



[Re] Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition

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Memorandum: Safe School Reopening for In-Person Education & Building Back Better

To: Carmel Martin and Biden Transition Team

From: [Re]Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition (BASIC)

Date: December 2, 2020

The [Re]Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition ([BASIC](#))—a diverse cohort of education, labor, civic, and industry groups—stands ready to assist the Biden Transition Team in re-opening our nation's schools safely and helping to pass the Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA).ⁱ

BASIC has provided expertise, advice, data and technical assistance to the House Education and Labor Committee and the Senate HELP Committee in developing reopening schools legislation and the Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA). Over the last four years we have met with Members and staff in over 200 Hill offices on both sides of the aisle. With this, federal policy makers have been educated on the following:

- **The scale of the PK-12 public education infrastructure**—Nearly 20% of all Americans are [usually] in about 100,000 public schools every day, and over the last twenty years, states and local districts have spent on average \$50 billion annually in school capital construction, and an additional \$50 billion annually in building operations and maintenance [2014\$]. The federal government has contributed less than 1% to these capital expenses, states have contributed on average 18%, leaving local municipalities to bear the responsibility irrespective of their capacity.ⁱⁱ At the end of FY 2018, local districts held nearly \$450 billion in capital debt.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **The level of need for modernization and construction**—The average age of our public schools is nearly 50 years and school districts have not had the capital to replace building systems that have exceeded their useful life or to modernize facilities to meet current health, safety, or educational standards.^{iv} Consequently, districts are maintaining and operating schools and building systems that should be replaced.
- **The chronic gap between what schools need and what local districts can provide**—Good stewardship of our schools requires \$145 billion annually for capital and operating. Districts need an additional \$37 billion per year in capital investment to avoid misspending limited maintenance and operations resources on systems that have far exceeded their useful life. To maintain schools in good repair, the gap is only an additional \$8 billion annually when districts have the needed capital funds.^v
- **The structural inequities in school facilities**—School capital construction is primarily financed from local revenues only and is the most regressive aspect of public

education finance in America. This financing system compounds the inequities that persist in our state and local policies and practices, ones that were key evidence of the separate and unequal conditions in public education documented in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling.^{vi}

On July 1, 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 2, a \$1.5 trillion comprehensive infrastructure package. **For the first time ever, public schools were included in an infrastructure bill.** This infrastructure bill would authorize \$100 billion in grants to states over 5 years to modernize and build new schools in high-need low-wealth districts and provide \$30 billion in subsidized interest for bonds for school construction. Passage of H.R. 2 in the House of Representatives is an enormous milestone, but it is not yet a victory. Until these policies are also passed by the Senate and enacted into law by the President there will not be relief for children, youth, school staff, or communities.

Current Barriers to Reopening Public Schools

The challenges to schools reopening to in-person education are formidable. Well before the politicization of reopening schools on site, districts and communities were working to figure out the logistics of following public health guidance in schools. The key barriers to reopening are:

1. **The complicated nature of the COVID-19** and how little research has been conducted on the efficacy of mitigation measures in schools.
2. **A lack of comprehensive, transparent, and consistent requirements for precautionary public health behavior** for operating schools during the pandemic; this creates mistrust and confusion by staff, parents, and guardians regarding the risks, costs, and benefits of in-person schooling.
3. **Limited resources** of local health departments and school districts that prevent them from following the current health guidance and from coordinating operations among medical, public health, and school operations professionals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the basic inadequacies and strong inequities of our nation's public-school facilities infrastructure described above. The deficiencies in air quality, cluttered and crowded classrooms, and lavatories in poor condition are examples of persistent problems caused by capital disinvestment that impair adherence to public health measures for safe reopening and operation of our public schools during the pandemic.

