

While Schools Decay, We Can't Turn Away

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Here's what you'll find in too many public schools in America today: "Classrooms" fashioned out of storage rooms, school cafeterias and stages because of school overcrowding. Extreme temperatures in classrooms that require students and staff to wear coats indoors in the winter and to swelter in dangerous heat in warmer months. Bathroom floors slick from toilets that routinely leak. Mold, mouse droppings, falling ceiling tiles, and other unsafe and unacceptable conditions. The message to our kids? You are not worth the effort to fix it.

Last month, President Obama sent Congress the American Jobs Act, a bill designed to help alleviate these problems and send a strong message that America is worth fixing. The legislation, if enacted by Congress, provides a powerful tool for the United States to address the decay of many of our school buildings, roads and bridges; to keep educators in classrooms where their students need them; and to help millions of people whose skills provide great societal benefit get back to work. But initial efforts to move this bold legislation forward were shut down last week, when Senate Republicans voted together to block a vote on the bill.

At a time when our country suffers from a 9 percent unemployment rate, the president's plan would create an estimated 1.9 million jobs over the next two years, without adding a dime to the deficit. It would prevent the layoff of 280,000 teachers, and keep police officers and firefighters on the job. It would provide funding to repair and modernize as many as 35,000 public schools that currently are unsafe, dilapidated or out-of-date. It would make our roads and bridges safer and more efficient. It would boost the stagnant economy, creating good jobs that allow millions of families to pump money into local economies. The jobs plan would do all this, if Congress summons the will to pass it this fall.

America's infrastructure crisis is apparent in the condition of many school

buildings. The American Society of Civil Engineers in a 2009 report gave the nation's school buildings a grade of D. Inadequate school environments are known to negatively affect student achievement, behavior, attendance and health, as well as teacher recruitment and retention.

The American Federation of Teachers recently asked educators to tell us about the physical conditions of the schools where they work. Their responses reveal appalling conditions in schools across the country. Common problems include severe overcrowding, leaking roofs and ceilings, crumbling drywall, loud noise (from clanging furnaces or outdated air conditioning units) that makes it difficult to hear classroom discussions, unhealthy air quality, lack of handicap access, and inadequate wiring to enable the use of technology.

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Educators voiced great concern about the effect of these environments on students' well-being and ability to learn. Indeed, when such conditions existed in many New York City schools, the United Federation of Teachers sued the city to remedy them for our students—and won. All across this country, teachers

and school support staff are similarly outraged by the message these conditions send to our kids. When students look at their schools, they learn a lot about the value society places on them and their opportunity to get a good education. These crumbling structures are in effect symbols of the inequality that pervades American society.

I spent time in downtown Manhattan recently listening to the protesters who are part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. What I heard repeatedly was their passionate desire to fight growing economic inequities and to enable people—the 99 percent who haven't prospered during the economic downturn—to once again have a shot at the American dream. Their ideals have been ignited, and they show an inspiring belief that steps can and must be taken to redress the wrongs in our society. And that is what each of us, in our own way, must do. America's educators strive every day to make a difference in their students' lives, but they need the conditions and support to help all children reach their potential. The president's jobs plan has a unique ability to strengthen both the economy and our public schools—urgent tasks, since neither can be strong if the other is weak.

We ask Congress not to squander any other opportunity to pass legislation that spurs the country's renewal. Show our children that they are worth it.



Photo taken by Ian, 10th grade. Use courtesy of CriticalExposure.org.