

Building Educational Success Together (BEST)

Overview and Background

The Building Educational Success Together (BEST) initiative is a constituency-building, research and communications collaborative working to improve urban school facilities. The mission of this initiative is to secure the policy changes needed to improve facility conditions for students and teachers and to make schools centers of their communities.

Specifically, BEST is pursuing policies that:

- Require broad public involvement in decision-making about school facilities;
- Enable and support shared community use of school facilities;
- Establish effective management and oversight practices for school facility planning, design and construction; and
- Secure adequate funding for school facilities maintenance and capital improvements.

We are seeking these changes to achieve three long-term goals:

- Educating all children to high academic standards;
- Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers; and
- Revitalizing urban neighborhoods.

The BEST initiative, led by the 21st Century School Fund of Washington, DC, includes the Education Law Center of Newark, NJ; the

KnowledgeWorks Foundation of Cincinnati, OH; the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities of Washington, DC; the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group of Chicago, IL; the National Trust for Historic Preservation of Washington, DC; and Mark Schneider at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. In its first year, BEST will focus its efforts in eight cities: Chicago, IL; Washington, DC; Newark, Paterson and Trenton, NJ; and Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus, OH. Primary funding for the BEST initiative comes from the Ford Foundation.

School Buildings and Teaching and Learning

Education has been a public priority on local, state and national agendas for many years — and there is no indication that the sense of public urgency will diminish. Much of the nation's focus on improving public education has centered on student achievement. The curriculum, instruction and testing practices of public schools have come under scrutiny and new measures, including rigorous academic standards, stronger assessments and increased accountability, are changing teaching and learning in American classrooms. However, if Americans are serious about improving achievement among all students, communities must improve the school environment for students and

teachers. The BEST initiative is committed to improving public school facilities because they affect the people and the programs essential to high quality education.

Students and teachers need safe, healthy, well maintained and educationally appropriate learning environments to do their best. Our goal is to make sure that more schools provide this environment to an increasing number of students throughout the cities in which we are working and throughout the nation as a whole.

Our experience tells us that too many schools do not meet this standard. Many students, particularly in low-income communities, attend school in buildings that are unsafe, unhealthy, poorly maintained, educationally inadequate, and not designed to accommodate community use. The 768,000 children in the target cities attend school in some of the most dilapidated buildings in the nation.

Working directly with parents and school communities reveals the impact of substandard facility conditions on the quality of education. Consider the following situations found in some of the schools in the cities in which we work:

Children must line up 2-3 times a day to use bathrooms and get water because their school has bathrooms and drinking fountains located only in the basement. This takes time from class and often increases

disruptive behavior. In a modern school, the bathroom and drinking fountain are in or adjacent to each classroom, leaving more time for instruction and reducing student misbehavior.

- Students must wear coats in some classrooms and short sleeve shirts in others, as the temperature is uncontrollable in both winter and summer. In appropriately heated and cooled environments, students and teachers can pay attention to learning rather than the classroom temperature.
- A roof collapses at a school. Students are bussed to a neighboring school, disrupting their own education and that of the students at the school they are assigned to temporarily. When roofs do not leak or collapse, students and teachers can stay focused on the work.
- Teachers and students working in deteriorating buildings suffer serious adverse health affects, ranging from respiratory problems caused by mold to injuries caused by broken windows or the sharp edges of broken walls. This in turn leads to high absenteeism, lower morale, and reduced time available for teaching and learning.
- Schools are so crowded that temporary classrooms have consumed the exterior space, reducing already limited physical education and play space for children without parks or back yards.

In focus groups with teachers in the cities in which we are working, teachers reported problems that ranged from broken windows and peeling paint to the lack of working laboratory facilities and falling roofs. The extent of these problems and the extent to which they limit the ability of teachers to meet increasing demands for higher student

achievement has clearly lead to a growing frustration with teaching as a profession. Run-down or ill-equipped buildings make it more difficult to attract and retain good teachers.

- A growing body of research indicates that these conditions take their toll on students and teachers. Among the most important research findings are the following:
- Smaller schools improve educational performance and other desirable student behavior. The improvement is especially evident for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Smaller class sizes are associated with better academic outcomes—and here too the results are even stronger for children from lower socio-economic status.
- Schools with better facilities have fewer disciplinary problems.
- Poor lighting, high ambient noise levels, and uncomfortable temperatures all lead to lower academic performance.
- Poor working conditions increase teacher absenteeism, reduce levels of effort, lower effectiveness in the classroom, depress morale and job satisfaction.

Search for Relief

Not surprisingly, in frustration and desperation with these and other conditions, communities have begun to demand that their school districts, city governments and states increase their investment in public school maintenance, renovation, modernization and construction. Local communities have mobilized their residents

to demand action from their elected leaders and local, state, regional and national advocacy groups have begun working on facility issues in response to this increasing public demand.

