

BY MARY FILARDO

# Time to Modernize Our Nation's Public School Facilities



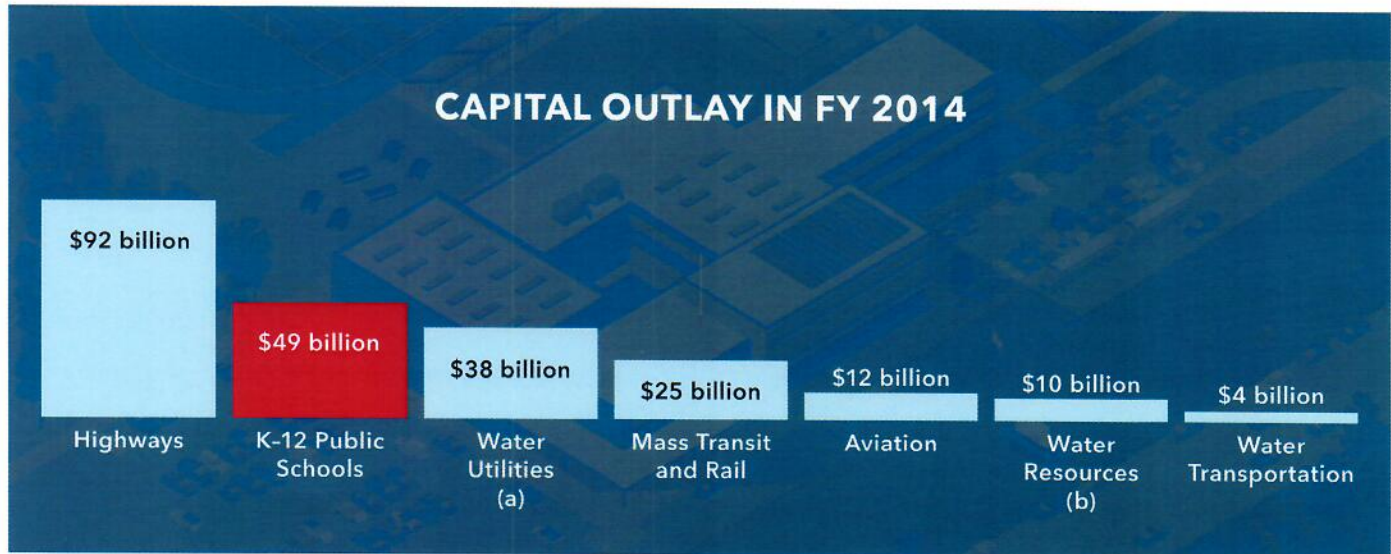
**According to a March 2018 poll by POLITICO and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 72 percent of the American people want schools to be made a top priority when it comes to increased infrastructure spending, including 68 percent of Republicans. Schools are just as important to the American people as roads and bridges and rank higher than airports, harbors and ports, and broadband access.**

We believe the public schools sector has, for the first time in decades, a significant opportunity to secure federal funding for building and modernizing school facilities. But it will take timely and broad-based industry support in partnership with the civic community to make this happen. The highway industry builds roads and bridges locally, but they get billions of dollars in federal support because they have been organized nationally for years. It's time for the civic, education and PK12 public school facility industry sector serving our school districts to do the same.

Toward this end, we launched [Re] Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition (BASIC) in January 2018 with the aim of securing \$100 billion over 10 years from federal sources for public school capital outlay. The civic, education and K12 industry sector have never made a sustained effort to secure federal funds, but we believe we have a unique opportunity now to make our case.



**THE CASE FOR FEDERAL FUNDING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE**



<sup>1</sup> Public Spending on Transportation and Water Infrastructure, March 2015 report of the Congressional Budget Office. State of our Schools 2016 report, K-12 Public Schools data is the 20-year average school construction annual capital outlay in 2014\$. (a) includes water supply and wastewater treatment facilities. (b) includes water containment systems (dams, levees, reservoirs, and watersheds) and sources of freshwater (lakes and rivers).

Public school facilities are where instruction, programs, and services are delivered to over 50 million children daily, preparing them for the work, family, and civic responsibilities of adulthood. Schools also contribute to the overall productivity of our economy by providing children and youth safe places to be during school hours and often before and after school while their parents and guardians work.

