

SUPPORTING OUR SCHOOLS: LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR 2021

How Congress Can Support Healthy, Green Schools for Safe Reopening, and Greater Equity Across America

THE PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED UNDERLYING INEQUITY IN SCHOOL FACILITIES

Nearly a year into the pandemic, many public schools across the country have been closed for the full duration – and remain closed. Schools have a core role in the functioning of our society and economy, providing not just education but food, health support, and socialization for America’s children, and enabling parents to work. With the impacts of school closures felt in rural and urban areas, there is bipartisan agreement on the goal to reopen schools safely.

The Center for Green Schools at USGBC has joined public health experts in calling for school attention to ventilation systems: “Organizations studying SARS-CoV-2 and providing guidance on how to manage the disease, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), and ASHRAE, all agree that ensuring ventilation systems are operating properly, increasing circulation of outdoor air and improving filtration are important in reducing the risk of the virus spreading in buildings.”¹

Many schools do not have the technical or financial capacity to implement recommendations for ventilation and indoor air quality that are featured in school reopening guidelines from experts including the CDC and Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Astonishingly, an estimated 41 percent of school districts need to update or replace HVAC systems in at least half of their schools, representing about 36,000 schools nationwide that need HVAC updates, according to a June 2020 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Most schools will need help – technical and financial - to maintain and modify their systems to meet the recommendations, and monitor conditions once students and teachers return.

The pandemic has also highlighted what The Center for Green Schools and other schools advocates have known for many years: many of America’s schools are deteriorated, unsafe, or outdated and unable to support quality education in safe and healthy spaces. The 2016 *State of Our Schools* report,² published by the Center and its partners, illustrated that schools are getting only about two-thirds of the annual investment they need to stay in good repair and meet modern educational needs. Lower quality school facilities are often serving low-income children and found in low wealth school districts, because of the dominant role of local property tax in funding school facilities. To provide safe, healthy, quality school

¹ See full [Article](#).

² 2016 State of Our Schools Report, available at www.stateofourschools.org.

facilities to all children and make a step towards equity in our education system, Federal funding is needed for school facilities construction and modernization.

As we address these challenges, inclusion of green schools strategies is a natural fit. A green school building is one that achieves the highest levels of operational and financial efficiency and also reduces environmental impact and resource use. Green school buildings also provide opportunities to teach students about global sustainability, and—critically, in this time—protect health and wellness. These three goals – sustainability, health, and sustainability literacy -- work together to make green school buildings better for students, teachers, taxpayers and the overall community. Students at every school—regardless of the wealth of their community—should benefit from these practices. When schools have the resources and support they need, we believe that these best practices will reach more communities.

THE CENTER FOR GREEN SCHOOLS AND USGBC URGE THE 117TH CONGRESS TO ENACT AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO REOPENING AND MODERNIZING AMERICA’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

(1) Pass RASA to Bring Safe and Healthy School Facilities to all Students

The Reopen and Rebuild America’s Schools Act (RASA), supported by Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, Rep. Donald Norcross of New Jersey, and Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, outlines a multi-year, \$100 billion plan to reinvest in school facilities, targeting low-wealth, high-need districts. In 2020, RASA passed the House, and momentum is growing for enactment of this critical bill as part of an infrastructure investment in 2021.

Importantly, RASA ensures that new and modernized schools are green schools. Third party verification such as LEED certification confirms that the building is designed, built, and operated to meet increasingly important environmental, efficiency and health goals, while protecting taxpayer investment.

(2) In COVID Relief, Provide Dept. of Education Funds for School Facilities to Reopen Safely

In the near-term, schools need additional support in the next COVID relief package to get school facilities ready to reopen and to monitor and maintain safe conditions once reoccupied.

The Center for Green Schools and ASHRAE have launched a study into the air quality strategies that schools have been putting in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope to understand how school districts have been implementing indoor air quality recommendations on the ground and what support school districts need in order to respond to similar, sudden crises.

The survey results are planned for release in spring 2021.

(2.A) Provide Additional Funds for School Facilities Repairs and Upgrades

The Consolidated Appropriations Act enacted in December 2020 included additional funds for the Department of Education Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, and importantly, modified the allowed uses to include HVAC and air cleaning needs. We commend the inclusion of these added uses, which are essential.

For additional relief to schools, however, **we recommend a dedicated fund** for school facility repairs and upgrades, rather than being one of many potentially competing allowed uses of the ESSER funds. **In the absence of a dedicated fund, we have drafted additional “allowed uses” language** for the ESSER funds to ensure schools have safe drinking water, can adapt outdoor

space for learning, and can use funds for construction and staff training in association with repair and upgrade projects.

(2.B) Provide Funds for a School IAQ Technical Advisory Service in Each State

We recommend funding to provide, through a dedicated staff position, state interagency detailee, or consultant, school district access to a state school indoor environmental quality expert(s) for a 2-year term. The expert(s) would be available to provide one-on-one technical advice to school districts in areas of indoor environmental quality, public health, and green building strategies. The availability of such an advisory service would give school boards and administrators increased confidence that they would be able to get answers, should unforeseen issues arise as they reopen their schools.