Federal Proposals to Support Reopening Schools & Modern Infrastructure

With over 30 years of experience researching and managing public sector school facilities issues, our team can provide the Biden Team with expert advice, accurate data, and estimates on the costs associated with reopening. Working extensively with our national network of state, district, and industry school facilities experts, we have identified a number of ways that federal leadership can help reduce barriers to school reopening on-site for all schools. These proposals can also begin to address the structural inequities that have made the pandemic more economically and educationally devastating for low-income and minority communities. Proposals for federal leadership to address safe school re-opening and school facility infrastructure inequities include:

- **Establish a Task Force** focused on operating schools during this pandemic that includes direct stakeholders and those with specific experience and knowledge about school conditions, reducing barriers to on-site education, and creating trust among stakeholders.

- **Establish an office within the U.S. Department of Education (ED) of School Preparedness and Facilities Infrastructure**, which will work CDC and relevant agencies on reopening and monitoring schools and districts and take a leadership role in implementing RASA should it become law next year. The pandemic has shown how school facilities are increasingly becoming part of the nation's rapid response to emergency and natural disasters and will increasingly play a greater role in years ahead.
- **Update CDC guidelines as they pertain to operating schools during this pandemic** including providing metrics for local health conditions and local public health capabilities that should be in place for schools to open for in-person education; specifying public engagement processes to establish trust among stakeholders; defining requirements for in-school mitigation measures to prevent the spread of the virus; and establishing transparent standardized measures and processes for assessing the efficacy of the mitigation.
- **Provide technical assistance funding to states** enabling public, private non-profit, university, and industry entities to assist local public health and school districts build their capacity to implement mitigation measures consistent with updated CDC guidelines and requirements, and to engage stakeholders in the planning and implementation of these measures.
- **Support a public service campaign** on updated CDC and ED information, guidelines and requirements.
- **Conduct research in schools** around the country and around the world to track what school districts are doing to keep the virus out of schools and to limit its spread to better understand what works and what does not work.
- **Secure \$10 billion in emergency federal funding** within a relief package for local public health and school districts to cover mitigation efforts, make emergency repairs to the buildings and grounds to ensure the safety of students and staff upon reopening—targeted to 25,000 schools, about \$400,000 per school—see Appendix A for state formula allocations.
- **Pass and fully fund the Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA)**, which would authorize \$130 billion in grants to states over 5 years to modernize and build new schools in high-need low-wealth districts and fully integrate school facilities into our nation's infrastructure policy.

We greatly appreciate your attention to school facilities as they affect the health of staff, students, and our economy during this pandemic, and look forward to working with you on school reopening and the critical investments needed in our public school buildings and grounds.

Sincerely,

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- ⁱ **BASIC [(Re)Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition]** <https://www.buildusschools.org>
- ⁱⁱ **Filardo, et al. 2016. State of Our Schools**, the go-to source for state by state school facility investment analysis - explaining the needs and the gaps. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED581630>
- ⁱⁱⁱ **U.S. Census of Governments**, Fiscal Survey F-33 FY2018.
- ^{iv} **GAO Report 20-494**: June 2020 K-12 EDUCATION School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement.
- ^v **Filardo, et al. 2016. State of Our Schools** <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED581630>
- ^{vi} **Filardo, Mary, Jeffrey M. Vincent, and Kevin Sullivan. 2019. "How crumbling school facilities perpetuate inequality."** *Phi Delta Kappan* 100(8): 27-31.
<https://kappanonline.org/how-crumbling-school-facilities-perpetuate-inequality-filardo-vincent-sullivan/> AND
Vincent and Jain. 2015. "Going it Alone: Can California's K-12 School Districts Adequately and Equitably Fund School Facilities?"
<https://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/publications?topic=School+Facilities&pubId=rec3FA6kCzBPmflzG>
This study quantified the annual gaps in school facility investment in California.

