

**EDITORIAL**

# SBAB reforms are overdue

For more than 50 years, local officials have sold school building projects with the argument that state reimbursement of up to 90 percent of the cost made new schools a bargain. State officials are recognizing how expensive all those bargains can be: It's now paying for more than \$6 billion in new school construction, and the school building boom shows no sign of slowing.

Most of those schools are vitally needed. Enrollment is growing, and schools built for the baby boomers are showing their age. Many cities and towns, caught in near constant budget crises since the adoption of Proposition 2 1/2, have shortchanged maintenance. Education itself has changed in many ways older buildings cannot easily accommodate.

But while the need is real, it's also clear that the state's School Building Assistance Bureau limits the options available to communities — with a bias toward the most expensive solutions. It covers new school construction, but not major maintenance like new roofs or heating systems. It reimburses school districts for complete renovations, but not smaller renovations or stopgap measures like modular classrooms. Its strict requirements for square footage inside and athletic fields outside create an incentive for sprawling complexes on

land that should be preserved as open space. SBAB reimbursements cover everything connected with a school project — landscaping, furniture, computers and such amenities as fieldhouses and swimming pools — which is often an incentive to gold-plating.

Based on the wealth of the community, SBAB reimburses from 60 percent to 90 percent of the costs of a school project. The average reimbursement is 69 percent, a figure Gov. Paul Cellucci says would remain unchanged under the SBAB reforms he proposed this month. But his reforms would lift the incentives toward maintenance and renovation, not new construction. They would discourage the use of open space for new schools. They would remove the 90 percent reimbursement rate for projects associated with racial balance plans, a financial incentive that undermines confidence in the educational goals of school desegregation plans. The bottom line is that the state would get more bang for its school construction buck.

The great virtue of the SBAB program has been that by providing a separate source of funding for school buildings, it insulates school districts' operating budgets from major capital needs. But we can no longer pretend there is no competition between buildings and programs. The state's share of the SBAB budget has grown from \$127 million a year in 1990 to \$331 million this year and is projected to approach \$400 million by fiscal year 2002. At those levels, SBAB will inevitably cut into state appropriations for other education needs.

As a general rule, educators are not good at embracing change. Superintendents with specific school projects in the works are already resisting the proposed SBAB reforms, fearful that any changes in the reimbursement rates or the reimbursement rules will jeopardize their funding.

No one is proposing changing state reimbursements for projects already approved, nor should they. But even school officials with approved projects cannot ignore the debate over the SBAB. Those trying to sell voters on a debt exclusion override will have to prove their projects are based on real needs, not the SBAB's incentives to overspend. They should determine whether the proposed changes in SBAB rules would create new options for less costly projects — and open those options for consideration.

Cellucci's reforms have been endorsed by the state Board of Education and welcomed by House Speaker Tom Finneran and Senate President Tom Birmingham. There may be room for improvement through the legislative process. If so, educators and local officials dependent on state support for new schools should join that debate or get out of the way. If we don't act soon, what we gain in shiny new school buildings we may lose in support for the teaching inside.