

(5/1/24 District Administrator's Corner Article)

Did you know that the American Society of Civil Engineers gives an overall grade of "D+" on the condition of America's 100,000 public school buildings? It is no wonder, considering the fact that half of the school buildings are half a century old. The age of our school buildings in River Valley have created the need to deeply analyze the future of facilities updates and maintenance. Here is a bit of a timeline:

- 1962 - A new High School was built in Spring Green (grades 10-12)
- 1969 - A new Junior High School was built in Spring Green (grades 7-9)
- 1989 - A new Elementary School was built in Spring Green (grades K-5)
- 1991 - An addition was added to the High School
- 1992 - A new Elementary School was built in Plain (K-5)
- 1996 - A small addition was added to the Middle School
- 1999 - An addition was added to the High School

Consider the age of these spaces. The district is fully responsible for capital improvements, despite the overwhelming need, and the federal government has no major funding program to rebuild our nation's schools.

By contrast, the federal government invests almost \$50 billion annually to subsidize state and local highways, and that funding is expected to increase dramatically with the recent bipartisan infrastructure bill pending in Congress (www.transportation.gov). Federal investments in roads and bridges are essential for strengthening our economy and are long overdue. I have witnessed numerous meetings at municipalities in which road conditions and care of the surfaces becomes the main debate and expense. Often, engineers work with a team to analyze and plan for these improvements using tax dollars and subsidies to accomplish. There are several projects planned for our local area.

Yet, there are great limitations to school boards seeking funding to the infrastructure of public school buildings so students can learn in safe and functional classrooms that are energy efficient and future ready. Consider the needs of these public learning spaces—HVAC systems, roofing structures, asbestos materials in ceilings and floors (that were once allowed and now require abatement), aging windows, roads, parking lots—and these are just a few of the categories in our ongoing maintenance plan.

Just as roads, bridges, and transportation have changed America's mass network of roads, the needs and changes in today's workforce have changed our schools. Collaborative space is the norm in today's work environment. We are preparing students for careers that require collaborative and technological skills. Consider rooms in which learners sit in groups to talk, share, and develop together. Consider each of the rooms in which township meetings take place. Each of our municipalities has rooms with tables so that collaboration is conducive and encourages participation. Older school designs did not create environments for learning in a group and for team teaching. Schools have to redesign to have shared community spaces that encourage interaction and build an environment where working together is vital.

The modernization of our schools emphasizes the need to repurpose our existing environment and to understand the impact it has on learning. "It was good enough for me, so it is good enough for them..." would be a viable argument if you completely ignore the modernization of the job force.

Our River Valley School District teams will continue to analyze learning spaces that foster collaboration, flexibility and technology. It is required to meet the needs of today's society and careers. Your voices matter, and they will continue to guide us as we navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. A community survey will be forthcoming to gather additional information and ask for advice on prioritizing River Valley facilities needs so students remain competitive in their future.

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