Appendix A: State allocation of emergency repair and upgrade per 10 billion per RRAS-2.xlsx

State/Entity	Estimated Grant Amount in thousands	Estimated State Share of Funds per CRS July 15, 2020	Total Students [State] 2018-19	# School Districts 2018-19	# of Public Schools 2018- 19	# of Counties 2018-19	Per student allocation (not targeted)
Alabama	\$ 162,351	1.64%	739,716	177	1529	67	\$219
Alaska	\$ 28,742	0.29%	130,963	54	510	28	\$219
Arizona	\$ 207,607	2.10%	1,141,511	717	2434	15	\$182
Arkansas	\$ 96,355	0.97%	495,291	294	1080	75	\$195
California	\$ 1,232,747	12.45%	6,272,734	2174	10437	58	\$197
Colorado	\$ 90,545	0.91%	911,536	270	1915	63	\$99
Connecticut	\$ 83,117	0.84%	526,634	204	1023	8	\$158
Delaware	\$ 32,547	0.33%	138,405	47	227	3	\$235
District of Columbia	\$ 31,435	0.32%	93,741	68	228	2	\$335
Florida	\$ 576,408	5.82%	2,846,444	76	4234	67	\$203
Georgia	\$ 342,119	3.46%	1,767,202	232	2309	159	\$194
Hawaii	\$ 32,467	0.33%	181,278	1	294	1	\$179
Idaho	\$ 35,812	0.36%	310,522	173	759	44	\$115
Illinois	\$ 426,156	4.30%	1,982,327	1056	4345	102	\$215
Indiana	\$ 160,499	1.62%	1,055,706	432	1919	93	\$152
Iowa	\$ 53,600	0.54%	514,833	339	1318	99	\$104
Kansas	\$ 63,257	0.64%	497,733	311	1314	105	\$127
Kentucky	\$ 144,570	1.46%	677,821	186	1536	120	\$213
Louisiana	\$ 214,759	2.17%	711,783	204	1384	65	\$302
Maine	\$ 32,772	0.33%	180,461	276	599	16	\$182
Maryland	\$ 155,531	1.57%	896,827	25	1418	24	\$173
Massachusetts	\$ 160,814	1.62%	962,297	432	1853	14	\$167
Michigan	\$ 291,701	2.95%	1,504,194	902	3754	83	\$194
Minnesota	\$ 104,870	1.06%	889,304	574	2555	87	\$118
Mississippi	\$ 127,130	1.28%	471,298	155	1055	81	\$270
Missouri	\$ 155,987	1.58%	913,441	564	2452	115	\$171
Montana	\$ 30,903	0.31%	148,844	488	826	56	\$208
Nebraska	\$ 48,706	0.49%	326,392	279	1081	93	\$149

Appendix A: State allocation of emergency repair and upgrade per 10 billion per RRAS-2.xlsx

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Nevada	\$ 87,694	0.89%	498,614	21	745	17	\$176
New Hampshire	\$ 28,169	0.28%	178,515	308	494	10	\$158
New Jersey	\$ 232,263	2.35%	1,400,069	688	2573	21	\$166
New Mexico	\$ 81,251	0.82%	333,537	147	883	33	\$244
New York	\$ 776,064	7.84%	2,700,833	1062	4811	62	\$287
North Carolina	\$ 296,576	3.00%	1,552,497	346	2684	100	\$191
North Dakota	\$ 24,918	0.25%	113,845	221	525	54	\$219
Ohio	\$ 366,092	3.70%	1,695,762	1045	3569	88	\$216
Oklahoma	\$ 120,446	1.22%	698,891	597	1807	77	\$172
Oregon	\$ 90,623	0.92%	609,507	222	1257	36	\$149
Pennsylvania	\$ 391,986	3.96%	1,730,757	789	2973	67	\$226
Puerto Rico	\$ 261,256	2.64%	307,282	1	847	1	\$850
Rhode Island	\$ 34,686	0.35%	143,436	64	320	5	\$242
South Carolina	\$ 161,874	1.64%	780,882	103	1270	46	\$207
South Dakota	\$ 30,903	0.31%	138,975	166	702	65	\$222
Tennessee	\$ 194,487	1.96%	1,007,624	147	1862	95	\$193
Texas	\$ 962,281	9.72%	5,433,471	1230	9423	253	\$177
Utah	\$ 50,754	0.51%	677,031	163	1072	29	\$75
Vermont	\$ 23,310	0.24%	87,359	235	312	15	\$267
Virginia	\$ 178,554	1.80%	1,289,367	215	2122	130	\$138
Washington	\$ 162,309	1.64%	1,123,736	337	2445	39	\$144
West Virginia	\$ 64,837	0.65%	267,976	57	725	55	\$242
Wisconsin	\$ 130,793	1.32%	859,333	464	2274	73	\$152
Wyoming	\$ 24,368	0.25%	94,313	62	363	24	\$258
Subtotal for 50 States, D.C. and P.R.	\$ 9,900,000	100.00%					
Set aside for Outlying Areas	\$ 50,000	--					
Set Aside for Bureau of Indian Education	\$ 50,000	--	43,706	174	174	79	\$1,144
Total Appropriation	\$ 10,000,000	--					

