

Rewarding neglect?

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State paying for new schools rather than repairing the old

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The roof leaked, water seeped through the library walls, and mold grew in hidden spots inside the Lincoln School in Winchester. The 98-year-old building was literally rotting away with age and neglect until recent repairs began to resolve the problems.

"I had constant upper respiratory illnesses while I worked there," said Stephen E. Gorrie, a former Lincoln School teacher who now heads the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

For Winchester, the solution came when residents recently voted to override Proposition 2 1/2 to pay to renovate the Lincoln School. Meanwhile, dozens of other schools across Massachusetts remain in a state of disrepair.

State Rep. Kay Khan, a Newton Democrat, is proposing a measure to increase funding for school improvements.

Exactly how much money the schools need, however, is unclear. The state Department of Education does not keep an inventory of proposed school repairs.

Mike Sentence, education advisor to Gov. Paul Cellucci, termed the lack of such an inventory "absurd." He is one of many experts who believe the school building assistance program needs to be overhauled.

In essence, critics charge, the way the state finances the school building assistance program rewards administrators who neglect the multibillion-dollar investment already made in the state's public schools. The state Legislature has doubled the amount of money it spends on major construction and renovation projects since 1990. Meanwhile, the commonwealth has abandoned a program to finance smaller repairs that could extend the life of some schools.

Each year, the state department sends an open-ended list of approved projects to Beacon Hill for state funds. As a result, each legislator aims to grab as much money as possible for the home district, turning the process into what one state official called "a pork-fest."

The state's reimbursement formula uses 10-year-old economic data to determine what proportion of local school construction costs it should pay, which overlooks important changes in local tax revenues.

"The current system is not working," said Jim Peysler, newly named chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education. "The program encourages poor maintenance, because school districts have to pay for that out of their own pockets. But when they want to build new schools, they can go hat in hand to the state."

How the system works

The School Building Assistance Bureau, an arm of the Massachusetts Department of Education, is in charge of the state's school construction and renovation program.

Every year, dozens of blueprints arrive in the bureau's

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Malden office as school districts scramble to meet the March 1 deadline for submitting preliminary school construction proposals.

Jim Anderson, who heads the five-person bureau, is usually familiar with most of the plans. He works with each school district to help make sure their projects meet all the rules, some of which date back to 1948.

For instance, the rules say a district must consider renovating a school or reopening closed buildings rather than building a new one. Three out of every four projects approved since 1990 involved school additions and renovations, Anderson said.

But often administrators try to make a case that building new schools will be more cost-effective than doing renovations. And ultimately the decision is up to local voters.

"We're working with approximately 170 projects," Anderson said.

Some of those projects will be shelved by June 1, swept out of contention for state reimbursement by local taxpayers who may vote against funding their portion of the costs of a school's construction.

But once a town approves a project and it meets the bureau's criteria, the proposal goes to the Legislature and governor for funding. The project is then added to a rolling list of school construction plans awaiting authorization.

Year after year, the Legislature makes appropriations for the projects at the top of the list. As a result, it may take as long as four years for a community to get a state appropriation.

While a town waits for state funds to flow into local coffers, it may float bonds to start construction. Eventually, the town will get as much as 90 percent of the costs of the project paid for by the state. On average, Massachusetts pays nearly 70 percent of the cost of new school construction and major renovations.

The program is designed to address social goals — desegregation as well as physical concerns. For example, Boston, Cambridge and other cities with school building plans designed to correct racial imbalances get the highest proportion of state money and

get funding priority.

Some critics complain, however, that the reimbursement rates are unfair, because they're based on outdated economic assumptions about each town's tax base.

"There are a lot of cities and towns that get too much money and some that get too little," said state Rep. Edward G. Connolly, who wants an investigation of the reimbursement system to see if it's fair. "There are definite discrepancies."

Dollars and sense

Last year, the state spent \$34 million to finance 51 new school construction and renovation projects. On top of that, the commonwealth spent \$200 million in ongoing payments for school construction projects approved in the past. All together the state has agreed to pay a total of \$6 billion for school building projects already under way.

Senate President Thomas Birmingham agreed the program has fundamental problems.

"We may be encouraging irrational decisions in some areas," Birmingham said. "There are some schools in the commonwealth that should be rebuilt instead of replaced."

However, the Legislature itself may have compounded the problem.

About 450 maintenance projects proposed by schools all over the state have been waiting for reimbursement for as long as 10 years. The projects include boiler replacement, roof repair and asbestos removal. The projects would cost the state \$174 million. But the Legislature hasn't allocated any money for those repairs.

"We send a very strange set of incentives to local school districts," said James St. George, executive director of the Team Education Fund. "The state pays between 50 and 90 percent of new construction costs but requires local towns to pay 100 percent of the cost of repairs."

But school superintendents have been forced to forgo those repairs as they struggle to meet the mandates of the Education Reform Act of 1993 and confront the limits on local spending imposed by Proposition 2 1/2.

Commissioner Driscoll said the state needs to revive some method of helping districts perform repairs. "We need to figure out how to help districts finance major repair projects," Driscoll said.

School spending edict 'long overdue'

Some educators question its impact

Until last year, the state gave school districts no incentive — neither a carrot nor a stick — to repair and maintain their buildings. In 1998, however, the commonwealth adopted a new law that requires each district to meet a minimum level of spending on maintenance.

Now they must spend at least 50 percent of their foundation budget — the target spending level set by the 1993 Education Reform Act — for ordinary and extraordinary maintenance. If districts fail to spend the required amount, they may lose their eligibility for state aid for major school construction and renovation projects — a step many believe was long overdue.

"I think this should have been done in the first year of education reform," said John Crisafulli, the superintendent of Westford public schools. "They should have obligat-

ed us."

Perry Davis, president of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents and superintendent of the Dover-Sherborn Schools, agreed that the state had to do something to protect its investment. "It's just driving the point back to school committees and communities that the state is giving us additional aid, and it's coming with strings attached," Davis said.

But some experts are concerned the law won't live up to expectations.

"It is not clear how much of a real impact this new requirement will have, because the law allows districts to count utility costs towards meeting their requirement," said David Driscoll, commissioner of the Department of Education.

The impact of the law will be known at the end of the year when the education department tabulates school district spending.

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