

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

US Public Schools Get a D+ for Poor Conditions, and Experts Say Problems Are Getting Worse

Source: Christina Zdanowicz and Holly Yan, CNN.com, September 18, 2022

When it gets too hot in Denver and Baltimore classrooms, students are sent home because their schools don't have air conditioning. In Massachusetts, checking for rusty water leaking from a ceiling has become a "morning ritual." In California, a school's cockroach infestation has gotten so bad that some students fear eating lunch.

While school infrastructure problems are a perennial challenge, national data and dismal stories from teachers suggest the crises are reaching an apex. Atrocious school conditions have even prompted some teachers this school year to go on strike.

CNN asked teachers about the conditions of their schools and received more than 250 responses from across the US. Some teachers spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retribution.

"We're getting to a critical stage now," said Mike Pickens, executive director of the National Council on School Facilities. "The average age of a school building now is from 49 to 50 years" -- the highest in memory. Some schools date back to World War II. But as schools get older and more desperate for repairs, the funding gap for public schools keeps getting worse.

"The American Society of Civil Engineers gives the condition of America's 100,000 public school building an overall grade of D+," the National Education Association said late last year. "And no wonder—half of our school buildings are a half century old.

Now, everyone is paying the price for underfunded schools. Students get sick, distracted or miss entire days of education when conditions turn abysmal. Parents sacrifice income to provide child care when classes suddenly get canceled. Burnt-out teachers already stressed by the pandemic and school violence are pushed closer to leaving the profession. Even those not directly connected to deteriorating schools will be impacted, Pickens said. Without more investment in US public schools, he said, "we get further and further behind on the world stage."

From Maryland to Colorado, students struggle to breathe in oppressively hot classrooms. In Baltimore, Marcia Turner is sick of her kids feeling sick at school. "My children can't even breathe in the school. It is so hot. One has asthma," Turner told CNN affiliate WMAR. Fourteen Baltimore schools don't have any air conditioning, school district Chief Operating Officer Lynette Washington told CNN. Those students get sent home early when it's too hot to learn -- 85 degrees or higher in their classrooms, she said.

Stifling temperatures can impede students' academic success. Researchers who looked at millions of test scores from American high schoolers found students tend to score lower when it's a hot school year, according to a 2018 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

But air conditioning mitigated many of the negative effects, the researchers found.

The lack of air conditioning doesn't just stymie students' learning. It also hurts parents who can't afford to leave work to take care of their children in the middle of the day.

"And I can't get off because I'm just starting a job," Turner told WMAR.

The Baltimore school district's COO said she's frustrated, too. About 65% of the city's public schools are over 41 years old; more than a third are over 51 years old.

"We have such a backlog of infrastructure that has not been updated and upgraded in a consistent way. When they're not upgraded toward the end of their life cycle, then we just hold onto them, and we just keep putting Band-Aids on them," Washington said.

"We do not have the dollars. We do not have the resources." Five years ago, Baltimore had 75 public schools without air conditioning, Washington said. Installing AC in all those schools would cost \$250 million -- about five times the district's entire annual infrastructure budget.

Forty Denver public schools still lack AC, down from 55 in 2019, Marsal said. In 2020, Denver voters approved bonds to pay, in part, for the installation of air conditioning units in schools, including a two-year plan to air-condition McAuliffe, the school district said.

But supply chain problems delayed installations this summer, leaving the work at eight schools only partially completed. So the district has heat mitigation liaisons, Marsal said. Portable cooling units are strategically placed during the day, and windows are opened at night, she said. Opening windows, though, means "we basically daily get wasps and flies -- and it's always exciting when that happens," Sara said. In the heat of day, Sara said, conditions in classrooms can make older kids anxious.

"You have students, I'm sure, who are nervous about sweat stains or they sit down on a plastic chair and their butt gets sweaty," she said. "It's stuff as an adult we're not as self-conscious about, but a teenager absolutely is." "I sweat, like, everywhere," seventh grader Zmarra Fleming told CNN affiliate KUSA. "In the classrooms, it's really hot. It's, like, hot where the point is you can't really breathe in there."

Leaking water in classrooms and brown, stained ceiling tiles have made for a "morning ritual" among some teachers at Joseph G. Pyne Arts Magnet School in Lowell, Massachusetts.

"Outside my room, in the hallway, there's several tiles that are stained brown like rusty, dirty water from leaks," said Eric Kolifrath, a seventh and eighth grade science teacher. "Everyone on my floor, especially if it's rained, we examine the ceiling to let the custodial staff know if we see new leaks." Last school year, a ceiling tile got so wet it "bowed out like a bowl," Kolifrath said. So custodians wheeled in a 33-gallon trash bin to collect the water.

The school funding gap keeps getting worse. The money spent on fixing or building US public schools falls woefully short of what's needed to get buildings up to standard, according to the latest "State of Our Schools" report by the 21st Century School Fund, the International WELL Building Institute and the National Council on School Facilities.

And the gap is widening. In 2016, public schools were underfunded by \$46 billion a year (or \$60 billion, when adjusted for inflation to 2020 dollars), the report said. By 2021, that annual deficit had grown by \$25 billion.

Where does funding for public school buildings come from? The funding sources and ratios vary across the country.

But in general, "local school districts bear the heaviest responsibilities for school construction capital funding," according to the 2021 "State of Our Schools" report.

Local school districts paid 77% of the costs for PK-12 capital projects. States paid 22% to districts for capital outlay and debt service. But state support is highly variable, with 11 states paying nothing to eight states paying over half the district-level capital costs. Public school districts got slightly more than 1% from federal funds for school construction.

"We have a gap of about \$85 billion in our country from where we are to where we need to be to be current with codes and standards and the quality of education," Pickens said. "In that, \$57 billion is in capital improvements, and about \$28 billion is in M&O -- which is maintenance and operation."

Even with regular maintenance, "about 50 years is a good place to (consider) replacing a school," Pickens said. But funding sources vary widely, and it can be hard to secure money for school improvements without raising taxes.

"Every state handles school facility improvements a little differently," said John Heim, executive director of the National School Boards Association. But "it usually comes from property taxes." And that can put already-disadvantaged students in a more dire situation. "It affects poor districts or those that have lower tax bases more than it does wealthier districts that have more tax base to call on. And so as things get more expensive, you're going to see that gap continue to grow."

Some school districts haven't been able to complete projects due to supply chain shortages or an increase in the cost of raw materials, he said. And remote or hybrid learning during the pandemic means some parts of schools may have been neglected.

"We've had two years of less use than we had," Pickens said. "And because students were not in buildings, we probably did not continue the maintenance and operation and capital improvements of those school buildings because students weren't in them."

Inflation this year could also be getting in the way of school improvements, Heim said.

And if America keeps underfunding public schools, the impact could last generations, said Mary Kusler, the National Education Association's senior director for advocacy.

"It's really setting up a continued structural imbalance between the haves and the have-nots ... unless we step up and push to ensure that a child's ZIP code does not determine the education they receive," she said.

"But that's what it comes down to: affordability and helping those poorer districts with their facilities." That doesn't mean wealthier school districts with state-of-the-art buildings should have anything taken away, Kusler said.

"The issue isn't that they deserve less. The issue is actually that all of our kids deserve more," she said.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the poor condition of America's schools? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.