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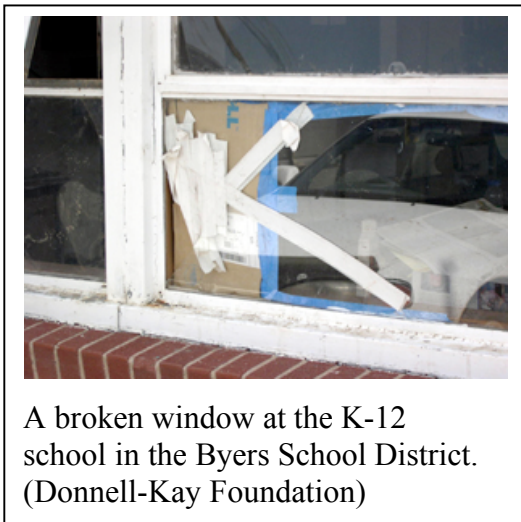
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Crumbling schools

Across Colorado, students are being taught in cramped and dilapidated facilities, but there's little money for fixes

By Mary Wickersham

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Imagine sitting in your high school class and having part of your desk fall through the floor under you.

That happened to a student in the Miami-Yoder School District east of Colorado Springs. A leg of his desk fell through the rotting floor of one of the portable buildings (i.e., trailers) used for all high school classes in the district.

Why use trailers? Because there is simply not enough room in the district's one permanent building to house any of its

high school students. In fact, 40 percent of Miami-Yoder students are in portable classrooms.

Unfortunately, the Miami-Yoder experience is neither unique nor limited to other small or rural school districts in our state. Students in school buildings (and trailers) all across Colorado are dodging falling ceiling tiles, navigating pools of water formed by leaking roofs, stepping over raw sewage backed up into the hallway or bundling up with sweaters and coats to keep warm because high levels of carbon dioxide from broken heating systems make them too dangerous to turn on.

So just how serious is the problem of crumbling classrooms in Colorado? It is hard to tell.

Colorado is one of a small handful of states that does not collect any information on K-12 facilities. The state does not even know exactly how many school buildings there are, much less their conditions.

In an attempt to better understand the condition of K-12 schools across Colorado, the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver-based foundation dedicated to improving public education, launched a wide-reaching assessment project last year.

First, surveys were sent to district superintendents and facility managers. Of 178 school districts in Colorado, Donnell-Kay received responses from 72 districts representing 60 percent of the state's school buildings housing 59 percent of Colorado public school students.

The second step was a series of individual school assessments performed by members of the Council of Education Facility Planners (a professional association that includes architects, engineers, planners and K-12 administrators) using a widely accepted system for collecting data on facility requirements. The system has been used in dozens of states, including assessments of all school buildings in Wyoming, Idaho and South Carolina.

Researchers visited 16 schools in eight school districts across Colorado. Schools were studied in each of the state's seven congressional districts.

What we found was disturbing. The highlights - or lowlights - of our assessment include:

More than a third of all school buildings are not in "good" condition, and a quarter are functionally inadequate.

According to superintendents, nearly a third of elementary schools and one out of every five middle and high schools are too small.

One-third of high schools have inadequate science facilities, and one-third are technologically inadequate.

Of the 16 individual schools assessed, each had needs totaling \$3 million - with one needing more than \$25 million in work.

Prior to this effort, the most recent study of Colorado's K-12 construction needs was a 2003 state auditor's report that pegged the statewide backlog at \$4.7 billion. The Donnell-Kay report estimates that the total statewide need is actually between \$5.7 billion and \$10 billion.

While some districts are worse off than others, almost all Colorado school districts are facing significant needs. From urban districts like Denver Public Schools to rural districts like West Grand in Kremmling to suburban districts like the Jefferson County School District, the financing options available simply aren't sufficient to keep up with the growing need.

Take, for example, the Jefferson County schools. Over the past decade, that district has passed two of the largest school bond measures in Colorado history, including the record \$324 million measure that local voters approved in November 2004.

Despite such successes, this district has never addressed more than 25 percent of its unmet need.

Understanding the scope of the problem is a significant first step, but it is not good enough. Colorado's current system for funding school construction relies almost exclusively on local property taxes. As a result, there is an enormous disparity between affluent districts and poor communities.

Low-income districts are further hamstrung by the cap on the amount of revenue they can raise through bonds at a percent of a district's property value. So even if voters approved bonding every available penny for school construction, it still wouldn't be enough to fix the problems. In fact, 40 percent of Colorado's school districts do not have sufficient bonding capacity to raise the revenue necessary to build a single new school.

The local funding system for school construction and renovations was supposed to be supplemented by the settlement of a lawsuit against the state brought by parents from six school districts. Under the settlement of the so-called Giardino lawsuit, the state agreed to pay \$190 million over 11 years to address the state's most serious needs. However, five years into the settlement, only a small fraction of that money has been paid.

It is likely the legislature will ask Colorado voters this fall for money to finally pay off this state obligation as part of a bonding referendum for infrastructure. Unfortunately, this amount represents less than 2 percent of the total statewide need. The same measure also dedicates more than 11 times more revenue to roads.

So, what can be done? For starters, we need to recognize that this is a statewide problem in need of a statewide solution. The Colorado Constitution requires the General Assembly to "provide for the establishment and maintenance of a thorough and uniform system of free public schools."

A safe, healthy environment in which to learn is the foundation for providing a sound education. It should be available to all Colorado students.

The current local funding system for school construction and renovations is woefully inadequate and outdated. While there will always be a role for local funding of schools, Colorado must follow the national trend of addressing school construction needs with state tax revenue.

For example, although it has half as many public school students as Colorado, New Mexico made a strong commitment to funding school construction at the state level by creating a Public School Facility Authority in 2003. This authority has since distributed more than \$400 million and technical assistance to local districts in only three years.

Arizona has put more than \$2 billion of state funds into its school buildings over the past five years and continues to budget more than \$100 million per year specifically for this purpose.

Without a significant commitment of state revenue in the near future, Colorado's problem is only going to get worse.

We can't sit by and watch as Colorado's public schools crumble in front of us.

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