

The Facilities Gap

Cameras in Hand, Students Capture Photos of Schoolhouse Decay

Nearly 20 years ago the American Federation of Teachers called for a “Marshall Plan” for urban schools, pointing out that the infrastructure of cities had deteriorated as federal funds were sharply reduced. Existing school buildings were crumbling and new schools were not being built. This problem has now spread far beyond the boundaries of urban school districts and touches nearly every school system in our nation.

Staff in the most neglected schools struggle to educate students in conditions that few corporations—much less building inspectors—would tolerate. Mold, leaking ceilings, extreme temperatures, raw sewage seeping into hallways, mice droppings, severely overcrowded classrooms—these unhealthy and unsafe conditions plague tens of thousands of old and new school buildings where millions of American children and adults must study and work. As a Boston math teacher put it, these deplorable conditions “convey a message to the students: You are not worth the effort of providing and maintaining a good school.”

Unhealthy and unsafe school conditions make it difficult for students to concentrate, for teachers to teach, and for staff to do their jobs. An elementary media specialist in Lake County, Fla., put it very well when she said, “Think of how much learning could take place if heads were clear, noses were not running, and coughing were not a constant distraction.”

This article is adapted from “Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning crumbling schools into environments for learning,” a new report from the AFT. For more information, see box on page 51.



DJ, Grade 8

“This picture has a lot of garbage. It has a ball, newspaper, a hubcap, a metal fence, candy wrappers, etc. All that garbage is floating on dirty water. This is a staircase to get to the basement of the school—looks like nobody’s been down there in a while. I took this picture because that is definitely a place they need to fix up.”

The AFT does not consider poor conditions an excuse for schools to escape accountability. But we will not shirk our responsibility to advocate for our members and their students by ignoring the situation. Poor school building conditions create a terrible inequity—a facilities gap—in which low-income and minority children are disproportionately affected by often appalling physical conditions. One of the greatest concerns is that unhealthy schools appear to be contributing to an increase in the number of students with asthma. Asthma can be caused—and exacerbated—by persistent exposure to air pollution and poor ventilation, both of which appear to be prevalent in school buildings. In a 1999 report on the condition of public school facilities, 26 percent of schools reported unsatisfactory ventilation and 18 percent reported unsatisfactory indoor air quality.¹ The consequences appear to be severe:

- Nearly one in 13 school-age children has asthma, and the percentage of children with asthma is rising more rapidly among preschool children than any other age group, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.²
- Among children ages 5-17, asthma is the leading cause of school absence due to a chronic illness. This translates to an annual loss of more than 14 million school days per

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Students' Photos, Students' Voices

It's one thing to read about moldy bathrooms, drafty classrooms, and leaky ceilings; it's another to see them—and still another to see them through the students' eyes. The photos shown here, and on the previous page, were taken by middle- and high-school students in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Md. These students are working with Critical Exposure, an organization founded by Adam Levner, a former fifth-grade teacher, and Heather Rieman, a former education policy analyst, to get students involved in documenting

the disparities in our school system. "Much as the Civil Rights Movement depended on those who were not directly impacted by segregation being exposed to brutal images of racial injustice," say Levner and Rieman, "the education movement will not succeed so long as Americans are shielded from seeing the reality that exists in many low-income schools."

Critical Exposure provides students with cameras and teaches them about documentary photography and visual storytelling. It then arranges

for the photos to be hung in art galleries, libraries, schools, cafes, and other public places to inform people about the conditions in our schools. In an effort to make the distribution of educational resources more equitable, Critical Exposure partners with community groups across the country to strengthen their campaigns by using the power of students' images and voices. To learn more, visit Critical Exposure online at www.criticalexposure.org.

—EDITORS

**Chris,
Grade 12**

"This is a picture of the broken water fountain in the school."



**Robert,
Grade 11**

"The Hole That Grew: When this chipped area in the wall first started it was not bigger than a cat eye. And now, due to no one fixing the hole when it first started it has grown."