Our public schools are also community centers often serving people of all ages. The scale of this infrastructure, with over 100,000 public schools, means that PK-12 public schools are our 2nd largest infrastructure, after highways.<sup>1</sup>

Substantial amounts of capital outlay are spent on our nation’s public school buildings and grounds. But because of their advanced years—on average over 44 years—their intense use, and lack of capital re-investment in their building systems, components, and finishes, communities across America suffer with substandard facilities. Too many facilities are unhealthy,

unsafe, educationally inadequate, and environmentally unsustainable. Hazardous building materials from an earlier age linger, such as asbestos, lead, and Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs). These legacy chemicals actively harm students’ health, causing asthma, liver, lung and kidney damage. These toxins, particularly lead, affect the young children stunting brain and neural system growth.

New building practices and materials can make school buildings more resilient in the face of earthquakes,

tornados, hurricanes, wildfires and flooding. But these were not used when most schools were built. Safety essentials such as working fire alarms, appropriate egress hardware and highly fire-rated safe-areas are not universally in place.

In many communities, schools serve as essential public infrastructure during times of natural disaster. During hurricanes, wildfires, or mudslides, school facilities must operate not only as a shelter for those displaced but also as an essential command

Annual Standards, History and Projected Gap	Modern Standards	Historic Spending	Projected Annual Gap
Maintenance & Operations (a)	\$58 billion	\$50 billion	\$8 billion
Capital Construction (b)	\$77 billion	\$49 billion	\$38 billion
New Facilities (c)	\$10 billion		
TOTAL	\$145 billion	\$99 billion	\$46 billion



and control center for local response teams, as well as aid distribution centers for the community.

Moreover, as tragic incidents have proven, schools need to be able to be secured for students, teachers, and staff in the case of shootings. But most of our schools were designed and built before this was a worry or consideration of occupants or the districts responsible for design and construction.

Nationally, there is a \$38 billion annual investment gap in capital construction for school building improvements projects and new construction.<sup>2</sup> These poor conditions disproportionately affect low income urban and rural communities.

The nation's cash-strapped school districts held a total of \$425 billion in long-term debt, a state average of \$7,448 per student, nationwide at the end of FY2015. Local school districts have historically provided the majority of funds to build school facilities – approximately 82 percent—with state governments providing the other 18 percent. That said, 12 states provide no aid at all. States and districts need federal funding to overcome this annual \$38 billion investment gap.

### POLITICAL CONTEXT

Unfortunately, the Trump Administration did not include schools in their February 2018 infrastructure proposal, even though fixing our crumbling schools was mentioned in campaign and election night promises. However, Congress has begun a long overdue debate on addressing the nation's infrastructure needs, but so far only Democrats have focused on our nation's public school infrastructure. In May 2017, two bills were introduced to provide \$100 billion in federal dollars to rebuild public schools: Senate Bill -S.1674 sponsored by Sen. Jack Reed

(D-RI) with 15 co-sponsors, and House Bill 2475 sponsored by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) with 113 co-sponsors.

A one-time, single infusion of federal dollars into the neediest school districts will not create a cycle of dependency for local school districts, but rather will help close a critical gap that has long created inequitable conditions in

thousands of schools. Safe and secure schools will positively impact student learning as well as student, teacher, and staff health. State and local governments have done all they can do; it's time for the federal government to step up to its responsibility.

We welcome new members to BASIC, at [www.buildusschools.org](http://www.buildusschools.org). +



**MARY FILARDO** is Founder and Executive Director, 21st Century School Fund (21CSF) and Facilitator of BASIC. As a parent of public school children who attended a 65-year-old public school building in poor condition, Filardo founded 21CSF in 1994. 21CSF is dedicated to building the public will and capacity to modernize public school facilities so they support high-quality education and community revitalization. She holds a bachelor's in philosophy and mathematics from St. John's College, and a MPP from the University of Maryland. Email her at [MFilardo@21csf.org](mailto:MFilardo@21csf.org).

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<sup>2</sup> State of our Schools 2016. Filardo, Mary, 21st Century School Fund.