

# Public Schools

Section 11

**M**ore than 49 million elementary and secondary students are educated in approximately 97,000 public schools in the United States. While enrollments are growing, neither the quantity or quality of the school infrastructure has kept pace. The U. S. Department of Education reports that 18 percent of all schools are overcrowded and 37 percent are forced to make do with trailers and other portable classroom structures.<sup>1</sup> The average age of our country's school buildings is now more than 40 years; they were built to

accommodate teaching practices and the community needs of earlier generations.

Educational programs have changed to include early childhood education, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, social services and psychological counseling, programs for severely disabled students, and the use of new instructional technologies. Many schools are also now being designed or reconfigured for use by members of the community outside of regular school hours.

Getting up-to-date information on the physical

condition of U.S. schools is not easy. "Currently, there is no reliable measure of how much money is needed to provide children with adequate public school facilities," noted an October 2006 report by Building Education Success Together, an initiative of the 21st Century School Fund. "No public agency is monitoring school conditions nationally," the report said, "and many states do not have a way to evaluate the extent or level of need at the state level."<sup>2</sup>

There has been no authoritative report on school facilities since the Department of Education's report, "Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999."<sup>3</sup> The

department's website posts construction spending amounts only through 2002. While somewhat dated, the data reveal a startling rise in construction expenditures throughout this period.

In fiscal years 1990 to 2002, inflation-adjusted spending to acquire or construct public school facilities increased from \$19.5 billion to \$43.0 billion, a 121-percent increase. This dwarfed the rise in public school enrollment, which grew by 17 percent over the same period. As the graphic shows, spending accelerated dramatically after 1995.

### Public Schools by the Numbers

- 97,382 public schools in the U.S. (2006)**
- 18 percent of public schools classified as overcrowded by the U.S. Department of Education (2005)**
- \$43.0 billion annual public school construction expenditures (2002)**
- \$171.43 average construction cost per square foot for a high school (2007)**
- 20.2 percent of school-age population with an immigrant parent (2007)**
- 96.1 percent of school-age population growth due to immigration (estimate) (2000-50)**

**Spending Required to Rehabilitate U.S. Public Schools:**  
**2000: \$127 billion (a) (\$2,397 per student)**

**2050 projections (b):**  
**\$165.0 billion: at current population trends**  
**\$146.7 billion: at 50-percent reduction in immigration**  
**\$127.0 billion: at zero population growth**

**Notes:**  
**a. Department of Education estimate (1999).**  
**b. Assumes per-student spending requirements are at 2000 levels.**

**Sources:**  
**Department of Education, Federation for American Immigration Reform, Center for Immigration Studies, School Planning and Management.**

## More spending, fewer schools?

A newer set of statistics, published by a private company, shows continued construction spending growth—albeit at far lower annual amounts than the federal figures indicate. School construction completed in 2007—including new buildings, additions to existing buildings, and major rehabilitation of existing buildings—totaled about \$20.8 billion, a significant increase over the \$20.1 billion spent in 2006. This marks the seventh year of the last eight in which completed construction exceeded \$20 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, even after adjusting for inflation, more money does not necessarily mean more physical infrastructure. That is what appears to have happened in 2007, when the total real dollars increased by 3.2 percent, but the cost per square foot of new buildings rose by more than 6.0 percent. As a result, while school districts increased spending on new school buildings by more than \$800 million, they actually added less space and fewer buildings.

The inflation rate applicable to school construction is cost per square foot. The one-year increase in schools completed in 2006 (\$151.52 per square foot) to those completed in 2007 (\$171.43 per square foot) was a whopping 13 percent. Some of this may be because schools are more concerned about building “green,” but most of it is because the price of materials and manpower used to build schools went up by more than the overall rate of inflation. Under these conditions, more construction dollars can mean less space added.

