

THE SCHOOLS OUR STUDENTS DESERVE: A Statewide School Facilities Program for Oregon

OREGON'S CHILDREN DESERVE BETTER SCHOOLS.

Oregon has adopted “the most aggressive high school and college completion goals of any state in the country” (*Oregon Blue Book*, 2013) without having a plan for the PreK-12 school facilities needed to support those goals. Many Oregon schools are outdated, dilapidated, and hazardous. Without a significant effort to increase statewide capital investment in PreK-12 school facilities, Oregon’s 40-40-20 goal and ambitions to build a “cradle to career” educational system will remain out of reach.

The **Task Force on School Capital Improvement Planning** calls on legislators to establish a four-part Oregon School Facilities Program:

- 1. Authorize \$125 million in new bonding for PreK-12 matching grants in 2015, maintain or increase this level of funding for the next five biennia, and explore permanent funding arrangements to sustain the commitment to PreK-12 capital needs beyond ten years;**
- 2. Establish and fund an Office of School Facilities in the Oregon Department of Education as a resource for local school districts;**
- 3. Provide technical assistance and small grants to assess district needs, support long-term capital programs, and inform statewide capital planning; and**
- 4. Launch the Oregon School Facilities Database to start building a repository of data for local district and statewide capital planning.**

The Task Force recommends that the existing \$20 million School Facility Grants portion of the State School Fund administered by the Oregon Department of Education be phased out and those funds repurposed to support the functions and programs of the new Office of School Facilities.

Key to the group’s capital funding recommendation is a **funding formula** weighted in favor of school districts with a high percentage of students in poverty and a limited local tax base.

The Charge

In 2010, Oregon voters approved Measure 68, amending the state’s constitution and authorizing new Article XI-P General Obligation bonds to provide matching funds to school districts that win voter approval for local school construction bonds. In 2013, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 540, establishing the **Task Force on School Capital Improvement Planning** and directing the group to recommend a) funding for PreK-12 capital needs, b) the types of technical assistance required by school districts for capital construction, and c) the appropriate role of the Oregon Department of Education in supporting the system and providing technical assistance. The bill also directed ODE to establish and maintain a public education facility information database.

Findings

The Task Force finds that the condition of Oregon's K-12 schools reflects a national pattern of under-investment: crumbling buildings, obsolete systems, and deteriorating site conditions. School bonds passed by local voters are not keeping pace, and many districts have had no success with local voters at all. In recent years, more than one-third of the capital dollars requested by school districts have been rejected. More than half the funds rejected have never been brought back before voters in subsequent elections. Consider:

- Deferred maintenance at Oregon's K-12 schools totals at least \$7.6 billion.
- Local voters rejected \$2.2 billion in school facility bond requests during the past 10 years.
- 43 percent of Oregon school districts have tried and failed, or not tried at all, to pass capital bonds since 1997.
- Some districts make three, four, or more attempts to win the approval of local voters before succeeding with a GO bond.
- Oregon is out of step with most other states in not having established statewide planning and funding for the state's local school facilities.

Urgent physical plant needs persist in school districts throughout the state. Stretched by legislative mandates for full-day kindergarten and K-8 physical education, growing emphasis on school-based early learning programs, and changing expectations for security and 21st century teaching and learning, Oregon's school facilities are falling into obsolescence and failing to provide our children with environments for achievement and success.

Program Benefits

An integrated Oregon School Facilities Program, backed by a long-term commitment to authorize and sell Article XI-P bonds, will incent local matching investments and deliver benefits in four areas:

1. **Health and safety improvements** that result in less illness, stronger buildings, and safer campus environments;
2. **Effective teaching and learning** in spaces designed for accessibility and wired for technology;
3. **Family-wage employment** in the construction and trade jobs needed for school modernization throughout Oregon; and
4. **Fiscal leverage** that can attract local support and help win voter approval for GO bond measures.

The Oregon School Facilities Program is about the school facilities that Oregon students deserve: healthy, safe, and designed and equipped to support achievement.

A copy of the full Task Force report, *The Schools Our Students Deserve: A Statewide School Facilities Program for Oregon*, may be downloaded from:

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=4014>