

# SchoolConstructionNEWS

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# MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS

A photograph of two electricians working on an open electrical panel. The electrician on the left is wearing a yellow hard hat and a dark t-shirt, while the one on the right is wearing a white hard hat and a red polo shirt. They are both focused on the internal components of the panel, which include large copper coils and various wiring. A 'CAUTION' sign is visible on the panel's interior. The background shows a brick wall.

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# Penny Wise and Pound Foolish

By William S. DeJong

Here we go again. Economic turn-down, less money for schools, cut the maintenance and operations budget. We have watched this occur in the early 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and again today. There is no question schools are in a predicament. Most school districts have seen a decrease in actual receipts in the past two years. More than 80 percent of school district budgets cover personnel costs in one form or another, which can be expected since education is a service industry. The personnel costs also include maintenance and operations workers.

Two decades ago, warning bells sounded regarding the condition of school facilities in the United States. Reports such as the "Wolves at the Schoolhouse Doors" and Government Accountability Office studies led to a new focus on statewide building assessments, as well as the rollout of extensive renovation and building replacement programs. This is what we failed to learn: The reason for such poor building conditions and backlogs of deferred maintenance projects was because we had significantly reduced the investment in school maintenance and operations in the 1980s. In the past 15 years, billions of dollars have been invested in school construction. Some of this was focused on building new schools to meet enrollment needs, but major investments also were made in older buildings, especially those built in the 1950s and 1960s.

Even though there has been major investment in renovations and new construction, from my observations in working with more than 300 school districts throughout the country, there has not been a corresponding increase in investment in maintenance and operations. In fact, I would bet there has been a decrease, and it is getting worse. School districts have cut budgets to the bone. Furthermore, retirements in skilled trades or custodial staff are



going unfilled. With hundreds and sometimes thousands of students moving through a building every day, it doesn't take long for it to get run down.

I have been around long enough to hear the discussions about the need for preventive maintenance. The fact of the matter is that most of our school maintenance and operations programs look more like a fire department, but without the ability to respond as promptly. When school construction was ramping up, many of the larger maintenance

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projects like boiler repairs, roof repairs, lighting improvements, etc., were being addressed through capital budgets. However, with the decline in capital budgets and fewer new bond programs, much of this work is falling back into the lap of the maintenance department. This just adds to the overall problem.

I have had the opportunity to work with several of the major school facility assessment firms in the U.S. (Magellan,

Parsons, VFA) and have had the opportunity to be in several thousand schools. It doesn't take long to figure out which have been well maintained and which have not. It is possible to be on the same assessment team in two different school districts and watch one school get a poor rating, while a similar school that was built at the same time but didn't undergo renovation gets a good rating. The difference: one district had a strong maintenance and operations program and the other district did not. I'm not trying to argue about whether or not to outsource maintenance and operations, but I have seen this same good/bad situation in districts that handle everything internally, outsource everything, or use a combination of approaches. The bottom line is that some school districts value maintenance and operations and invest in it, while others do the absolute minimum to get by. The latter are the ones that are in trouble.

There are many metrics for investing in maintenance and operations. This is not guesswork. However, many school districts, and often for good reasons, do not invest properly. Maintenance and operations is usually funded out of the general operating fund. Monies for maintenance and operations need to compete for the same resources as teacher salaries and other essential services. Too often, maintenance and operations loses out in this arrangement. In many states, there are separate funding sources for transportation and food service. More effort should be made to create separate budgets, funding sources, sinking funds, and other mechanisms to adequately fund maintenance and operations.

As the old saying goes, we can be



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penny-wise and pound-foolish. If we don't properly invest in maintenance and operations, we are going to repeat history once again.

I have a great deal of respect for people who work in this profession. Indeed, custodians and maintenance workers are the unsung heroes of American public schools. It is impressive how through the quiet work of many of these people our schools are kept clean and in working order. When I walk into a school and floors are polished, restrooms are clean, lighting is bright, and the walls are painted, I feel good about the school and am glad to be there. Maintenance and operations is important!

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