Some states and school districts have responded by increasing the amount of funding for public school facilities. The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) approved its first long range facility plan in 30 years, setting the stage to modernize or replace every one of its 147 schools over the next 10-15 years. DCPS has spent nearly \$500 million on building improvements since 1996. The Chicago Public Schools has spent over \$2.5 billion dollars on school renovation and construction in its 660 schools in the last five years and is exploring financing possibilities for an additional \$4.8 billion over the next 10 years. Across the country districts are following this pattern with K-12 public school construction expenditures exceeding \$20 billion in 2001.

However, the estimated need for construction and modernization exceeds \$300 billion. There is a long way to go, especially in poor urban districts that lack the financial capacity to rebuild deteriorated and overcrowded schools. In some of these districts, communities have successfully sought relief from the courts. The nearly 30 year history of case law on the funding of school districts and the continuing involvement of the courts in assuring

adequate and equitable resources for public education has provided new underpinnings for equitable funding of public schools. Funding for school facilities is now a part of this case law and the link between facilities and educational outcomes is recognized by the courts in many states.

*"It is undisputed that the school buildings in Abbott districts are crumbling and obsolescent and that this grave state of disrepair not only prevents children from receiving a thorough and efficient education, but also threatens their health and safety."
-- Abbott v Burke 1998*

In New Jersey, the Abbott v. Burke cases led to a court-mandated \$6 billion school construction program, the states largest investment in school facilities ever. These renovation and construction funds are targeted in 30 poor urban districts, and will help bring their facilities up to the same physical standards as those in more affluent communities.

In Ohio, the DeRolph decisions focused on the flaws within the school finance structure and provided an impetus for increased state support for local school districts. Because of the DeRolph decisions, the Ohio State Legislature has authorized \$11 billion for school facilities construction and modernization, including a fast track expenditure program for large urban districts.

A court case on fire code violations in the District of Columbia Public Schools (Parents United vs. Mayor Marion Barry et al.) sought to make the city enforce fire code laws in the District's public schools and the school system abate thousands of fire code violations. The settlement of this case involved an agreement by the city to fund the school system's capital budget at a minimum of 27% of the city's total capital budget, paving the way for increased school facility renovation and construction.

In these court cases, and others across the country, including Kentucky, West Virginia, Wyoming, Montana, North Carolina, Arkansas, Arizona, and South Carolina, the courts have shown a willingness to address problems of equity, adequacy and more limited issues of safety. In other states, plaintiffs are moving forward with equity and adequacy cases, including New York, Idaho, Alaska, California, Connecticut and others. The willingness of the courts to rule for the plaintiffs in these cases highlights the need for change in school facility financing and management.

Policy Agenda

In order for school district facility initiatives and court mandates to succeed, new policies, regulations and procedures must be in place to improve the financing and implementation of building improvements. While an effective governmental framework

alone will not ensure improved facilities, it is a critical element of a successful capital program.

The BEST policy agenda was developed collaboratively by the partners during an intensive year-long planning period. The BEST initiative will work to achieve policy changes at the state and local levels and will explore options for an appropriate federal role in educational facility renovation and construction. The approach to policy change is based on direct experience working in communities, a review of the current research on the relationship between facilities and student outcomes, and first hand knowledge of legal thinking and court mandates.

To achieve the goal of healthy, safe and educationally appropriate school buildings, that anchor our communities, BEST is pursuing policy change in four areas: public involvement in facility decision making; community use of facilities; capital program management and oversight; and funding for maintenance, repairs, modernization and construction.

**Policy Objective 1:
Broad public involvement in
decision-making**

Secure state and local policies that require broad public involvement in facilities decision-making.

Rationale

Community involvement in school facilities planning can help identify educational and community needs and create solutions for school building and other neighborhood and community problems. It also can increase long-term community support for schools, which yields positive benefits for the community and for students.

Yet most decisions in the school facilities planning, design and construction process are considered the domain of professional planners, architects, engineers and contractors, with local school and community involvement a clumsy add on. School boards, superintendents and school district operating officers, let alone community stakeholders, seldom are trained or versed in school-facilities planning or management. In many older urban communities, school renovation and construction have been absent from the public agenda for so long that communities are unfamiliar with the processes, concepts or requirements for democratic action regarding school planning, design and construction.

Yet, if members of a community are involved, school facilities are likely to be better designed, better built, better maintained and more widely used. In a 2000 publication, *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizen's Guide for Planning and Design*, the U.S.

Department of Education described six fundamental principles of an effective facilities planning process. Among the principles is that “the learning environment should result from a planning/design process involving all stakeholders.” This principle is based on the belief that “not only do people have the right to participate in making the decisions that will affect them, but their participation will improve the quality of the decision making process.”

