildings.

Additionally, schools with upgraded facilities report higher attendance rates, with students up to 15% less likely to miss school due to illness.

The organization I lead, American Infrastructure Partners, works with communities and cities to address their critical infrastructure needs, including at schools.

The consequences of outdated infrastructure extend beyond just discomfort; they are detrimental to student health and performance, and they carry real safety risks. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has linked poor air quality in schools to higher asthma-related absenteeism, which disproportionately affects children from vulnerable families.

The neglect of critical maintenance to our schools is taking its toll. The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that addressing the nation's deferred maintenance in public schools would require spending more than $270 billion on addressing fixes to leaky roofs, broken plumbing and outdated electrical systems.

All this is the backdrop for flagging student performance in the classroom, as data shows students are struggling in reading and math, especially compared to before the

COVID-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic also exposed the divide between affluent and struggling schools in how they are able to support remote learning.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest district, has committed $27 billion since 1997 to modernizing schools through an ambitious program that has revitalized hundreds of facilities, incorporating technology labs, updated classrooms and improved athletic facilities.

Urgent change is needed across the country. Even the federal government's $100 billion for school modernization through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is only a first step and much of that money did not go to true physical plant improvements; additional funding is necessary to tackle the full scope of the problem.

The government is never going to be able to raise the money it needs to in order to improve every school. Additionally, its typically slow pace of action means that, to effectively support today's students, we require quick investment and swift implementation.

Traditional funding methods, such as local government bonds, often fall short. Recent analysis by S&P Global revealed that 42% of local bond measures were defeated, resulting in approximately $31 billion in funding not secured for local projects. This highlights the challenges many districts face in securing necessary funding through conventional means, especially as public support for new taxes and bonds fluctuates.

Public-private partnerships offer a promising solution. By leveraging private capital and expertise, we can accelerate school upgrades, ensuring that every student has access to modern, safe and healthy learning environments. Research from the U.S. Green Building Council shows that energy-efficient schools save an average of $100,000 per year in energy costs, making green bonds a viable and highly effective funding solution.

America's education system is at a crossroads, confronting challenges that demand immediate and decisive action. Improving school infrastructure is an essential part of building a workforce prepared to secure a competitive edge in the global economy. The solutions exist. It's time to make them a reality.

Bob Hellman is the CEO and Managing Director of American Infrastructure Partners, a firm focused on addressing public infrastructure needs by connecting them with private investment solutions.