

KUSA Channel 9 News

Democrats propose billion dollar fix for schools

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By Nelson Garcia

DENVER – House Speaker Andrew Romanoff says it's hard building the future in buildings from the past.

He spent part of his summer touring schools all around the state in facilities which he says compromise the safety of students.

"The truth is, it's awfully tough to learn if the roof is caving in or your desk is falling through the floor," said Romanoff, (D-Denver). Romanoff, State Treasurer Cary Kennedy, and newly elected Senate President Peter Groff unveiled what they call the BEST plan – Building Excellent Schools Today.

"We are putting our kids at a disadvantage and in danger from the moment they walk in to some of these buildings," said Groff, (D-Denver).

Romanoff says many of the rural districts around the state simply cannot afford to make repairs or build new buildings.

"In Yuma County, part of the roof collapsed in an elementary school. In Washington County, untreated sewage is backing up into the school cafeteria," he said. "In Crowley County, there are gutters inside the high school gym we saw that are used to route the water leaking through a roof, the school can't afford to fix."

The state's top Democrats are proposing to take money generated from the School Land Trust and using it to leverage a billion dollars in construction money. In 1876, the federal government gave the state of Colorado more than three million acres of land. To this day, the state government makes money off this land through farming, mining and leases. That money is then used to help fund operating costs of schools across Colorado.

In 2004, the state made nearly \$57 million in royalties, rents, mineral lease revenues, and interest according to the Democrats. They are predicting that revenue to total more than \$90 million.

"We are proposing to take this asset and put it to its highest and best use," said Kennedy, (D) State Treasurer.

The BEST plan would take \$30-to-\$40 million and leverage it into more than \$500 million. Local districts could then match capital revenue creating a sum of a billion dollars in construction money available to repair or build new buildings, according to the proposal.

"These problems can be fixed. These problems should be fixed and these problems must be fixed," said Groff. He says this plan would do so without raising taxes or affecting the state's general funds.

However, there are questions as to how diverting money for operations into construction costs will affect school budgets. 9NEWS tried to contact several members of the Republican Party for their response to the proposal which will be addressed once the legislative session begins.

Romanoff says this issue that will be a priority for his party.

"Students and teachers in this state should be able to focus on reading and writing and arithmetic not flooding and fire hazards and septic tanks," he said.

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