Residents, communities and local school personnel pay for and/or live with the long-term decisions made about school facilities. These individuals need to be educated about facility planning, design, construction and renovation processes and options and they need to be fully incorporated into the planning and design of school buildings. This is especially critical in urban school districts where comprehensive modernization or new construction, from building assessment to construction, can last well beyond the average tenure of a school superintendent and his/her appointees.

Local Work

Examples of local activities BEST members will undertake to support public involvement in facilities decision-making:

Washington, DC: The 21st Century School Fund is providing technical assistance to the Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals

and Educators in developing high school facilities planning committees.

Chicago: The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group is providing workshops throughout Chicago on the schools’ capital budgets and on ways to integrate the capital improvement program into school improvement plans.

New Jersey: The Education Law Center is working with the New Jersey State Department of Education and the Governor’s Task Forces to advise him community participation in school facilities planning.

Ohio: The KnowledgeWorks Foundation is promoting changes in the Ohio School Facilities Commission to require public involvement in facilities decision-making.

Indicators of Success

To the extent that BEST is successful, school districts will have a growing number of better-designed, better-built, better-maintained and more widely used school facilities in the cities covered by the BEST partnership. These facilities will have been planned and designed through a process that involved a variety of individuals and organizations, including teachers, parents, students, neighbors, businesses, community leaders and public officials. These facilities will reflect their input and will provide teaching and learning environments

consistent with educational and community values, goals and aspirations.

Policy Objective 2: Schools as centers of community

Secure state and local policies that support schools as centers of community life.

Rationale

School facilities are a powerful indicator of a community's values and aspirations. Well-designed, well-built schools send a powerful signal to students, teachers and parents alike that strong academic achievement is expected and that education is valued. A high quality school facility enhances property values, increases confidence among local business and civic leaders, helps anchor new housing and commercial development in a neighborhood, and provides a venue for other community activities, from adult education to early childhood centers. Old and historic schools, in particular, have served as community anchors for generations and their restoration and modernization can enable them to serve as high quality educational centers while retaining an important link to a neighborhood's past.

Revitalizing urban schools as community centers requires shared vision and shared leadership. Unfortunately, schools tend to be considered in isolation from other urban needs. The autonomy of school districts

places school-facilities planning and design outside of the larger municipal planning framework, with minimal joint planning or provisions for shared use.

Part of the challenge in some neighborhoods is keeping the local schools open at all. In Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Washington, DC, scores of schools are at risk of closing or consolidating because they have too few students. But when deciding whether to retain or close a public school, school districts rarely factor in the growing body of research showing that small schools increase the academic success of children, especially children from low-income families. Equally troubling, a number of states and school districts have policies that automatically favor new school construction, even when renovation and modernization of existing schools might be a better educational, community and economic option.

Additionally, schools play an important role as community anchors. In many neighborhoods, a public school is one of the only public facilities that can serve as a meeting place, recreation center and source of ongoing educational opportunities. Many communities also are using schools to house health and social services, municipal programs and libraries. These non-educational roles have a direct impact on students' readiness to learn and the vitality of the school community.

Local Work

Examples of local activities to BEST members will undertake to support the role of schools as community centers:

Washington, DC: The 21st Century School Fund is helping local communities and schools at J.C. Nalle and H.D. Cooke in their work to incorporate community use into the planning and design of their schools.

Chicago: The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group is seeking to increase the involvement of city agencies, such as parks and recreation, planning and development, and the housing authority, in school facilities planning and design.

Ohio: KnowledgeWorks Foundation is funding projects in Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland to plan schools that are community centers, including the collocation of services at schools and keeping schools open for after school, weekend and summer programs.

Indicators of Success

To the extent that BEST succeeds, across the cities in which we work, we should find more schools that are open weekend and extended hours, an increased number of school facilities designed and operated for shared uses by multiple local government agencies and community programs; old and historic schools that have been modernized to support best educational practice;

neighborhood schools that are centers of revitalized neighborhoods and are architecturally pleasing; school facilities planned and built as an integral part of community-revitalization, economic-development and environmental improvement projects in urban neighborhoods; and an increase in the number of states and localities with policies encouraging cross agency collaboration in planning, designing, constructing, funding and operating school facilities.

Policy Objective 3: Effective management and oversight

Secure policies for effective management and oversight of school-facilities planning, design, modernization, construction and maintenance.

Rationale

The urban school districts in which BEST is working have only recently had funds to undertake major school-construction programs . This longstanding neglect — and a lack of consensus on what constitutes best practice in management and oversight — has left these school districts with neither the staff nor the systems in place to operate a well-managed capital program. In addition, the highly politicized environment of urban public education means that school district facilities directors sometimes are forced to make decisions based on political

expediency rather than on the best interests of teachers, students and communities.

