

School emergency repairs under budget axe, low-income schools concerned

By Allen Young

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Rotting roofs, broken windows and plumbing problems at schools located in some of the state's lowest-income neighborhoods will have to be put off if a budget plan endorsed by legislative leaders is adopted.

Critical facility repairs that are fixed through grants and reimbursements provided under the state's Emergency Repair Program would be put into jeopardy by a proposal that would shift about \$50 million out of the facility fund to help pay for child care.

Making painful choices between critical programs has been a recurring theme for lawmakers since the onset of the national recession – but facility managers say this latest move could prove expensive to taxpayers in the long run because the cost of maintenance only rises the longer it is delayed.

“The buildings start falling apart, and then you're in a situation where it is exponential because you haven't been able to perform maintenance. All your systems start failing and it becomes a huge, huge bill,” said Joe Dixon, superintendent of facilities and government relations at Santa Ana Unified, which has 36 projects that are lined up to use ERP funds.

In his 2011-12 budget proposal, Gov. Jerry Brown provided \$43 million in ongoing funding and \$11 million in one-time funding for the ERP.

The program was born out of the 2004 Williams Settlement, a landmark case that attempted to provide each student with quality facilities and other education essentials.

Beginning in 2005-06, the state agreed to pay at least \$100 million each year for eight years to address health and safety-related repairs to school districts that scored in the bottom three tiers on standardized tests.

So far, the state has paid out about \$344 million for the ERP, but new money hasn't been apportioned since the 2008-09 school year.

This year, lawmakers from both legislative houses have approved a counter-proposal to redirect three years of ERP funding into state subsidized child care programs.

Child care would be cut about \$716 million under the governor's plan, the reductions achieved through a mix of across-the-board cuts and limiting child eligibility based on age or family income.

Social service advocates say they need the money just as badly.

“Certainly we don't support choosing one program over another as the case may be here,” said Brad Strong, a spokesman for Children Now, a child care advocacy group.

But early childhood programs “are critical to the foundations of learning and a child's brain growth and development,” he said.

Back in the school facility world, the ERP cut is compounded by the removal of two other K-12 maintenance programs that interests say have largely collapsed under categorical flexibility – the Deferred Maintenance program and the Routine Restricted Maintenance account.

“Most districts will do whatever they have to do to mitigate a safety hazard, but it doesn't fix the problem,” explained Dixon from Santa Ana. “You might just do a band aid. For example, if you have uneven paving, you might patch it.

But pretty soon, when you start doing that, it's going to cost you big money,” he said.

According to the Office of Public School Construction, the ERP account is oversubscribed, meaning there are more projects in line for funding than the state has committed to pay. For that reason, new applications are no longer being accepted.