



Will Trump Help Rebuild America's Schools?

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President Donald Trump called on Congress to pass a sweeping \$1.5 trillion infrastructure package Tuesday night during his State of the Union address.

The infrastructure proposal itself wasn't a surprise. Trump has been making the pitch since his campaign trail days. But what he left off his infrastructure to-do list surprised some: Schools.

For the past year, the president has been consistent in pledging to bolster the country's K-12 schools as part of an infrastructure plan to right what he's characterized as a facilities problem.

He even made it a cornerstone of his election night speech on Nov. 7, 2016: "We are going to fix our inner cities and rebuild our highways, bridges, tunnels, airports, schools, hospitals," he said. "We're going to rebuild our infrastructure, which will become, by the way, second to none."

And for good reason: Public schools are the second largest sector of the country's infrastructure, after roads and highways, with more than 50 million children and adults setting foot in a public school every day. But half of those buildings are at least 50 years old and many are plagued by chronic facilities issues, including faulty heating and cooling systems, lead pipes and poor air quality.

Indeed, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave public schools a D+ in its [2017 infrastructure report card](#), finding that more than 53 percent of schools would need to make investments toward repairs, renovations and modernizations to be considered in "good" condition.

"If that isn't a national emergency then I'm not sure what is," says Kosta Diamantis, president of the National Council on School Facilities and director of school construction grants for Connecticut's Department of Administrative Services.

It would follow, then, that any federal infrastructure investment include funding for school improvements, as Trump has been signaling.

That's why you could nearly hear the collective gasp from the education community Tuesday evening when in making a brief pitch for his infrastructure plan, the president didn't mention schools.

"We will build gleaming new roads, bridges, highways, railways and waterways across our land," he said instead. "And we will do it with American heart, American hands and American grit."

The charter school sector was especially quick to pounce, blasting out an email just minutes after the State of the Union ended to call out Trump.

"We are concerned that the Administration's proposal, leaked in recent days, does not include funding to reduce the costs of acquiring, renovating and expanding school facilities for either public charter schools or district-operated schools," the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools said in a statement.

Charter school advocates have been particularly vocal about including school funding in an any infrastructure plan since they locate and pay for their school buildings themselves, rather than operate in a free, public facility as traditional public schools do. And they rarely receive local or state funding for maintenance. Since the Trump administration has made school choice their No. 1 K-12 policy, a pillar of which is the charter school sector, the logic follow that the White House may want to bolster those investments.

"Modernizing America's public schools could be a lasting legacy for this president and his administration given their focus and interest in expanding school choice," the alliance wrote. "Facilities funding challenges are among the biggest obstacles to providing more students access to the high-quality public charter schools they deserve."

But leaving schools off the list during the State of the Union address underscores just how difficult it's been for presidents to wrangle Congressional support for federal spending on school infrastructure in the past.

Indeed, Congress has historically shot down attempts to direct federal dollars to school infrastructure, largely at the objection of Republicans who have been quick to brush off such investments as local and state responsibility and also question what type of regulation schools would be opening themselves up to if their buildings were subsidized by the federal government.

"There's been a fair amount of evidence that the money isn't used all that efficiently and that school districts in some cases may not have been as vigilant as they should have been in maintaining buildings to begin with," says Neal McCluskey, director of Cato's Center for Education Freedom, who [took to Twitter](#) during the State of the Union to applaud the president's decision to leave schools off his infrastructure to-do list.

"If they are using their own money there is a lot more incentive to use that money efficiently than if it comes from a big pool of federal money that they get from a formula," he says. "If it's not directly the district taxpayer money, there is some incentive to say, 'Let's not only look closely as to why we have maintenance problems but let's instead allocate money for the new planetarium,' which may not be all that necessary."

Many are still hopeful, however, that Trump's prior inclusion of schools in talk of infrastructure investment , combined with recent headline-grabbing news of massive school facility failures,

including Baltimore schools closing for weeks at a time due to failing heating systems and lead paint flaking from school walls in Philadelphia, could pinch GOP members who would otherwise oppose any such proposal.

Perhaps putting even more pressure on Republicans is the fact that school facility woes aren't confined to urban school systems. Earlier this month, the Roanoke Times blew the cover off schools in Lee County, Pulaski County and others in Southwest Virginia, where industrial-sized trash cans catch water that pours in from the roof, windows are held together with duct tape and classrooms lack air conditioning despite schools opening in August.

"Rural areas really, really could use the help," says Jeff Vincent, director of public infrastructure initiatives at Center for Cities and Schools, an initiative out of the University of California, Berkeley.

