



Issue Brief

The American Institute of Architects • Government Advocacy • Federal Issue Position and Analysis

Key Points

- *The AIA believes school design plays a major role in the learning environment. Proper school design can also promote healthy, safer learning environments.*
- *There is a need to focus attention on the role of school design in the educational process and the life of local communities.*
- *School repair and modernization are needed to make the nation more competitive with other countries in a global environment.*
- *The GAO estimates that \$112 billion is needed to bring America's schools into "good" overall condition.*
- *A national study of the impact of school design on America's competitiveness in the 21st century is needed.*
- *Green elements should be incorporated in school modernization and new construction projects.*

21st-Century Schools: School Modernization and Sustainable Design

AIA Position

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) believes that education is a top national priority and that a proper built environment is vital to ensure that our children have a safe and healthy place to learn. School modernization, repair, and construction must be addressed nationwide. Though school construction is generally a matter of state and local jurisdiction, the AIA believes there is a consistent and complementary Federal role in providing assistance, tax incentives, and "best practices" information for local school systems as they design new schools to make our students competitive with those in the rest of the world.

Actions Sought

- The AIA supports legislation to conduct a comprehensive study to quantify the effects of well-designed, healthy, safe, and sustainable educational facilities on the well-being of children and academic achievement.
- The AIA supports funding the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, a public service that provides information on planning, designing, funding, building, improving, and maintaining schools. The Clearinghouse is managed by the National Institute of Building Sciences, a nonprofit organization created by Congress in 1974 and should be funded with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.
- The AIA supports the funding of "Green Schools" demonstration projects throughout the United States.
- The AIA supports revision of the tax code to simplify and facilitate the use of tax incentives to build public/private partnerships for school modernization.

Explanation and Justification

The need for modernization and new construction for school facilities has reached a critical stage throughout the United States. Schools face the enormous challenges of record enrollments, new demands for education technology, the need for school-based before- and after-school programs, and the health and safety hazards of deteriorating facilities. The overwhelming national need to improve the condition of America's schools and to construct new buildings to accommodate rising enrollments affects school districts in every state.

School modernization and new construction projects should incorporate “green” elements, which promote energy savings, effect positive environmental change, improve health and educational achievement, and provide hands on learning experiences for students and faculty.

A report released in June 2000 by the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that \$127 billion is needed to fix America’s school buildings. This figure is consistent with an earlier General Accountability Office (GAO) study that estimated \$112 billion was needed to bring schools into “good” overall condition. Other studies examining the costs to construct new classrooms and upgrade schools—to include modern science labs, media centers, telephones in classrooms, cable hookups, and wiring for computers, Internet access, and networks—estimate the cost to be greater than \$300 billion.

This problem demands a strong and sustained partnership of federal, state, and local entities working together. States and local school systems cannot address these problems alone. Federal support and guidance, not control, is needed. Improved education facilities for all students will result in a better educated, more informed, more productive American population in the future.

What America Thinks: A recent nationwide poll of voters (1,000 sample, margin of error +/- 3.1) conducted December 16-22, 2004, by two respected national pollsters—The Tarrance Group, a Republican firm, and Lake Snell and Perry, a Democratic firm—found that among projects on which the government could consider spending tax dollars, an overwhelming 91 percent of voters surveyed said that “repairing unsafe and dilapidated school buildings” was an important priority. Of those, a large 66 percent rated it “very important” and 25 percent “somewhat important.”

On another question, 77 percent of voters polled said they agreed with the statement, “We are in urgent need of renovating existing school buildings.” Moreover, a majority —51 percent—said they “strongly agreed” while 26 percent said they “somewhat agreed.” High percentages of all demographic groups agreed on the need for renovating schools— notably, 82 percent of women and 86 percent of Hispanics were in agreement.

In addition, the survey found that voters nationwide believe state and local governments are not doing a particularly good job of repairing dilapidated school buildings. Only 27 percent positively rate “state and local governments’ ability to repair dilapidated school buildings.” In fact, a whopping 11 times more voters rate them “poor” than “excellent” on this issue.