The proposed technical advisory service would be a resource to schools to address challenges in reopening, interpreting data, staying up to date on guidance, and determining responses to conditions and situations that may arise in their school

(3) Boost Funding to Federal Programs with Expertise to Help States and School Districts

Existing Federal programs with relevant expertise can be better leveraged to support state and school district efforts to reopen. Federal agency support should include distributing funds for school HVAC needs, as well as critical technical advice. Two key programs are the State Energy Program in the Department of Energy and the EPA Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools program. **USGBC has draft language that could be used in an appropriation bill or stimulus package, to leverage these programs.**

The **DOE State Energy Program** could play a key role by distributing funds to state energy offices under its existing authority. State energy offices could then provide HVAC services to school districts through a statewide service contract. State energy offices could provide management of contractors, technical oversight, standard scopes of work, Q/A, reporting, and other administrative needs, and could also use existing performance contracting programs to implement replacements and reduce up-front public costs.

The **EPA's Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Program** is an important Federal resource in the goal to reopen schools safely. The long-standing Tools for Schools program offers a high level of expertise in environmental health and has a robust set of materials designed for the school audience including facility managers. We urge increased funding to EPA to expand the program to enable the increased delivery of education and training directly to schools, as well as technical advice to schools and states. EPA may also be an option for providing funding to schools for HVAC improvements.

Federal programs could help schools with HVAC & IAQ needs such as:

- inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, and replacement of HVAC systems including air filters, ductwork, sensors, control systems, and related equipment,
- installation of CO2 monitors, and
- training of local school district staff as appropriate.

(4) Fund Targeted Dept. of Education Programs to Support Green Schools

Green schools not only support safe reopening and healthy indoor environments, but align with the Biden Administration's equity, health, and climate goals. Green schools embody an integrated set of proven strategies to drive positive outcomes toward these critical goals. Recent research connects green schools with environmental justice, as, when low wealth districts do get funding, they tend to build green schools. And, all across the country, LEED certified schools are being built for no additional cost over standard construction.

(4.A) Establish an Office of Healthy Green Schools at the Department of Education

Staffed by professionals and experts, an Office of Healthy Green Schools could provide expertise on the topics of school facilities and health, sustainability, and climate resilience, to the Secretary and throughout the Department; as well as to state Departments of Education. Activities could include providing input on the proposed Presidential Budget, assessing available data on school facilities condition and disparities in disadvantaged communities, and providing technical assistance to states regarding healthy green schools. The Office could also serve as a clearinghouse for research on schools and health, including related to COVID-19, and as a source of information on available grants, loans, incentives, and other programs to implement energy efficiency, renewable energy, and other school facility improvements.

(4.B) Fund Green Ribbon Schools Assistance Program at U.S. Dept. of Education

To improve our schools, support health in the pandemic and beyond, and advance climate solutions literacy, we propose funding for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to offer a Green Ribbon Schools Assistance program that would enhance the current award program and provide funding to states. Funding would be focused on engaging and supporting states, and increasing visibility and incentives for schools participating in the award program. Firstly, the ED-Green Ribbon Schools Assistance program would have the resources needed to work with, on a voluntary basis, state departments of education on strategies for greening schools facilities as well as climate literacy. Secondly, funding would be allocated to raise the profile of the national award, both through incentives to winning schools and through additional communications to showcase the winners. ED could also maintain and build out the existing Green Strides website, which serves as a free resource for schools.

(5) Pass Additional Bills that could Fund School HVAC Upgrades

Several legislative proposals provide additional ways to fund or finance school HVAC upgrades.

- The Open Back Better bills sponsored by Sen. Tina Smith (116-S 4060) and Rep. Blunt-Rochester (116-HR 7303), propose to leverage Federal funds with private finance to upgrade critical facilities, including schools, for resilience and efficiency.
- The House-passed 116-H.R. 2- Sec. 33222 as well as 116-S.2657-Sec. 1004 would establish a new DOE-administered competitive, needs-based grant program for efficiency and onsite renewable energy at schools. This program includes, in addition to renewable energy systems and efficiency, related improvements that support student health such as daylighting, ventilation, green roofs and other features.

(6) Fund a School Climate Change Education Grant Program at NOAA

More than 3,000,000 students graduate from high schools and colleges each year; imagine if they were all armed with knowledge, skills, and behaviors related to the climate. Recognizing this potential impact, the U.S. House of Representatives Climate Crisis Action Plan recommends: “Congress should expand and sustain federal support for climate literacy for STEM and career and technical education, with an emphasis on removing barriers and broadening participation for underrepresented groups.”

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communications reported in a 2019 survey that over 78% of Americans believe that schools should teach our children about the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to climate change. The National Center for Science Education reports that 86% of teachers in the United States feel that climate change should be taught in schools, but less than half of them understand the extent of the scientific consensus on climate change.

The Climate Change Education Act, introduced by Representative Debbie Dingell (D-MI) and Senator Edward Markey (D-MA) in 2019 (H.R. 2349/S. 477), would direct NOAA to establish a Climate Change Education Program to increase climate literacy and to issue grants to states for climate change training and education.

USGBC supports this approach to help states implement climate education in K12 and higher education. The impact of climate change and the urgency and magnitude of the challenge of addressing climate change will soon fall on today's students. We owe them at least the chance to develop the literacy they need to confront a rapidly warming planet.

CONTACT US

For more information on our policy proposals, please contact Liz Beardsley, Senior Policy Counsel, USGBC at ebeardsley@usgbc.org.

To learn more about green schools and school facility needs, please contact Anisa Heming, Director of the Center for Green Schools at USGBC, at aheming@usgbc.org.