State/Entity	Estimated Grant Amount in thousands	Estimated State Share of Funds per CRS July 15, 2020	Total Students [State] 2018-19	# School Districts 2018-19	# of Public Schools 2018-19	# of Counties 2018-19	Per student allocation (not targeted)
AMERICAN SAMOA			12,106	1	29	1	
GUAM			29,719	4	44	1	
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS			10,718	2	26	2	
TOTAL/AVERAGE	\$ 10,000,000		51,109,099				\$ 196

Appendix A shows estimated state allocations per Title I Part A under the Grants for the Long-Term Improvement of Public School Facilities program estimated by the Congressional Research Service in a July 2020 Memo on Rebuild America's School Act. Appropriations level of \$10 billion. State shares of the amount of funding for formula grants range from 0.24% in Vermont to 12.45% in California.

Examples of projects that could be done with emergency funds that will have immediate COVID safety benefits, but also have sustained use and improvement for the health and safety of schools:

- Eliminating window unit air-conditioners that bring in little fresh air and replace these window units with roof top units;
- Repairing classroom or office windows so they can open properly, including: replacing screens, locks, sash balances, tilt mechanisms, or other window hardware;
- Replacing windows that cannot be repaired;
- Repair or replace exterior door hardware—including security systems—to enable staggering entrances and exits;
- Replacing bathroom plumbing, fixtures and faucets so all lavatories are fully functioning, and faucets are touchless;
- Replacing and repairing ventilation controls in HVAC or air handling units;
- Upgrading filters for mechanical systems—with adjustments to fans or other aspects of system to support higher levels of filtration;
- Repair dampers in fresh air intake systems;
- Audio enhancement for classrooms to improve hearing due to masks, fan or mechanical noise, outdoor noise due to open windows, and for outdoor learning;

State/Entity	Estimated Grant Amount in thousands	Estimated State Share of Funds per CRS July 15, 2020	Total Students [State] 2018-19	# School Districts 2018-19	# of Public Schools 2018-19	# of Counties 2018-19	Per student allocation (not targeted)
<p>Outdoor improvements to school grounds, outdoor learning structures, furniture and equipment that will enables outdoor instruction, and other activities, typically offered indoors, such as lunch;</p>							
<p>Testing mechanical systems;</p>							
<p>Recommissioning mechanical systems;</p>							
<p>Improvements to finishes--walls, ceilings floors--that make higher level of cleaning easier; and</p>							
<p>Assessing and monitoring air quality.</p>							
<p>There are other emergency repairs and improvements that schools may have to do to reopen on site in 2020-21, such as purchase room air filter systems, install plexiglass partitions and convert drinking fountains to hand washing stations--but hopefully, districts will be able to do repairs and upgrades that are permanent. Additionally, low wealth districts with school facilities in poor condition, will have basic maintenance that has been deferred that will need to be done to implement COVID related measures--for example, if roof top mechanical units are to be installed to improve air ventilation and filtration, the roof it is put on needs to be in good repair.</p>							