

Testimony on
“Underpaid Teachers and Crumbling Schools:
How Underfunding Public Education Shortchanges America’s Students”

Committee on Education and Labor
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Sharon L. Contreras, Ph.D., Superintendent
Guilford County Schools
Greensboro, North Carolina

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Foxx, Congressman Walker, Congresswoman Adams and members of the Committee. I am Sharon Contreras, superintendent of Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, North Carolina. With me today are my colleagues, Angie Henry, chief financial officer, and Julius Monk, executive director of facilities. Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and thank you for your leadership and service. I deeply appreciate the invitation to testify about the condition of our facilities and how critical school infrastructure needs impact our students and their teachers.

OVERVIEW

As an educator and administrator who has worked in public schools in several states, I have seen firsthand how school design, construction, renovation, timely repair and maintenance can create healthy, safe and innovative spaces that truly support 21st century learning. I have also seen firsthand how inadequate facilities, broken HVAC systems and dilapidated buildings negatively affect learning and put our students at a competitive disadvantage in terms of career and college readiness.

The substantial obstacles we face in bringing America’s schools up-to-par from a facilities standpoint date back generations, and are found in every state, particularly in our urban and rural areas, which serve the highest concentrations of children and adults living in poverty. A 2011 Council of Great City Schools survey of 50 urban school districts found that these systems alone needed approximately \$20.1 billion in new construction, \$61.4 billion in repair, renovation and modernization, and \$19 billion in deferred maintenance costs, or some \$100.5 billion in total facility needs.

More recently, the joint publication of the 21st Century School Fund, Inc., U.S. Green Building Council, Inc., and the National Council on School Facilities, “2016 State of Our Schools”, estimated that \$145 billion should be spent nationwide each year to provide 21st century facilities for all children. In 2017, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave a grade of D+ for America’s school infrastructure and reported an annual underinvestment in school facilities of \$38 billion, which only serves to compound the deterioration of the nation’s schools ever year.

LOCAL CONTEXT

We see this in my school district as well. Guilford County Schools (GCS) serves more than 73,000 PreK-12 students in 126 schools in a county-wide district that spans about 650 square miles and encompasses urban, suburban and rural areas. Students of color represent the majority at 68 percent. About 65

percent of our students are considered economically disadvantaged, while 13.3 percent of our students qualify for special education services, and 10 percent are considered English language learners. Our students come to our doorsteps eager to learn; unfortunately, our doors don't always open to facilities designed to meet the needs of students in the post-industrial era.

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

Our facilities team manages 126 schools, 300 buildings, nearly 3,000 acres of land and 12.5 million square feet of facilities as well as sidewalks, driveways, curbs, fencing, security systems, athletic facilities, and other components. Our average school building is about 50 years old and was designed for an industrial era that no longer exists. We have 469 mobile classrooms, 58 percent of which are more than 20 years old. We have five mobile units that date to 1972.

Our maintenance staff responds to more than 30,000 work orders annually, many for failing HVAC units, plumbing systems, leaky roofs and other basic building needs. Schools routinely use buckets and trashcans to catch the water during heavy rains. Water seepage and flooding is also common, especially since our county has – during just the past year – experienced a devastating tornado, two hurricanes, an unusual 12-inch snowfall and a record 64 inches of rain.

We do have some new and partially renovated schools thanks to a \$457 million bond approved by voters in 2008 and \$34 million in Qualified School Construction Bonds (QSCB) provided in 2009 and 2010 via federal stimulus funds, which helped us upgrade three schools as well as replace HVAC systems, windows/doors and roofs in 24 schools. An additional \$10 million in stimulus funds also were used to upgrade our technology infrastructure to better support wireless connectivity – an advantage that many school systems in North Carolina and nationally have not had.

Despite these investments, a recent, comprehensive facility study funded jointly with bipartisan support by our school board and county commissioners, indicated we need more than \$1.5 billion in capital investment to renovate and upgrade current facilities and build new schools. According to the study, 45 percent of our schools were rated as unsatisfactory or in poor condition. Many of the schools rated as unsatisfactory or poor are also Title I schools, educating the poorest and most vulnerable students in Guilford County. Ten schools were recommended for possible closure while one new school and 27 replacement schools were proposed to improve conditions and alleviate overcrowding.