## State Spending Varies Greatly

Construction spending varies greatly among the states. Average per-student construction expenditures over the 1990 to 2002 period ranged from a high of \$1,039 in Alaska to a low of \$196 in Rhode Island. The overall U.S. average was \$629 per student.<sup>5</sup>

School construction costs are noticeably above average in states with large immigrant populations. Florida (\$998), Arizona (\$954), and Nevada (\$926) were, respectively, second, third, and fourth in per-student construction expenditures. California (\$689) ranked tenth.

Areas with large immigrant populations spend extraordinary amounts constructing new facilities. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, is in the midst of a \$19 billion new construction program that will deliver 150 new schools by 2012.<sup>6</sup> LA’s school construction program is so massive that the Army Corps of Engineers was called in to manage it.<sup>7</sup>



For the most part these extraordinary construction expenditures have not been wasted on gold plated, overbuilt palaces of education. They are used to provide basic infrastructure needs of a burgeoning student population. As detailed below, many school districts have failed in this effort.

## Immigration Drives Enrollment Growth

Public school enrollment growth has accelerated in recent years. Many observers attribute the resurgence to the so-called “baby-boom echo”—children of persons born between 1946 and 1964. It is clear from U. S. Census data, however, that immigration policy accounts for the vast bulk of this increase.

Although immigrants account for 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, 20.2 percent of the nation’s school-age population is children of immigrants.<sup>8</sup> There are 10.8 million children of immigrants in the school-age population.

Children of immigrants account for such a large share of the school-age population because a higher proportion of immigrant women are in their childbearing years, ages 25 to 34. Immigrant women also tend to have more children, on average, than their native-born counterparts. The fertility rate of foreign-born women is 37 percent higher than the fertility rate of native women.<sup>9</sup>

Although less than one-fourth of school-age children of immigrants are immigrants themselves, by law any child born to immigrant parents in the U.S. is a citizen entitled to public education. They would not be here had immigration policy not allowed their parents to enter the country.

Not surprisingly, states with above-average school construction costs also tend to have above-average shares of children of immigrants in their school-age populations. The future offers no demographic relief, as evidenced by the even larger share of immigrants in the preschool populations of most states (see table above).

**The Condition of School Infrastructure**

The American Society of Civil Engineers’ (ASCE) 2005 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure assigned a D to the physical condition of America’s K through 12 public schools, noting that the projected costs of improving the nation’s school facilities varies widely.

Survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that a one-time investment of \$142 billion beyond current amounts would be necessary to bring school facilities into a good state of repair.<sup>11</sup> The National Education Association has estimated that a one-time investment of \$360 billion beyond current spending would be necessary to “modernize” schools (both figures are in 2004 dollars). However, neither estimate specifies the period over which the investment would be made.<sup>12</sup>

Lacking an overall national picture of the condition of public schools, it is necessary to look state by state and, in some cases, school district by school district. Below we cite anecdotal evidence assembled by the American Society of Civil Engi-

neers and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR.)

**Nevada:** Nevada’s school enrollment grew a whopping 54 percent between 1995 and 2004—more than that of any other state and over five times the U.S. average of 10 percent. Clark County schools are so crowded that students complain that they cannot find available restrooms between classes. The district (which includes Las Vegas) projects that it will add 10,000 to 15,000 students every year. The average student-teacher ratio in the district’s secondary schools is 32 to 1; some classes have more than 40 students.<sup>13</sup>

**California:** A Rand Corporation report concluded that California has made progress in addressing K-12 public infrastructure needs.<sup>14</sup> “Progress” is a relative term, of course. California schools are the most crowded in the nation, classes often exceed 35

students per teacher (18 is considered ideal). Lack of space forces some students to attend class in trailers, on school stages, or in the gym. Yet the state is still adding 100,000 new students each year.

Los Angeles schools are so crowded that some have lengthened the time between classes to give students time to make

their way through packed halls. Some Los Angeles schools will have to hold double sessions (one in the morning and one in the afternoon) and Saturday classes. Conversion of library, music, and laboratory space to classrooms is among the other expedients the Los Angeles Unified School District has used to cope with its burgeoning school population.