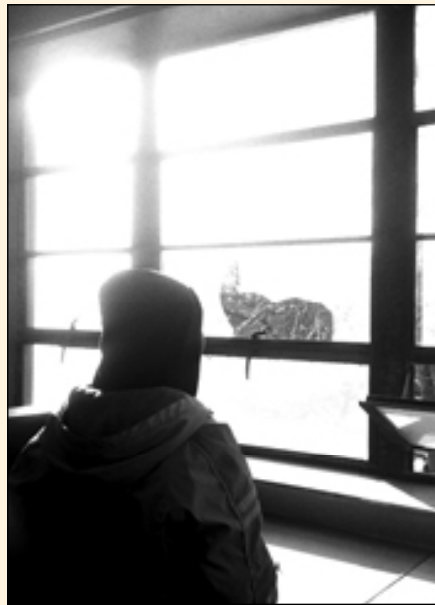
Top right, **Frances, Grade 11**
Right, **Alexis, Grade 12**





**Kayla,
Grade 10**

"This is my AP Government and Politics class. This picture displays the conditions that students have to endure in order to obtain an education from a recognized school of excellence."



**Ian,
Grade 10**

"This window has been broken for months. Insulation problems lead to higher energy costs."



Above, **Timothy, Grade 10**



Far left and below, **Alexis, Grade 12**

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“Temperature extremes range from being so cold in the winter that students/teachers have to wear their coats and gloves (making it difficult to write) and so hot in spring and fall (up to 98 degrees in some classrooms) that children have nosebleeds and vomiting, and teachers feel faint and nauseated.”

**—Teacher
New York City**

year, or approximately eight days for each student with asthma.³

■ The death rate from asthma for children ages 5-14 doubled from 1980 to 1998,⁴ with African-American children and young adults four to six times more likely than white children and young adults to die from asthma.⁵

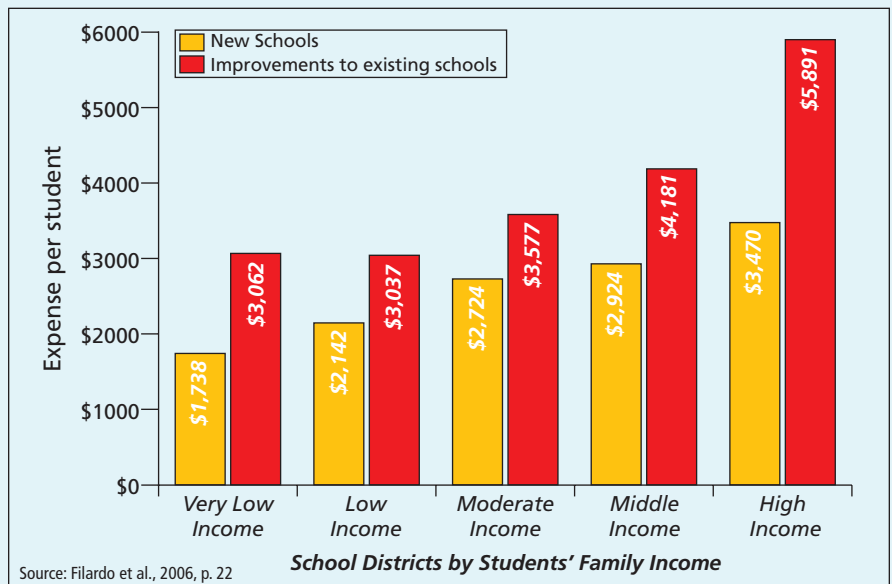
The need for additional federal support for state and local efforts to build, repair, and modernize schools is tremendous. But with or without additional federal dollars, teachers, support staff, parents, and other members of the community can bring unhealthy conditions to light, push for repairs to be made, and ensure that new construc-

The Facilities Gap Appears to Be Growing

A little over a decade ago, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that about 60 percent of the nation’s schools needed at least one major repair and that one-third of the schools—which educated 14 million students—needed extensive repairs or to be replaced (GAO, 1995). Not surprisingly, it also found that schools in need of repairs were concentrated in central cities and tended to have very high percentages of students from low-income families (GAO, 1996).

Since that time, nearly \$600 billion has been spent on school construction; more than 12,000 new schools have been built and over 130,000 repairs and other improvement projects have been completed (Filardo et al., 2006). But because that money has not been distributed and spent equitably, problems still exist—especially in urban areas.