The deferred maintenance backlog in our district was pegged at \$800 million, while renewal funding for preventative maintenance and reasonable replacement cycles for furniture, fixtures, equipment and technology was estimated at \$6.9 billion over a 30-year period. Modern standards do exist for maintaining and upgrading current K-12 public school facilities. A general industry standard for facility maintenance and operations, including utility and security costs, indicates that a minimum of 3% of the current replacement value (CRV) should be budgeted annually. An additional 1% of the current replacement value should be budgeted annually to systematically reduce the accumulation of deferred maintenance over the next ten years (ASBJ, June 2018). Our current maintenance budget, however, is only around \$6 million, which equates to just 50-cents per square foot.

Because our maintenance budget is so severely underfunded, when a HVAC system failed at one of our middle schools several years ago, we were forced to replace it in phases over a three-year period at the cost of approximately \$5 million. Had we replaced the HVAC system in one year, that upgrade for a single school would have nearly depleted our entire annual maintenance budget.

Considering the limits of our capital funding and the age of our buildings, roofs, walls, plumbing, HVAC systems, doors and windows, all of which affect structural integrity and indoor air quality, it is not surprising that we spend operating dollars every year addressing remediation and intervention as opposed to more proactive measures. Essentially, we must take money from our operational budget that should be used to improve teaching and learning because we do not have enough capital money to maintain and update our facilities. We do not have enough funds to meet our telecommunication needs, and our technology replacement cycle for classroom devices is nine years, well past the useful shelf-life in many cases. Most of our schools do not have career and technical education (CTE) spaces, maker spaces, modern science labs, current technology, flexible student and teacher work spaces, adequate electrical infrastructure or modern safety measures and design. Accessibility for students with disabilities is inadequate. Our schools and campuses by and large were designed in an era when classrooms opened directly to the outside, with multiple buildings on open campuses that are more challenging to monitor and secure.

And, while it's easy to dismiss administrative facility needs as unimportant or unnecessary, we struggle to maintain our fleet of more than 1,000 school buses in an outdated maintenance shed with limited repair bays, lifts, storage and an antiquated online inventory system. Our financial accounting system is more than 30 years old, and is incompatible with our equally outdated personnel software, making position control difficult and requiring additional staff to manage transactions. These and other behind-the-scenes support structures designed to facilitate teaching and learning fall woefully behind those of business and industry, and wealthier school systems. I am proud that a robust study of our finances and expenditures found that 96 percent of our expenditures directly support the educational program in our district (Schoolhouse Partners, 2015). However, I also know that we could drive more innovation and student success with more current and efficient systems.

While the physical condition of our buildings is troubling, our greatest concern and frustration is that most of our schools do not meet the baseline standards required to adequately support 21st century learning, with the average school rated as "poor" in terms of educational suitability on the recent facility study. We cannot adequately prepare students for the careers of tomorrow in the fastest growing STEM industries, advanced manufacturing, and other high-skill, high-wage professions using outdated instructional materials and technologies in cramped, poorly lit and poorly ventilated spaces. Similar conditions are found not only across North Carolina, but throughout the United States, particularly in regions like ours that are characterized by fewer (or exiting) major employers, slower economic growth and higher rates of poverty.

CHRONIC UNDER-INVESTMENT

In our district, and nationally, the deteriorating condition of our aging facilities requires us to address potential health and safety issues piecemeal and with stopgap measures. For example, we patch leaky roofs and repair outdated HVAC systems innumerable times, but do not have adequate funds for roof replacement or new HVAC systems, which would address the root causes of water intrusion and humidity that cause indoor air quality concerns. In short, we make every effort to protect teacher and student health from harm that may otherwise be caused by inadequate, or undermaintained facilities, but we do so on a shoestring budget that often does not allow us to provide a truly optimal, healthful learning environment.

Our business and industry partners tell us repeatedly that our students must use current technologies, systems and equipment, work in a team environment, and know how to interact appropriately and communicate effectively. How can our educators manage all of this effectively if their students are

sitting on register covers in over-crowded classrooms, their computers are outdated, and they're using tattered textbooks that still highlight George W. Bush as the current President of the United States?