Even if the district builds 86 new schools, all 49 existing high schools will still have to adopt year-round schedules to keep pace with enrollment increases.

<b>Immigration’s Impact on School-Age Populations, 2007</b>		
	<i>Percent with immigrant fathers</i>	
	<b>School-age population (5 to 17) (%)</b>	<b>Preschool age population (0 to 4) (%)</b>
<b>California</b>	<b>46.9</b>	<b>45.5</b>
<b>LA County</b>	<b>57.4</b>	<b>56.4</b>
<b>Nevada</b>	<b>32.9</b>	<b>33.2</b>
<b>New York</b>	<b>31.1</b>	<b>36.5</b>
<b>NY City</b>	<b>54.8</b>	<b>57.1</b>
<b>Florida</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>29.2</b>
<b>Arizona</b>	<b>22.7</b>	<b>33.1</b>
<b>U.S.</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>22.6</b>
<b>Source:</b>		
<b>Steven A. Camarota.<sup>10</sup></b>		

California's Class Size Reduction program calls for adding thousands of new K-3 teachers, but finding classroom space has proved impossible in some areas. Playgrounds are being transformed into parking lots for portable classroom trailers.<sup>15</sup>

**Florida:** Public school enrollment grew 23 percent between 1995 and 2004, faster than any state east of the Mississippi. Florida's schools are so overcrowded that legislators are considering paying students to go to private schools instead of public ones. In Miami-Dade County, 41 percent of schools are at least 150 percent over capacity, and locker rooms and custodial closets have been converted into classrooms. In Sarasota, some classrooms have more than 40 students at a time. In Manatee County, lunch lines are sometimes so long that students do not have time to eat unless they miss class. Pasco County has opened six new schools in the last three years, has three more scheduled to open in the upcoming months, and still projects that by 2005 two high schools each will receive 700 more students than they have room for. No affordable land is available for further school construction.<sup>16</sup>

Florida's high immigration rate means that population growth often exceeds projections. As a result, the state's school funding formula frequently underestimates actual enrollments, "leaving school districts scrambling to provide additional personnel and programs without fresh infusions of cash."

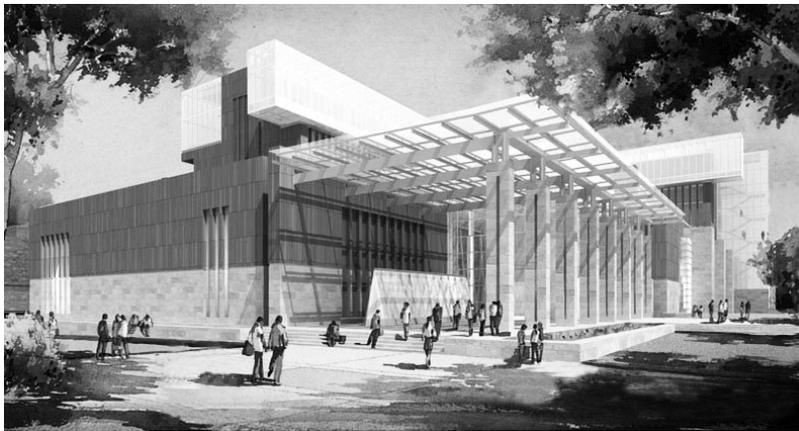
"Our anticipated gains in the number of foreign-born students alone will require us to build one elementary school a month just to keep up," Miami-Dade school superintendent Roger Cuevas says. Every year since 1994, between 12,000 and 20,000 new foreign-born students have enrolled in the district's schools.<sup>17</sup>

**New York:** Three years ago, a court-appointed panel found that \$9.2 billion for new classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and other facilities is needed

to relieve crowding, reduce class sizes, and give the city's 1.1 million public school students adequate school facilities.<sup>18</sup> In May 2008, a report by the City Comptroller's office stated that "There are too many neighborhoods with overcrowded schools, elementary schools in particular, and no relief for years to come."<sup>19</sup> ■

## Endnotes

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