Already, Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, has signaled her support for infrastructure spending on schools and co-authored a letter with Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., to Trump asking him to make good on his pledge to include funding for schools in any forthcoming infrastructure plan.

"This is the right thing to do for students, educators, and communities," they wrote. "It is also a smart investment, since it will give a needed boost to our economy by creating local jobs in every community across the country."

Sensing the momentum, a coalition of six organizations that advocate for federal spending on school facilities, including the 21st Century School Fund, the National Council on School Facilities, the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers and others, recently launched a campaign to press Congress and the White House to take a more active role in helping school districts with their most dire school repairs.

"What I think people are realizing is that it's not merely an urban conversation – it's affecting everyone in all parts of the country," says Diamantis. "The current congressional environment is starting to realize that and see that. I think President Trump saw that when he made it part of his election night speech, that school infrastructure is a national emergency and should be part of an infrastructure bill."

Among other things, the coalition is drawing attention to legislative proposals in the House and Senate that would provide \$100 billion in federal grants and school construction bonds over the next 10 years and create about 1.8 million construction jobs.

"By not having those infrastructure costs we create what we in the industry call sick buildings," says Diamantis. "It's a national emergency that the federal government needs to assist states and the municipalities in investing in a safe and secure educationally adequate facilities for students."

In December, representatives from the coalition met with more than 70 members of Congress and their staff to outline the specific funding gaps states and school districts face – a key piece of data that policymakers have only recently been able to nail down thanks to a concerted effort by the coalition to collect data from each school.

Schools currently spend about \$50 billion annually on maintenance and operations and another \$49 billion on new school construction and capital development, the coalition found. But what they should be spending to keep up with facilities is \$145 billion annually, the coalition says, meaning the country is underspending on school facilities by about \$46 billion per year.

"What we find is really a massive gap in spending in terms of minimum investments that should be made each year just to keep school facilities at a basic level of good quality," says Vincent. "And surprise, surprise you find some areas tend to have the biggest gaps – low-income communities and communities of color. There is a really strong pattern there and the opportunity we have here at the federal level to really invest in this infrastructure with federal dollars is a unique one."

It's especially important, advocates argue, because research shows that good and stable facilities can increase student achievement, reduce chronic absenteeism, drop-outs and suspensions and even improve teacher satisfaction and retention.

Advocates for federal spending on school infrastructure are also quick to point out that a federal fix was never their first choice, but that the funding shortfall has gotten so bad that it's now incumbent upon the the federal government to step in.

"We actually didn't think it made sense to be looking for federal dollars until local and states were doing their fair share," says Mary Filardo, executive director of the 21st Century School Fund. "Now we think it's time. The feds need to do their share too."

She continued: "We are not asking the feds to take over this financial responsibility at all, but we know that [federal] support will be the difference in the low-wealth, high-need areas and rural communities in terms of whether or not they are really just left to suffer."

Like funding for K-12 programs, schools rely heavily on local property taxes to fund their buildings. On average, the coalition found, local school districts cover 82 percent of costs, while the states cover on average 18 percent – though that amount varies widely, with five states that cover nearly all their districts' capital costs and 12 states offer no support whatsoever.

The federal government, meanwhile, covers about 0.2 percent and nearly all of that funding is through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and used for reconstruction after natural disasters, like hurricanes.

To be sure, Trump isn't the first president to pitch federal infrastructure support for schools.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt included more than \$1 billion for school building and repairs as part of the New Deal following the Great Depression, and President Dwight Eisenhower steered some federal dollars to school construction projects through the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act and the National Defense Education Act.

In 1995, during the Clinton era, the Government Accounting Office published a report that found that half of all schools had problems linked to indoor air quality and 15,000 were circulating air deemed unfit to breathe.

"We cannot expect our children to raise themselves up in schools that are literally falling down," Clinton said during his 1997 State of the Union address – though Congress would eventually only approve \$1.2 billion for urgent school renovation.

Later, President Barack Obama proposed \$20 billion for school modernization in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aimed at hauling the country out of the Great Recession. His proposal was met with a hard block.

"By putting the federal government in the business of building schools, Democrats may be irrevocably changing the federal government's role in education in this country," former Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., and then chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said at the time.

That's exactly the sentiment many are still pushing, though there's growing acknowledgment even in conservative circles that schools stand a better chance at being included in an infrastructure package this time around.

"It would probably surprise me if schools were not included in the bill," says McCluskey. "It strikes me that in the end, even if it's not the primary thing they think of, people like schools, and I think people are probably under the impression that schools also need maintenance and construction money because when you ask people they in large numbers always say schools need more money."