The public is demanding assurances that capital funds be well spent and independently monitored. To that end, decision-making and management authority have been assigned to various parties: the state, such as the Ohio School Facilities Commission and the Economic Development Authority (New Jersey); other public agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Washington, DC) and private-sector architectural and construction management firms (Chicago). But the efficacy of their management is not well understood or evaluated by the public.

Existing models of facility management and oversight must be reviewed to understand how effective they are. Additionally, work is needed to ensure transparency in all aspects of the construction, modernization and maintenance process and to allow the community the opportunity to be involved in the oversight of these activities. By disclosing important facility information to the public, districts can rebuild public confidence in their management abilities and the public can make sure that plans are based on accurate, unbiased assessments of the data rather than politically expedient short-cuts that are disconnected from reality. As the final users of these facilities, teachers, staff and students should also

have a role in monitoring new construction, modernization and maintenance.

Local work

Examples of local activities to BEST members will undertake to support effective management and oversight of school facilities:

Washington, DC: The 21st Century School Fund is conducting research on models for public oversight of facility design and construction and will evaluate the current oversight policies and procedures in the District of Columbia Public Schools to determine opportunities for improvement.

Chicago: The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group is tracking the capital improvement program in the public schools and developing specific building profiles that detail needs and square footage.

New Jersey: The Education Law Center is identifying legislative and regulatory changes to require the state to partner with local districts in the school design and construction process.

Indicators of Success

Based on policy changes in management and oversight promoted by BEST partners, we hope to see improvement in the quality of school facilities' design and construction; routine public disclosure of data on school facilities conditions and capital spending in

user-friendly formats that enable parents, teachers and community stakeholders to track the allocation and distribution of capital resources; greater cost-effectiveness in school-facilities programs; a cooperative relationship among school districts and the public in prioritizing long standing school facility problems; and increased awareness and capacity of school district facilities managers to employ best practices in the management of school facilities capital programs.

Policy Objective 4: Adequate funding for repairs and construction

Secure adequate funding for school-facilities maintenance and capital improvements.

Rationale

After a generation of disinvestment, school districts and municipal and state finance agencies cannot support the costs of building, modernizing and maintaining high-quality schools. The unprecedented economic growth of the last 10 years made increased spending on school-facilities improvements possible, and some progress has been made. Nevertheless, the combined expenditures for the districts that BEST represents equal only about one-quarter of the funds needed to create healthy, safe and educationally appropriate school facilities and even these limited funds are threatened in today's economic slump.

Whether there is an economic downturn or an economic expansion, the demands for public capital funds – from public safety to public health – offer legitimate and competing claims on the governments' borrowing capacity. School facilities maintenance competes with other priorities in the school districts' operating budgets, including teacher and staff compensation, new textbooks, and special education. Without adequate operating funds, districts will continue to defer maintenance, will not address school overcrowding, and will be unable to modify classrooms to support best educational practice. Yet, when districts fail to address critical facility maintenance and construction needs, they limit the effectiveness of their academic program and hinder attempts to revitalize urban neighborhoods.

To address these multiple needs, school districts need a stable level of adequate funding over an extended time period. Achieving this result likely will mean adding federal funding and combining it with increased state and local efforts. Creative public private partnerships, such as financed the design and construction of a new Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in Washington, DC, and the use of "Tax Increment Financing" (TIF) to help revitalize schools in special economic districts offer alternative ways to finance school construction.

Local Work

Examples of local activities BEST members will undertake to support efforts to secure stable and sufficient funding for maintenance, modernization and new construction:

Washington, DC: The 21st Century School Fund is studying the fiscal capacity of the District to fund the capital program needed for schools and exploring financing options to develop a long term facility financing strategy.

Chicago: The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group is educating state legislators about the facility conditions in Chicago and the need for state construction funds to match local district expenditures.

New Jersey: The Education Law Center is working with communities to identify agency partnerships to fund community centered amenities in schools that are being modernized or replaced with state funds.

Indicators of Success

As a result of the work on facility financing issues we anticipate expanded and sustained school maintenance, modernization, and construction activity which is distributed more equitably and strategically through our districts; the alleviation of overcrowding as new schools are completed; greater rates of building renovation for old and historic schools,

rather than replacement, as a way to control cost, improve quality and protect the environment; and well planned and consistent maintenance of schools so that they continue to serve as high quality educational institutions.

A Call to Action

The BEST agenda is clearly ambitious and we cannot achieve our goals alone. We are building networks of people who share our concern for the future of our children and who share our vision of how to revitalize education for the 21st century.

For more information: contact the 21st Century School Fund at 202-745-3745, email us at info@21csf.org or check our web site: www.21csf.org.