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No money, schools crumble

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July 9, 2005

Schools in Northeast Colorado face issues that are part of a bigger problem.

A study on Colorado's schools shows most Colorado school districts face "significant problems" their buildings. The study, conducted by the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver research company, shows how many of the problems local schools currently face are found in school districts across the state.

According to the study, more than a third of all school buildings are not in "good" condition. Other problems cited included buildings that are too small, inadequate science facilities, outdated technology, a lack of air-conditioning, and the need for new ventilation systems.

But at the same time, the study found Colorado's school districts don't have the money to keep up with capital construction needs. The study found 60 out of 178 districts haven't passed a bond in 20 years and haven't "been able to invest in capital."

The study reported that 69 percent of superintendents said school funding is the "most pressing issue facing their school district."

Eighty-eight percent of school districts have at least one building need related to "health and safety issues." Sixty-five percent need roof repairs, 70 percent need to repair or replace heating and ventilation systems, and 51 percent of schools don't have air conditioning.

Those same problems affect many schools in Northeast Colorado. There are local schools without air conditioning, that need major roof repairs, or have face remodeling needs. Fleming, Merino and RE-1 all struggle to balance the funding they do receive with what can be spent on capital construction. Colorado school districts primarily fund remodeling and rebuilding by going to the voters in a bond or mil levy override election.

"Unlike most other states, Colorado relies almost exclusively on local property taxes to build and renovate the school buildings," the study noted.

Bond issues don't fly

Like other Colorado schools, it has been a while since local schools have passed a bond election to pay for capital construction. RE-1 Valley last passed a bond election in 1994 to build Ayres Elementary school.

Merino's last bond came in 1990 and paid for the new gym. Fleming Business Manager Linda Hawthorne said Fleming's last election happened so long ago it was "before any of our time."

"I think all over the state there is a need to re-look at the infrastructure," said Merino Superintendent Dave Kautz.

RE-1 Valley Superintendent Betty Summers said the biggest issue is to "take care of what we have so it will last another 40 or 50 years."

"I think our issue is things really do wear out and we have to have a plan to replace what we have ... We put it off because there is really a financial burden," Summers said. "But if we put it off, it becomes a financial burden."

Kautz says Merino's problems center on the issue of space. He said the older high school and elementary school - built in the 1950s- is no longer adequate. While the buildings are "fundamentally sound," educators now have greater demands to meet.

"Adequate space and adequate storage just isn't there," said Kautz.

The size of the classrooms is the biggest issue. Kautz said the problem primarily affects the elementary school, although it does affect the high school to a lesser degree. Kautz said students today are larger, and additional space is needed for "small group" activities used in today's education.

"Space is a premium," said Kautz.

RE-1 Valley Superintendent Betty Summers said education today includes what she called "moving activities" that enhance learning.

"Classrooms are no longer a place where you go in and sit down," she said.

Plans to remodel Sterling High - which the school board hopes to take to the community in a bond election - call for increasing the size of the classrooms from 600 to 900 square feet, in keeping with current standards.

"It will greatly improve the academics when you have more space," Summers said.

Roofs, ventilation cause headaches

Space is also an issue in Haxtun. Haxtun Elementary School Principal Becky Heinz said the elementary school could use more space. The district is currently working on a grant for capital construction.

And there are other problems. Summers said many of the districts buildings weren't built for technology - there aren't enough power outlets in classrooms, and there is no place to put computer network cables.

Kautz said electrical services are also inadequate in Merino because the building was not designed to add additional equipment. Many electrical sockets are overloaded, and it could be a potential safety issue because overloaded sockets can cause a fire.

Other safety concerns exist. Fleming Superintendent John Condie said he considers the condition of Fleming's roof to be a safety concern. The cost of making the roof a pitch roof to fix the many leaks is around \$800,000. Fleming is currently applying for two different grants to try and pay for the project.

Merino recently replaced the high school roof, but Kautz says the elementary school roof must be replaced. He explains many of the roofs of older buildings "tended to be flat" and were not designed for today's air quality standards. They relied on natural ventilation where air would flow in through open windows.

Summers said she considers the roof at Sterling Middle School that school's "main problem," stating it will need to be replaced "in the very near future."

Access is another issue. Kautz said the number of exterior doors is a concern when trying to secure the school - an issue that didn't exist as much five years ago.

"Safety is a big concern for all of us," Kautz said.

Heat and ventilation systems are also a problem. Summers considers Sterling High's main problem the heating and ventilation system. Ayres Elementary and some parts of Caliche schools have air conditioning, but the districts remaining six buildings do not. Summers said bad lighting and hot and cold temperatures also make education difficult.

"Its hard to learn under those conditions," she said.

Too many problems

Stevens Elementary has so many issues- including windows, plumbing heating- the board has elected to close it down the line.

"It doesn't make sense to put that investment in it," said Summers.

Kautz said Merino's ventilation system could also be improved. The high school and elementary school have air conditioning units in each room but do not have central air.

The study reveals one conundrum - Colorado residents often think their school is in better condition than it actually is. According to the study, 18 percent of facilities managers think their school facilities are in "excellent" condition. But district superintendents said 27 percent of people in their community would rate the same facilities in excellent condition.

Summers said that doesn't surprise her. She said people see the exterior condition of the buildings, that the grass is mowed, think about what the schools were like when they went there - and don't know what the interior condition of the schools is like.

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