

## **Testimony of Brian Kennedy**

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### **Before the Education and Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education**

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical and urgent need for federal investment to modernize our nation's public schools. My name is Brian Kennedy, and I serve as the Director of Legislative Affairs for the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC). I also serve as a Board Member of the Build America's School Infrastructure Coalition (BASIC), a diverse national nonpartisan coalition united in advocacy for a robust and reliable federal role in modernizing the nation's public school buildings and grounds. I speak to you today not only as an advocate for America's construction workforce but as someone deeply committed to ensuring that every child in this country has the opportunity to learn and thrive in a safe, modern, and healthy school environment.

### **The State of America's Public School Facilities**

America's public school facilities are in crisis. A December 2023 survey of the US Department of Education found that the average age of the main instructional building of our nation's public schools was 47 years. This means tens of thousands of our nearly 100,000 public schools were constructed during a wave of investment in the mid-20th century and have since fallen into disrepair. A 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found that an estimated 54% of schools need significant upgrades to their heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, and also had other major systems, like roofs, plumbing, and electrical needing to be upgraded or replaced.

These antiquated and deteriorated systems create environmental hazards from mold, lead, PCBs, and asbestos, posing significant health risks to children and staff. These poor conditions make facilities a barrier to student achievement and engagement, and to teacher performance and retention. Additionally, many school buildings do not meet modern standards for resilience and will not hold up to flooding, extreme heat, hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Schools in these vulnerable regions become unsafe buildings.

Local communities are working hard to address these challenges, in Fiscal Year 2022 school districts spent nearly \$80 billion in 2024\$ for school facilities capital construction and had over one half a trillion of long term debt. However, a conservative estimate for what is needed is \$130 to \$180 billion each year over the next 15 to 20 years to this ensure responsible stewardship of this essential public good.

## **A Nonpartisan, Community-Centered Issue**

This is not a red state issue or a blue state issue - it is a community issue. It is about ensuring that all children, regardless of their zip code, have access to a safe and conducive learning environment.

Without a local, state, and federal partnership to address this crisis, the problem will only worsen.

## **Health and Learning Impacts**

The decrepit conditions of our school facilities have a profound effect on both health and academic outcomes. Poor indoor air quality, caused by failing HVAC systems, has been linked to higher rates of asthma and respiratory illness, leading to increased absenteeism among students and staff. Studies have shown that students in well-maintained, modern buildings perform better academically, with fewer disruptions and higher rates of teacher retention.

For example, schools with proper temperature regulation and lighting see improved student focus and achievement. Conversely, overcrowded classrooms in dilapidated buildings create an environment where learning is hindered, and the overall quality of education suffers. We must ask ourselves: how can we expect our children to compete in a 21st-century global economy when they are learning in 20th-century—or even 19th-century—buildings?

## **Economic Benefits**

Investing in school modernization is not only about improving education; it is about creating jobs and bolstering local economies. Federal funding to address school infrastructure would directly support the construction industry, creating millions of jobs for skilled workers like bricklayers, masons, electricians, painters and plumbers. These are good-paying, middle-class jobs that help families build stable futures while addressing a critical national need.

Moreover, modernizing schools strengthens communities. Public schools are often the heart of local neighborhoods, serving as polling places, and community meeting spaces. A federal investment in school infrastructure is an investment in the social fabric of our communities.

## **The Federal Role in Addressing the Crisis**

Historically, the federal government has played a limited role in funding school infrastructure, leaving states and local districts to bear the brunt of these costs. However, the scale of this crisis demands federal leadership. Localities alone cannot close the structural gap in our system for financing and funding the modernization of our nation's public school buildings and grounds. In today's dollars it requires a minimum of an additional \$50 billion of stable funding per year over the next 15 years for direct support for facility improvements. Additionally, the complex work of meeting modern health, safety, security, environmental, and education standards requires increased state capacity, not just in funding, but also in expertise to help high need districts. The Supporting America's School Infrastructure Initiative in the US Department of Education, which has funded facility technical assistance capacity-building in 7 states and one territory, is a promising pilot for a high rate of return on federal investment.

Finally, Federal assistance to rebuild public schools damaged and destroyed by natural disasters has involved billions of dollars. Communities recovering from hurricanes, wildfires, and other climate related events have the resources to rebuild schools to modern standards. Federal funding can ensure these

communities not only recover but build back stronger, more resilient facilities that protect students and staff during future disasters.

## **Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA)**

That is why the BAC has endorsed the Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA), legislation sponsored by Ranking Member Bobby Scott and Representative Donald Norcross that invests \$130 billion in our nation's school infrastructure, improves students' academic performance and creates more than 2 million jobs. And while we continue to support RASA, we are open to other creative approaches to addressing this critical issue. What we know for sure is that the status quo is not working.

## **A Call to Action**

Today, I urge this committee to champion a bipartisan effort to provide robust federal funding for public school infrastructure. By doing so, we can:

- **Ensure Safe and Healthy Learning Environments:** Modern, well-maintained facilities will protect the health and well-being of millions of students and educators.
- **Create Millions of Jobs:** Investments in school infrastructure will revitalize the construction industry and provide economic opportunities in communities nationwide.
- **Strengthen Communities:** Schools are community anchors, and modernizing them will benefit all who rely on these essential spaces.
- **Prepare for the Future:** Resilient, disaster-ready school facilities will safeguard our children against the challenges of an increasingly volatile climate.

As we gather here today, millions of students are sitting in classrooms with cracked ceilings, inadequate heating, and unsafe drinking water. Their teachers are doing their best under impossible conditions.

Our children deserve better, and as a nation, we can and must do better.

Modernizing America's public schools is not just an investment in infrastructure—it is an investment in our future. I urge this committee to take bold action and lead the way in providing the federal assistance our schools so desperately need.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with you to address this critical issue and am happy to answer any questions you may have.