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Miami-Yoder school way past its prime

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By Brian Newsome

RUSH - Superintendent Rick Walter opens the door to an aging trailer that houses science classes in this rural eastern plains school district.

“This one has floor issues,” he says of the building. Asked to elaborate, he replies matter-of-factly: “You can fall through them.”

In a nearby trailer — 20 years older — an art teacher makes light of the rainwater that drips from an overhead vent onto the toilet of the girls bathroom. It keeps the kids from hiding out during class, she says.

Poor conditions and cramped classrooms make the case for a new junior/senior high school in Miami-Yoder School District 60JT, district officials believe. Nothing fancy, just a place with sound construction and more space. Yet even a modest building would seem like the Taj Mahal in a place where property values total just over \$14 million, and where hiring one additional teacher can wreck a school budget.

Colorado school districts rely on property taxes to pay for construction, usually by issuing bonds and paying off the debt with voter-approved tax increases. That system seems to work best for metro districts, where billions of dollars in property and assets lead to hundreds of millions in taxfunded construction bonds. The burden of paying back those bonds is shared by thousands of residents and hundreds of businesses.

Not so for poor rural districts, where few people occupy vast amounts of agricultural land and the biggest retailer is a feed store or gas station.

“It’s hard from the standpoint that you look at how unfair the system is across the board,” Walter said.

This year in the Pikes Peak region, four high schools and six elementaries are in various stages of construction at costs totaling more than \$180 million.

Miami-Yoder wants to build a \$6 million, 32,000-squarefoot school that would serve about 160 middle and high school students. The price tag — already scaled back from the original \$7.1 million design — is three times the district’s legal maximum borrowing power, even if voters support the idea. The district is asking the state for a \$4 million grant to pay the rest, but Walter concedes that the request is a tall order.

The school district made the list of “crumbling classrooms” in a report produced by the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver-based nonprofit organization that focuses on issues affecting education. The foundation has lobbied for state financial assistance to help districts such as Miami-Yoder. It argues that school buildings are part of a safe and healthy environment, and therefore a constitutional obligation, said foundation Executive Director Tony Lewis.

“I think the state has been reluctant, at best, to take that responsibility on,” he said.

Sen. Andy McElhany, R-Colorado Springs, agrees the state could do more. The state does set aside money for school buildings, the Senate minority leader said, but it’s “woefully inadequate.”

Lawmakers must debate how much to give, where it would come from and what the rules would be, he said.

“There are rural school districts that just have no tax base, and no matter what they do they’re not going to be able to raise the money,” he said.

Walter has spent his career in poor rural districts like Miami-Yoder. What these districts lack in wealth, he said, is made up by the “rich volume” of students and staff members.

Still, that makes it hard for Walter to watch them cope with the school’s ailing and aging facilities. The original school building was built in 1915, he said, with various additions over the years. The most recent section, an elementary wing, was built in 1997.

Classrooms are about half the size of those in typical schools, and some classrooms serve unusual functions such as weight room and band hall.

The two computer labs are packed into tiny rooms reliant on window-unit air conditioners to counter the heat produced by about two dozen computers. At times, the temperature in the lab creeps into the 80s, Walter said.

In the science trailer, built in 1992, he points to a plywood square covering a hole in the floor. He notes the foundation framing underneath is loose and falling apart.

The art-and-music trailer was built in 1972 and purchased by the district in 1980.

The art room is jammed with drawers of supplies and artwork. In the girls’ bathroom, where the overhead vent leaked rain during a Tuesday storm, a trash can was placed on the toilet seat to catch water.

Nearly 70 percent of middle and high school students attend classes in trailers at least part of the day. Most high school seniors attend Pikes Peak Community College for vocational or entry-level college classes.

The district has struggled academically over the years, and Walter and Lewis believe the old and crowded buildings are partly to blame. The buildings limit opportunities to train on new technology, teach in teams and adopt other modern educational practices, Walter said.

It's distracting, Lewis said, to be "worried about the roof caving in on you while you're sitting in the classroom."

Miami-Yoder will learn in August whether it receives a state grant. If it doesn't, it won't ask for a tax increase and will postpone its plans for at least one more year.

Walter acknowledges it's difficult to operate in a system that holds every school district equally accountable without considering the inequities among districts.

"We're doing the best we can to educate these kids with what we have," Walter said.

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