

Tour of districts exposes problems with Colo. Schools - Advocacy groups draw attention to biggest needs

URL: http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN_957_5610027,00.html

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

June 30, 2007

RUSH - Andrew Romanoff climbed out onto the roof of the Miami-Yoder School in this tiny rural community on Friday and stared down a narrow metal ladder.

"Does it meet any kind of state standard?" the Colorado Speaker of the House said as he gingerly stepped down.

"Could be," Miami-Yoder School Superintendent Rick Walter responded, emitting a laugh that was part humor at seeing the state's third-most- powerful politician clambering about his school fire escape.

The humor was mixed, though, with despair over whether even Romanoff can help fix what has been neglected for so long in this community east of Colorado Springs:

- The fire escape in a school built in 1915 that requires Miami-Yoder's 375 students to exit onto a roof and down a narrow ladder.
- Capacity issues that require 45 percent of students to attend classes in portable classrooms or trailers, including one built in 1973.
- Crumbling conditions throughout the original building and assorted add-ons and portables, including a rotting floor that a boy and his desk fell through last year. He wasn't injured.

"Reading is fundamental," Romanoff said after a daylong tour of conditions at Miami-Yoder and the nearby 115-student Edison school district, "but so is plumbing."

Friday's tour was an effort by Great Education Colorado and other advocacy groups to draw attention to the escalating capital needs of school districts statewide.

Romanoff, D-Denver, who also visited schools in the San Luis Valley this month, seemed convinced by day's end that something needs to be done.

He and State Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, said they expect to ask voters to support a statewide school bond issue in fall 2008 or 2009.



Kasia Broussalian © The Rocky

Colorado House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, examines pieces of rotting tile in the science room of the Miami-Yoder School in Rush on Friday.

Romanoff said the school tax question may be part of a larger package, along with roads and bridges, that attempts to address Colorado's infrastructure needs.

It would likely be the first statewide school bond issue ever attempted in Colorado.

While lawmakers annually set aside funding for costs such as textbooks and salaries, there is no similar significant funding source for capital needs.

Instead, school districts are expected to go to local voters to win approval of property tax increases for buildings.

The trouble is that in districts with small tax bases, such as Miami-Yoder and Edison, the money that can be raised via tax increases is limited.

Edison, for example, could raise \$610,522 at most in a voter-approved bond issue. The district needs \$2 million to build an elementary school.

"We make do," said Edison School Board President Jim Doak, standing outside the school library in a small, run-down wooden building once used for teacher housing. Part of the house is closed off because of spreading mold.

Edison and Miami-Yoder repeatedly have sought help from the state and been turned down. In 2000, after six school districts filed a class-action lawsuit over poor building conditions, then-Gov. Bill Owens agreed to set aside \$190 million over 11 years to address them.

But the amount is "not even close" to what's needed, said Kathy Gebhardt, attorney for the plaintiffs in that lawsuit. This year, the committee overseeing the settlement fund has received 192 applications.

For Jason Barnett, who graduated last spring from Miami-Yoder, the poor conditions spilled over into other aspects of his education.

He wanted to go to college; his guidance counselor told him to take welding classes. Of the 27 students in his graduating class, he says four are in college.

"We settle for mediocrity," he said. "We have a lot of bright kids here, and we're just not giving them the tools to be as successful as they could be."

Barnett ignored his counselor's advice. Last summer, he went to community college and paid for the advanced math classes that he could not get at Miami-Yoder. He recently finished his first year at the Colorado School of Mines.

"It makes me angry," he said of the conditions at Miami-Yoder, "because we could be so much better."

State schools in disrepair

Independent surveys of Colorado school districts in 2003 and 2005 show a backlog of building and repair needs in the billions of dollars. The Colorado Department of Education doesn't collect data on school buildings, so an official count is unknown.

\$4.7 billion Backlog reported by Colorado school districts filling out a 2003 survey for the state of Colorado auditor's office

\$5.7 billion is the low end of the backlog reported in 2005 when a Denver foundation surveyed school districts and hired a team of professionals to assess a random sampling of those districts

\$10 billion is the high end of the backlog reported in that 2005 report by the Donnell-Kay Foundation

• **For more information** about the capital needs of Colorado schools, the Donnell- Kay Foundation has created a Web site at **crumblingclassrooms.org**

mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5245

Copyright 2007, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.