
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Finance

Respectfully Submitted by: Bob Donohue, School Facilities Program Manager

Subject: School Construction

Date: April 15, 2025

Statewide Public School Facilities Assessment

In 2021, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed Act 72, funding a statewide inventory and assessment of all public school buildings. The purpose of this data collection was to inform a future Legislature on the extent of school facilities needs in Vermont and to provide a foundation should a new statewide school construction aid program be created.

With an average age of 61 years for Vermont schools, the suspension of state construction aid has contributed to a backlog of school construction projects and the decline of school facilities conditions statewide. This has resulted in less safe and less healthy learning environments, as well as disparities in the quality of education between better-resourced communities and high-need districts.

Cost estimates from the statewide assessment estimate a 20-year annual average spending of \$300 million to address facilities deficiencies, just to replace systems that have reached the end of their useful life “in kind.” The assessment of facilities also does not include the creation of 21st century learning environments. While there are many definitions of 21st century learning, there is a general consensus that the term is used to refer to an approach to learning that centers on collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving. As we work to shift our approaches to educating for the 21st century, there should also be thoughts about how school spaces can help or hinder this kind of learning.

Facilities Master Planning Process

The School Construction Task Force and the School Construction Working Group have discussed a wide variety of topical areas related to school construction. One of them, through Act 149 of 2024 established the Facilities Master Planning Grant program. This program, although enacted, remains unfunded. The Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Planning (CEFMP) is a process whereby a district collects/develops the following information:

- (A) a description of the educational mission, vision, and goals of the district
- (B) a description of current educational programs and services offered by the district
- (C) the performance of a space utilization assessment
- (D) the identification of new program needs
- (E) the development of enrollment projections
- (F) an understanding of the demographic makeup of current and future enrollments
- (G) the performance of a facilities assessment
- (H) multiple options for achieving the vision

The result of the Facilities Master Planning Process is derived from robust community engagement throughout the entire process. It results in one or more options for consideration to achieve the long term goals identified by the community.

How can the state support conversations around school consolidation?

During the School Construction Taskforce and the School Construction Working Group, the Agency proposed that the comprehensive educational facilities master planning process was an approach that could inform data-driven consolidation decisions. The typical time to complete a CEFMP is 18 to 24 months and can cost in the range of \$250,000, for an average sized school district in our current 52 district configuration. In the future configuration of 5 districts, we could expect these larger districts to require \$2.5 - \$3.0 million to conduct such a CEFMP and we could expect that it would take over two years' time to complete. A dearth of A/E firms that operate in the K-12 school sector in this niche of educational facilities master planning could be a bottleneck of timely progress on this front.

In acknowledgement of the timelines and costs to complete a CEFMP in an authentic and meaningful way and that school construction may be necessary to grade realignment or consolidation or other strategies to achieve proposed class sizes, the Governor's proposal for education transformation proposes to carry the cost of the current portfolio of buildings for several years through additional weights for small schools. As proposed, this additional support is for all small schools, with the understanding that a future point in time, the state would set criteria for schools that are 'small by necessity' and continue to provide the additional weight for only those schools.