

# Leaky roofs, lead in the water, fire risk: Baltimore schools face nearly \$3 billion maintenance backlog

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A crew of facilities workers on a "blitz" at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary school, in which they periodically go through school buildings to make repairs. Some issues -- like the rusted pipes and buckling gym floor -- have to wait. (Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun video)

(Kenneth K. Lam)

Federal Hill Preparatory Principal Sara Long says she's grateful that when her school's 43-year-old roof leaks, the damage is mostly in the stairwells and hallways.

If there's heavy rain and wind, tiles fall down. Big puddles form. Bits of the auditorium ceiling crumble to the floor.



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Her concern, she says, is the day when "suddenly it's happening in a classroom."

As the lack of air conditioning in many Baltimore public schools garnered recent media attention and finger-pointing from the governor

and others, the school system's other maintenance needs — which affect teachers and students year-round — generate less outrage.

There are aging roofs, rusted pipes, cracking steps and broken elevators — all piling up to a massive maintenance backlog that has swollen to nearly \$3 billion. That's more than double the district's annual operating budget.

"We do have the oldest school buildings in the state of Maryland. That can't change from a quip or from a magic wand," says city schools CEO Sonja Santelises. Addressing the backlog in repairs, she says, is "not going to happen overnight."

It's become a back-to-school tradition for politicians and community members to decry the lack of adequate air conditioning in Baltimore classrooms. The conditions, which forced dozens of schools to close early during the sweaty first days of the school year, led Gov. Larry Hogan and Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot to demand that all city schools be outfitted with AC in the next few years. That's meant funding for air conditioning has taken precedence over other pressing projects.

The Baltimore school board approved a report this month that lays out the city's complex needs. The [2018-2019 Comprehensive Maintenance Plan](#) is clear: After decades of underinvestment, the city school system needs a dramatic infusion of money before its school buildings have a chance at being up to par.

A report released in 2012 found the city needed an estimated \$2.4 billion to replace or renovate its existing buildings. That triggered the creation of a \$1 billion initiative, the 21st Century School Buildings Program, which will eventually rebuild or renovate up to 28 schools —

nearly 20 percent of the district's 165 buildings. Nine state-of-the-art schools have opened so far.

But at the many schools not chosen for the program, deferred maintenance costs continue to compound.

Children in most Baltimore schools still rely on bottled water, more than a decade after revelations about lead contamination. Many schools have to hold extra fire drills because their buildings aren't fully covered by automatic sprinkler systems. Pipes burst, roofs leak and windows break — and district officials find ways to prioritize the needs with limited dollars.

State-commissioned reports have found Baltimore schools operate with hundreds of millions of dollars a year less than what is needed to educate students.

According to a formula used by facility management professionals, the district should be spending about \$150 million a year just on building maintenance. But the district's operating budget for maintenance and operations is about \$23 million for this fiscal year, according to district documents.

"We continually look for different ways to change structures and procedures to be more efficient in our work," said Lynette Washington, the district's interim chief operations officer, "but there's only so much we can do with very limited resources."

Beyond maintenance funding, the district has also received, on average, \$47 million a year over the past decade toward replacement of aging buildings and antiquated systems. The majority comes from the state.

“Under the Hogan administration, the state has provided more funding for school construction and maintenance projects to Baltimore City than any other jurisdiction,” the governor’s spokeswoman, Amelia Chasse, said in a statement. “The governor will continue to make historic investments to ensure that our students are able to learn in a safe and healthy environment, while pushing for increased accountability and fiscal responsibility from North Avenue.”

Mayor Catherine Pugh’s latest budget includes \$19 million for school capital projects. That’s an increase of \$2 million over previous years, a move spurred by highly publicized incidents last winter when school heating systems failed across the city.

That extra money, however, does little to close the gap between what Baltimore spends on school construction versus its wealthier neighbors. Anne Arundel County, for example, budgeted more than \$180 million for school construction projects last fiscal year.

Between state and city dollars, Baltimore schools officials say they can pay for only a handful of major maintenance projects, such as roof replacements, each year. Most schools get the equivalent of Band-Aids.

“We’re not really touching each of the buildings,” Washington said. “We’re only addressing the most emergent needs – roofs where we know we’ve been patching it for so long that it can no longer be patched.”

With the money the district receives now, Washington said, she sees no way of plowing through the system’s entire backlog.

The governor’s office has repeated criticisms that the city has been fiscally irresponsible in managing the capital improvement funds it

receives. In January, after a heating crisis left thousands of Baltimore children shivering in their classrooms, [The Baltimore Sun reported](#) that state officials had rescinded tens of millions of dollars for building repairs after the projects took too long or became too expensive to complete in the designated time frame.

A 2015 report stated it's been a "persistent concern" from the Interagency Committee on School Construction that the city school system "has not managed its State-funded capital projects at the same level as other Maryland school systems."

District officials counter that the state's system of allocating money long [punished poor jurisdictions](#) such as Baltimore. Wealthier school systems have been able to pay for school repairs upfront and then ask the state for reimbursement later. Baltimore can't afford to do that, leading to problems with rescinded funds. The state is making some changes to its funding procedures to address this concern.

One way city schools officials approach the maintenance backlog is through regular "blitz cycles." Baltimore schools get visits from facilities staff every six weeks, during which workers can plow through some of the most pressing work orders.

On a recent school day, the blitz team visited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary/Middle School in Northwest Baltimore, a nearly 50-year-old building with four pages of work orders waiting.

With the maintenance crew present, a teachers' restroom faucet broke. Water rushed out of the bathroom, slowly spreading across the hallway's green tile.

Principal Rachel Brunson jumped on her walkie-talkie, requesting assistance and some orange cones. She tried to help as students in a

third-grade class walking by pressed themselves close to a wall to avoid the water.

“This is urban education,” Brunson said.

When this type of incident occurs, she said, her staff does everything it can “to isolate the areas and not have it impact student learning.”

“These structures are pretty much falling apart,” she said. “But we can’t let that be an obstacle keeping our scholars from meeting their goals.”

The school is built into the side of a hill, which makes it prone to flooding during storms. The gym’s hardwood floor has started to buckle – creating a tripping hazard for children.

Washington said the city needs another 21st Century schools project, which could fund more new buildings for schools like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The ACLU of Maryland, a driving force behind securing the initial funding, sees opening new buildings as the most cost-effective way to bring the city’s school infrastructure up to date.

The city needs to “continue the pace of openings happening now,” said Bebe Verdery, the organization’s education director.

In the meantime, a state-mandated push for district-wide air conditioning has shoved other needs down on the list of priorities.

The state Board of Public Works [voted in 2016 to withhold](#) millions of dollars in school construction money from the city, along with Baltimore County, unless officials agreed to install air conditioning in all classrooms by the start of the school year. The board later

reinstated the money after the city presented a plan to cool all of its schools within five years.

When Santelises discussed the plan with state officials, she noted that the emphasis on air conditioning would have other consequences.

“I also do just want to point out in the spirit of transparency that we will be deferring critical projects, like fire safety and roofs, in order to implement the AC plan,” Santelises said in January 2017.

The city recently asked the state for about \$1.5 million for a new roof at Federal Hill Prep, to replace the one built in 1975.

The request was deferred.

Long doesn't know whether her school's request was affected by the air-conditioning edict.

“I just know we need a new roof,” she said, “and we don't have one.”