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Safe schools for Colorado's kids

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In our rush to reform public school education, it's easy to forget that some of the buildings in which our children are taught are unhealthy and unsafe.

Many school buildings in Colorado are crumbling, and Democratic leaders in the legislature and state Treasurer Cary Kennedy have proposed a plan to repair or rebuild them. The money would come from the School Land Trust, which generates nearly \$90 million a year in mineral lease royalties, rent and interest from 3 million acres of Colorado land. The land was given to Colorado in 1876 to benefit school children.

The legislature would have to approve the plan, but we see no reason why it shouldn't. The children of Colorado deserve a safe school environment.

Colorado's children should not have to attend an elementary school, like one in Prowers County where the district has applied for a grant to buy cables to lash the old building so it won't buckle, or a school like the one in El Paso County where a portion of a student's desk, with the student in it, fell through the rotted floor of a classroom trailer.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff is leading the effort after touring schools this past summer. "The baling wire and duct tape solutions are giving out. This is not Colorado," he said.

Nearly half of the state's 178 school districts lack the tax base to build a new school. Indeed, the disparity between the richest and poorest schools in Colorado is tremendous. Aspen School District in Pitkin County, the wealthiest district, has an assessed real estate value per student of \$1.1 million, 8,000 times that of Sanford School District in Conejos County, whose assessed value per student is about \$14,000.

Real estate value determines how much money a district can raise through bonds.

By law, the trust fund revenues must be used exclusively for the state's K-12 public schools. About a third of the trust's permanent fund, currently about \$500 million, funds annual school operations. In the last five years, the fund has nearly doubled, thanks to growth in the economy, improved mineral revenues, higher interest rates and other factors, and is expanding at a rate of about 10 percent per year, Kennedy said.

Under Romanoff's proposal, \$30 million to \$40 million a year — roughly \$1 billion over 20 years — would be used to repair and rebuild schools. That is a small enough amount that the permanent fund should be held harmless, and continue generating hefty interest income. Money would be allocated based on a needs assessment, paid for by the trust, with legislative approval. A new school would cost about \$5 million.

Colorado's children deserve decent schools. From what we can tell, the Democrats have come up with a decent plan to accomplish that goal.

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