

Bill addresses school facilities needs

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Public school infrastructure is a topic familiar to most Vermonters.

School districts and supervisory unions have not been shy about their struggles to pay for facilities improvements. From making basic upgrades to meet modern educational standards to addressing major health concerns like environmental contaminants in the water and air, the needs are great and varied.

In recent years, districts have asked residents to help address those needs through multimillion-dollar bonds with varying degrees of success. More often, however, they slowly chip away at the problem in their annual budgets.

The coronavirus pandemic only highlighted those deficiencies. As schools worked to reopen safely, poorly functioning ventilation systems and inadequate spaces for social distancing hindered progress and made for less-than-ideal conditions — finally forcing a conversation the state has been putting off for too long, according to some school officials.

Now, a new bill is looking to help the state get its arms around its aging schools.

Introduced by the House Committee on Education, H.426, would create an inventory of the state's K-12 school facilities needs and develop a plan for addressing them.

“It’s no secret that we have had some school buildings in trouble,” said Rep. Kathryn Webb, D-Shelburne, chair of the Education Committee, who pointed to the abrupt closure of Burlington High School last fall after dangerous levels of cancer-causing PCBs were detected inside the building.

Webb said schools have fallen behind in their facilities management and been unable to keep up with changing educational standards.

Previously, a state-run program provided aid to school construction projects, covering 30% of the cost, but a moratorium was placed on it in 2008 in the midst of the Great Recession.

With the state now flush with an influx of federal relief funds, Webb said it’s a good time to get an assessment of the physical health and needs of Vermont’s schools.

“By having this assessment of our school buildings and our school infrastructure, we should be in a better place to begin to quantify what our problem is and to begin to address it in a more equitable manner,” she said.

The bill, which was recently referred to the House Appropriations Committee, authorizes the Agency of Education to use up to \$2.5 million over three years to conduct the assessment and deliver a final report to the Legislature.

In addition to creating an inventory, the bill would require the agency to update standards for school facilities to meet changes in educational delivery models and requirements for “healthy and resource-efficient” facilities.

It also calls for an update to the Capital Outlay Financing Formula and a final report that, among other details, will recommend potential sources of more equitable funding for school construction projects.

For their part, districts and supervisory unions would be expected to designate someone responsible for facilities management in each and develop a five-year capital operations improvement plan.

Webb acknowledged that the bill is the beginning of a longer process and doesn’t help schools address their immediate needs.

For the time being, she said they will have to “move forward with the tools that they have at the moment,” noting the possibility of more federal funds coming down the pike.

“This bill is moving through the process. There could be ideas coming forward on how we handle things right now, particularly since there’s so much happening at the federal level with federal funds that there could be opportunities coming forward. We just don’t know yet,” she said.

Webb said having an updated inventory would get the state closer to identifying shovel-ready projects for when more money becomes available.

“We’re not alone in this problem, but we are alone in New England for not having a plan,” she said.

A 2016 report on the state of the country’s K-12 schools produced by the 21st Century School Fund, the Center for Green Schools and the National Council on School Facilities, found even though states spend a combined average of \$99 billion annually on facilities spending and investment, they are not meeting the needs of students.

The report argued an additional \$46 billion in funding is needed to get schools up to 21-century standards.

“Research shows that high-quality facilities help improve student achievement, reduce truancy and suspensions, improve staff satisfaction and retention, and raise property values,” the report reads. “They also are integral to ensuring equity in educational offerings and opportunities for students.”

To remedy this, the report calls for states to create inventories to understand current conditions, engage communities in the planning process, identify new “innovative” sources of public funding, and “leverage public and private resources in new ways to assist states and districts” in providing better facilities.

Brooke Olsen-Farrell, superintendent of the six-town Slate Valley Unified School District, called H.426 an “exciting first step.”

“The conversation around school construction and school construction aid is long overdue,” she said.

Olsen-Farrell said districts have done their best to keep up with infrastructure needs, but the lack of access to school construction aid and having to resort to bonds has made it “extremely difficult.”

Last year, voters in Slate Valley rejected a nearly \$60 million bond to address myriad infrastructure needs at the district’s six school buildings. The project proposed the closure and sale of some buildings and upgrades to others, as well as the construction of a new union middle school on the Fair Haven Union High School campus.

The district ultimately settled on a more modest union middle school project that will relocate all seventh and eighth grade students to the existing high school footprint for a price tag of \$2.3 million.

“For our middle school reorganization, we’ve incorporated those costs into the local budget and are using reserve funds to tackle some of those issues,” Olsen-Farrell said.

Over the next five years, however, she estimates the district will need to spend at least \$8 million for “must-do” electrical, plumbing, heating and HVAC upgrades, as well as the replacement of an elevator system at one school that alone will cost almost \$1 million.

While Olsen-Farrell characterized the work as “basic,” she said it goes a long way to creating “inviting spaces that kids want to be in.”

“We’re not asking for anything fancy,” she said, adding that the students are “worth the investment.”

Across the county in the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, Superintendent Jeanne Collins called the bill “wise” for its goal of assessing infrastructure needs and developing a sustainable plan to address them.

“It is deplorable, in my view, that the state has not invested in school infrastructure for over 15 years,” she wrote in an email.

Collins cited the example of the ongoing mitigation of PFAS chemicals detected in the water system at Leicester Central School last fall as a costly but necessary project.

“The next phase to investigate it may cost \$100,000; repairs after that will add even more costs. Yet we have no choice but to address it,” she stated.

Collins noted that a bond to address safety issues at several other Rutland Northeast schools failed 18 months ago.

“While we have been able to do a few of the items at (Otter Valley Union High School) and we are fortunate to be in a situation in which we keep up minimal maintenance on our buildings, that is not the case for all,” she wrote. “In many situations, over the years, districts have had to choose to fix a roof or hire a reading teacher. Over time, this builds up to emergency situations.”

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