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State acts like schools don't matter

By Diane Carman, Denver Post Staff Columnist

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Let's begin with Gunnison, where the temperature sometimes drops to 30 below in the winter months.

The high school is heated by two boilers installed in 1965, with an anticipated life expectancy of 30 years. One of the boilers is cracked and leaks carbon monoxide. The other is operating well beyond capacity and often breaks down.

School district officials applied for help from the state's Capital Construction Grant Program, hoping to replace the antiquated boilers with ones that would save \$5,000 a year in natural-gas costs and have the added benefit of not shutting down in sub-zero conditions.

At a cost of more than \$670,000, it was too extravagant, the committee said. Instead, Gunnison got \$73,382 to help pay the cost of venting the carbon monoxide.

Now, let's move east to the Woodlin School District where a hailstorm destroyed the roof of the school and contaminated the building with asbestos. The structure is so damaged it can't withstand the weight of workers to repair it. And damaged high-voltage power lines and transformers on the playground have added an extra level of lethality, so the entire property has been condemned.

With just weeks before the start of the school year, families are left to wonder where their children will attend class.

Stories of leaky roofs, broken fire alarm systems, wells contaminated by inadequate sewer systems, red-tagged heating systems, asbestos contamination, floors collapsing from dry rot and all manner of neglect fill the 264-page report by the Colorado Department of Education for the committee allocating the grant money.

It's a shameful legacy for a state with one of the highest rates of personal income in the U.S. It's also a blatant violation of our constitution and a breach of the settlement the state signed in the 1998 Giardino class-action lawsuit, aimed at forcing adequate funding for school construction.

This year, the legislature appropriated \$5 million for the capital construction fund, an amount so piddling in the face of an estimated \$5.9 billion to \$10 billion in unmet needs, it is sure to provide unimpeachable evidence against the state when the next round of lawsuits goes to trial.

"It really is just a matter of time before a serious tragedy occurs," said Mary Wickersham, director of special projects for the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which is investigating conditions in school buildings around the state.

The problem stems from the method used for financing school construction.

Districts must approve general obligation bonds to be repaid through property taxes, but state statute limits the amount that can be borrowed to a maximum of 20 percent of the property valuation in the district. Forty percent of the school districts in the state are so poor that if they approved bond issues for every penny available to them, it would not provide enough money to build a single school.

"People don't understand the magnitude of the problem," said Kathleen Gebhardt, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys in the Giardino lawsuit.

She said not only has the state failed to fulfill its commitment to provide \$190 million for capital construction, it has refused even to assess the situation.

State records don't reveal how many public schools exist in the state, much less their conditions. "If they put a number on it, they're afraid they'll have to fix it," Gebhardt said.

State Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, agreed: "The state has not wanted to address this issue because they know it would be a huge obligation if it ever admitted responsibility for school facility needs."

Instead, schoolchildren are forced to sit in classrooms where the rain soaks their clothes and books, asbestos and carbon monoxide fill their lungs, and fire alarm systems are so unreliable they give teachers nightmares.

Never mind their oaths to uphold the constitution, state officials don't want to hear about the problems. They guard their ignorance fiercely.

After all, it makes it a whole lot easier to pander to voters with permanent tax cuts if you conceal the truth from them about what's happening to the children.

Diane Carman's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. She can be reached at 303-820-1489 or dcarman@denverpost.com.

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