

Michigan's school buildings: Neglected and unfunded

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With less than 17 months to spend \$6 billion in federal COVID-19 money earmarked for facility upgrades, Michigan school districts may still be swimming upstream when the money is gone. Nationally, \$123 billion was distributed to school districts by the CARES Act in 2020 for facility maintenance and upgrades, with the caveat that the money be spent by September 2024.

Michigan school districts have never received state funding for maintenance and infrastructure upgrades, always relying on bonds and millages based on the districts' property taxes, leaving its poorer districts starved for funds. As a result, Michigan's children are confined to out-of-date, dilapidated and unsafe school buildings.

The funds received through the federal CARES Act were distributed based on the proportion of low-income students enrolled in the district. But they fall far short of meeting the needs of public schools at almost every level.

Cities such as Detroit and Flint have received greater resources than wealthier districts. Yet in Detroit, where in 2016 teachers organized sickouts, independent of the teachers' union, to protest the deplorable conditions in the schools, little has improved. Official documentation published by the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) states: "With continuing rising costs, our Facility Master Plan proposes the **most immediate investment needs totaling \$700M out of a \$2.1 billion need** [emphasis in the original]."

School infrastructure continues to receive a D+ rating from the American Society of Civil Engineers in Michigan as well as nationally. Yet a 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that improving HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) and air quality systems was a lower

priority for school districts than "security updates." With few requirements attached to the federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds allocated by the CARES Act, some Michigan districts opted to spend a portion of their allocation on security cameras and metal detectors.

The same report determined that 54 percent of school districts nationally needed to entirely replace or upgrade buildings.

In 2019, Democratic Representative Bobby Scott of Virginia, in introducing legislation to address crumbling school infrastructure, noted that every year school infrastructure funding was "underinvested" by \$46 billion nationally. The "State of Our Schools" report that he cited also noted that, in fact, \$145 billion was required every year to modernize and maintain the nation's public schools. While Scott's proposal fell far short of the need, it nevertheless died in the House. When reintroduced as H.R. 604, the Rebuild America's Schools Act of 2022, it never even got to a House vote.

The most recent State of Our Schools (2021) report notes that, accounting for necessary COVID-19 safety measures and inflation, the \$46 billion annual underfunding has ballooned to \$85 billion (and that is in 2020 dollars, when the inflation rate was 1.23 percent). The report also considers the increased costs of construction due to inventory and labor shortages. School construction costs rose from \$262 per gross square foot in 2016 to \$343 in 2020, a more than 30 percent increase. Additionally, annual expenditure for school construction, which crashed along with the rest of the economy after 2009, still lags by 20 percent behind pre-recession levels.

The dismal state of school buildings in Michigan, as in the rest of the country, is emblematic of the decades of defunding of public education. With the onset of the

COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, 60 percent of the state's schools did not have air conditioning. The 2020 GAO investigation found one school that relied on a boiler from the 1920s for heat.

A 2021 *Chalkbeat* survey demonstrated that 25 percent of Michigan schools' HVAC systems were at least 20 years old, and almost no schools had systems for air filtration to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For the last three years, teachers in Michigan and across the country have been constructing their own DIY room filtration systems, known as Corsi-Rosenthal boxes, a totally inadequate solution to a life-and-death problem.

The *Detroit Free Press* notes that despite \$20 million allocated by the Michigan legislature in June 2022 to audit the state's school infrastructure needs, this has not taken place. The *Free Press* reports that Flint schools "closed for several days in summer 2021 because of a lack of air conditioning" in some buildings. One year later, Dearborn schools "canceled class when temperatures soared."

Southeastern High School in Detroit only reopened on March 15 following a shutdown of over two months after pipes burst, flooding the school in January. Students were switched to remote instruction after the Christmas holidays.

In many schools, student bathrooms are in need of repair, lead in the water has not been eliminated, elevators remain inoperable for months in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In a recent interview with the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, Tynisa Williams documented the appalling conditions educators in Montgomery, Alabama, confronted upon their return to in-person instruction. Similar conditions persist in nearly all US states, including Michigan.

The rotting infrastructure of schools is an expression of the rot within the capitalist system. When educators ask, "Why is there no money for our schools?" they should consider this:

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer's most recent budget handed huge windfalls to the automakers, including \$1.7 billion to Ford Motor Company's proposed EV battery plant in Marshall (or \$693,000 per job for the 2,500 workers to be hired). The US spent more than \$115 billion on the war in Ukraine in 2022, with no end in sight, and the Biden administration has proposed a military budget of nearly \$1 trillion for

future wars launched in the pursuit of US global domination.



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