As the chart above shows, high-income districts spent[†] roughly twice as much as very low-income districts



on school construction, improvements, and repairs, between 1995 and 2004.

But wait: It gets worse. Not only did high-income districts spend more, they were mostly doing upgrades. In contrast, the low-income districts were making desperately needed repairs. The researchers found that:

Most projects that took place in very low-income school districts were health- and safety-related projects, often the result of poorly maintained school buildings. Examples include the “warm, safe, and dry” initiative of the Cleveland Municipal School

District and the basic health and safety projects of the Abbott School Districts in New Jersey, where roof and boiler replacements, asbestos abatement, and other basic improvements consumed the vast majority of construction dollars. In contrast, in the high-income districts, projects in existing schools were much more likely to entail modernizing a science lab, adding a performing arts center, or investing in other facility improvements that enhance the quality of education. By modernizing their buildings, affluent districts are further increasing the edu-

[†]In this study, very low-income districts were those in which more than 75 percent of students qualified for lunch subsidies, low-income districts were those in which 40 to 75 percent of students qualified for lunch subsidies, moderate-income districts were those in which 25 to 40 percent of students qualified for lunch subsidies, middle-income districts were those in which 10 to 25 percent of students qualified for lunch subsidies, and high-income districts were those in which less than 10 percent of students qualified for lunch subsidies.

tion and modernization projects are planned, designed, implemented, and maintained in a manner that produces conditions conducive to teaching and learning. Here are several examples of how AFT affiliates have been trying to improve their local school facilities.

- In Newark, N.Y., the AFT local union played an active role when the district undertook a \$50 million building project in 2000. Union members sat on districtwide planning committees, and union leadership followed the process closely as construction proceeded, particularly when classes were conducted during construction. The union requested copies of air quality reports as they were issued and accompanied building and fire inspectors on their tours after construction was completed and before certificates of

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ditional amenities available to their students, while poorer school districts are struggling just to keep their students dry. (Filardo et al., 2006, p. 22)

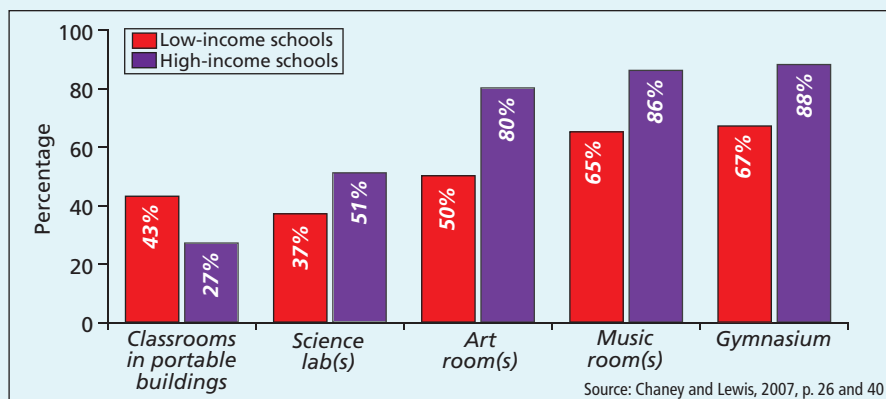
A thorough, national study of school facilities has not been completed since the GAO's study in the mid-1990s, so it is not possible to say what percentage of the nation's schools now need major repairs. However, two recent nationally representative surveys indicate that much work remains. One survey asked principals about a range of factors that affect the school environment (such as indoor air quality, acoustics/noise control, and heating); about one-third of principals reported that there was at least one factor that interfered with instruction (Chaney and Lewis, 2007). The other survey asked teachers if their school buildings and grounds were clean and in good condition; 18 percent of all teachers, and 24 percent of teachers who work in inner city

"The mold is so bad that in one of the teachers' bathrooms, mushrooms are growing."

**— Math specialist
Greenburgh, N.Y.**

schools, said no (Markow et al., 2006). Similarly, a 2002 study of the schools that 10th-graders attend found that many needed basic repairs and better maintenance. For example, in 30 percent of all of the schools studied and 38 percent of the urban schools, some bathroom stalls were missing doors; trash was found on the floor in 16 percent of all the schools studied and 26 percent of urban schools (Planty and DeVoe, 2005).