GCS is not unique in terms of its facility needs. Gaston County Schools in North Carolina has identified school repair, renovation and replacement projects that would cost more than \$650 million. In May 2018, voters approved a \$250 million school bond referendum, the largest in the county's history, but it will only address one-third of Gaston's critical school facility needs. The New Hanover County Schools estimate its unmet capital needs at \$500 million due to growth in student enrollment, safety and security, and deferred maintenance. Flexible learning spaces require new technology and innovative furniture. Per New Hanover's superintendent, funding is essential to provide safe, healthy, and orderly school environments supportive of academic success and to improve the operating efficiency of their facilities. Burke County Public Schools in the Western part of our state has identified nearly \$78 million short-term and \$16 million long-term facility needs, while Rowan-Salisbury Schools estimates that its current capital needs exceed \$208.5 million due to deferred maintenance and aging facilities, 60 percent of which are over 50 years old. The district faces an annual capital funding deficit of nearly \$3 million each year. I could give many more examples from North Carolina, alone.

I am grateful that the North Carolina state legislature has increased public education funding since 2011; however, as of 2017, North Carolina still ranks 39th nationally in per pupil funding. If Guilford County Schools were funded at the national average per pupil spending, we would receive at least an additional \$150 million per year, some of which would be used for facilities' maintenance.

Public schools help children and young people see what is possible. What vision are we providing our students if the walls in their classrooms drip with humidity, the circuits blow when the teacher plugs in a computer or space heater, there aren't enough laptops or devices to go around, the security cameras don't work and are so old the manufacturer doesn't make parts for them anymore, their sidewalks and parking lots are turning into gravel and their playgrounds have the same equipment their parents and grandparents used when they attended school there? This is the daily reality of far too many students today, even though the potential economic return on investment in public education is powerful and well-documented.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Greater investments and efficiencies in K-12 education pay for themselves via increases in economic productivity. A National Bureau of Economic Research study regarding the financial return of states' investment in improving K-12 education indicated that if all students in the U.S. could achieve basic mastery as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP, the U.S. GDP would increase by \$32 trillion, or 14.6 percent. Yet, spending on K-12 education by states and localities amounted to just 4 percent of the total GDP of \$18.57 trillion in 2016.

Good schools, are in fact, good for the economy, with even modest improvement in student achievement generating gains in productivity that outweigh investment costs (Hanushek, Ruhose and Woessmann, 2015). Communities associated with higher levels of learning tend to have more robust economies, better health outcomes and higher quality of life indicators. Greenville, South Carolina, for example, is booming in part because it has opened 82 new or renovated schools since 2003.

In North Carolina, a 2015 study showed that each graduating class of the Wake County Public School System generates between \$1.4 billion and \$1.6 billion in additional lifetime income and saves taxpayers about \$639 million in welfare, crime and health costs. In addition, the study found that every \$1 million

spent on school construction projects creates about 10 local jobs. Given that the average elementary school typically costs between \$15 million to \$20 million to build, the economic impact of building new schools and keeping current schools in good repair is significant (Walden, 2015).

Economic growth and housing values are largely shaped by the quality of schools available in each neighborhood and community—ask any realtor. The chronic underinvestment in public school infrastructure, educational programming and teacher compensation constrains teaching and learning, harms students and families, and hampers economic growth and development.

CONCLUSION

Our crumbling school infrastructure requires national leadership and federal funding to assist state and local efforts to upgrade our schools for our students while also sparking greater investment in the urban and rural areas that are hit hardest by rising rates of poverty, dwindling tax bases and chronic funding shortfalls. Bridging the current gap in funding in our district and in school systems across the United States also will require new designs for learning and more ingenuity at the local and state level. I support Chairman Scott's introduction of the "Rebuild America's Schools Act of 2019," and encourage this Committee and Congress to come together and prioritize investments in our school buildings and our students. Transforming learning and life outcomes for children and young people is not a partisan issue, it is the issue our nation must address if we want future generations to prosper, if we want our children and grandchildren to live fulfilling lives, and if we intend to preserve our great democracy.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the infrastructure needs of our nation's public schools. I look forward to any questions you may have.