Trash on the floor and missing bathroom doors are, of course, urgent problems—but so too are disparities in science labs, gymnasiums, art rooms, and other amenities. For many urban schools, this isn't an issue of



"[Our school has] broken ceiling tiles, plumbing in bathrooms that have not been updated since the '60s, dirty carpets and electrical outlets that don't work (this causes the use of extension cords across the room), and finally, roaches everywhere!"

**—Paraprofessional
Oklahoma City**

needing repairs, it's an issue of needing to have such spaces. The survey of principals mentioned above revealed great disparities between schools in terms of what they can offer students. As the chart below shows, low-income schools* are much more likely to have classrooms in portable buildings and are much less likely to have amenities like science labs or music rooms.

—EDITORS

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*In this study, low-income schools are those in which at least 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and high-income schools are those in which less than 35 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

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occupancy were issued. The union was vigilant about ventilation systems for science labs and technology rooms, where it continually monitored gas jets, chemical showers, chemical storage closets with locks, and other safety issues. Once construction was completed, the union continued monitoring and reporting problems to district administrators, such as leaky roofs, incomplete classroom finishing work, malfunctioning parking lot lights, heating and air ventilation problems, and improperly mounted equipment that could fall (e.g., projection screens and televisions).

■ In Chicago, Ill., the AFT local union regularly monitors the condition of schools with a three-step process. First, members are encouraged to report problems to the building-level Professional Problems Committee, which makes sure the principal follows up with a work order for necessary repairs. Second, if repairs aren't made, the union then directly contacts Chicago Public Schools officials. Finally, if the problem is not fixed, a complaint is filed with the Illinois Department of Labor, which will visit the site and issue citations, if necessary. Examples of recent problems

“[We have] leaks and even the occasional icicle from my computer lab ceiling, asbestos coming up off the floor, the exterior walls are crumbling. We feel forgotten by our community and state and federal funding.”

—Technology coordinator
Minnesota

include large amounts of dust in a building from external sandblasting, ceiling tiles falling on students and staff, and dangerously loose floor tiles. The union newspaper regularly highlights unsafe building conditions, as well as the union's actions to protect students and staff.

■ In Baldwin, N.Y., AFT members participate in the district's very active health and safety committee. The committee formulated an indoor air quality document that is used as a standard in other districts. Air quality issues are investigated within 24 hours of a complaint being filed. When an addition was built to Baldwin's middle school, all members of the committee were furnished with hardhats and invited on walkthroughs during the construction.

AFT members bring to the school facilities process a vital institutional memory, a deep understanding of how the school building can help or hinder the learning process, and an abiding concern for the well-being of students and colleagues.

The urgent conversation about educational improvement in our country is usually missing one critical element—the physical condition of many of our schools. That omission is unfair to students and the staff who work with the students, and it inhibits the advances in achievement we need to

build a more equitable society and a stronger economy. High-performing schools—healthy and sustainable, built and maintained to spark learning and generate pride—cannot be reserved for select communities. They must be part of the academic agenda for every American student. If this nation is committed to high academic standards, we must stop ignoring the impact that the physical environment plays in students' health and learning. □

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999, by Laurie Lewis et al. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2000).

² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, IAQ Tools for Schools: Managing Asthma in the School Environment (Washington, D.C., 2000), www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/asthma/10ways_asthma.pdf.

³ “The Costs of Asthma,” Asthma and Allergy Foundation 1992 and 1998 Study, 2000 Update.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data, (Atlanta, Ga.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000-2003).

⁵ Asthma: A Concern for Minority Populations. See www.blackhealthcare.com/BHC/Asthma/Description.asp.

“Building Minds, Minding Buildings” is available at www.aft.org/topics/building-conditions/downloads/minding-bldgs.pdf.

The report covers the problem of inadequate, unhealthy, and unsafe public school building conditions; the consequences of poor conditions on learning, health, and staff retention; the elements of well-designed, well-built, well-maintained schools; and recommendations for action at all levels to improve school buildings.

