



Opportunities for Green Schools in 2021: A Resource for States

The case for green schools has never been stronger.

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 work together to make green school buildings better for students, teachers, taxpayers and the overall community. 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.

Green schools respond to COVID-19 by proactively preparing for future public health emergencies.

Reopening guidance for schools from the CDC and other experts includes recommendations for re-entry policies and procedures, such as cleaning and disinfecting, and also for building-related environmental health precautions, such as enhanced ventilation, filtration, and water quality monitoring.

Ventilation and filtration: LEED-certified schools are designed for better overall air quality, with requirements for adequate outdoor air and minimum air changes. Additional points within LEED are given for using MERV13 filters or better, a key recommendation of air quality experts in preventing the spread of viral particles in indoor spaces

Water quality: Environmental health experts are warning schools of the risk of Legionnaire's disease and other dangers posed by the risk of unused water systems during prolonged shut-downs. LEED offers prescriptive guidance for school systems that are reopening buildings to ensure safe drinking water upon reentry.

Cleaning and disinfecting: Green cleaning is a central strategy for green schools. Protecting the health of students and teachers with respiratory illness and protecting community waterways and natural resources is increasingly important. LEED offers recognition for cleaning and disinfection practices that protect against disease transmission, both upon reentry as well as on an ongoing basis.

State policy can help ensure that all students have equitable access to safe, healthy learning environments.

Typically, less wealthy communities have more difficulty raising funds to build schools, or do major repairs, but recent research shows that when they do have funds, they [tend to build green schools](#). All across the country, LEED certified schools are being built for [no additional cost](#) over standard construction. States like [Ohio](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have required, and/or incentivized green school construction and have targeted funds toward low income communities for maximum impact. When states elect to assist local education agencies with school repairs and construction, they can take steps to ensure that high quality, healthy school buildings are provided for all students.

Federal funding for school facilities is a policy priority.

Both in the short and long-term, many school systems will need *both* Federal and state support to provide the best facilities possible for students and teachers. Beginning well before COVID-19, the Center for Green Schools, USGBC, and allies have been tirelessly advocating for Federal funding for school facilities construction and renovation, with progress being seen in 2020 (see box **BRIEFING: Federal Outlook** on last page).

Where schools are looking to reopen facilities for staff, or for in-person learning, they will likely need technical – and in many cases, financial -- assistance to follow CDC guidelines to ensure maximum occupant health. This is especially true for low income school districts, who [may be starting](#) with schools in significant disrepair and/or nonfunctioning building systems.

With many state budgets strained with the pandemic, meeting local districts' needs to ensure safe reopening of school facilities adds to that strain. We have been working to encourage Congress to provide dedicated funding in the next relief package for school facility repairs and upgrades for safe reopenings. Unlike the CARES funds, this proposal – included in Heroes 2 -- specifically authorizes a range of facilities testing, repairs, upgrades and improvements, including related construction, for HVAC, plumbing, structures/finishes, and other core building systems, along with training of building operations and maintenance staff. *Please contact us or watch our website for updates on this provision in any forthcoming relief package.*

States have the opportunity to support school facilities NOW.

States can take concrete actions now to support better quality, more efficient, healthy school facilities for everyone. State legislatures as well as governors and executive agencies have critical roles in ensuring that school districts have the resources that they need.

Specific funding for facilities reopening needs: While we are advocating for dedicated funding to support safe school facilities to be in the next Federal relief bill, the outlook is uncertain. With or without such support, states can utilize other sources of funds to take action.

- For example, the State of Vermont carved out a part of the CARES I general relief fund – not its education funds -- to [offer schools funding for indoor air quality projects](#) such as repairing, maintaining, and upgrading HVAC systems. Within two weeks, about two-thirds of Vermont's schools signed up.
- Similarly, California [passed AB 841](#) to create a new utility program to provide technical and financial support to schools for testing, monitoring and repairs to HVAC equipment, as well as plumbing fixtures.

Governors' offices as well as legislators can identify potential sources of funding and approaches suitable in their states.

Prepare for future federal funding: If Congress enacts the proposed new long-term funding program for school facilities construction and repair (see box **BRIEFING: Federal Outlook**), states will want to be prepared. Below are several steps that states can take to prepare for potential funding:

- If a state does not currently have an **office that advises or oversees school construction** in the state, an important first step is to establish one. If a state already has such an office, reviewing and revising as needed its construction standards and policies can be done in advance. K-12 schools have unique needs distinct from other building types, and projects benefit from this type of specialized expertise.
- States should establish **basic design and construction expectations** for school buildings. Ideally, publicly-funded schools will achieve third-party green school certification to provide resource-efficient, healthy schools and protect the public investment. Third party verification adds a layer of accountability and transparency to the taxpayer investments being made.
- States can establish **priority criteria and targets for school facilities funding**, accounting for financial need and equity.
- States can take stock of **school facilities condition assessments** and require, incentivize, and/or fund such assessments to be done on the local level. If funded, this could be a jobs creator, and it will more clearly define the facility improvements needs of schools.

- States can also consider requiring or incentivizing **utility benchmarking** to establish a baseline of how efficiently school facilities are operating, as well as identify low-hanging fruit for needed upgrades.
- States can evaluate what schools spend on utility costs, develop estimates of **potential savings** from efficiency projects, and identify priorities.
- The Federal *Open Back Better Act* proposes additional funding for school energy efficiency and resilience upgrades to be paired with private financing through performance contracting; states that do not have an active school performance contracting program can take steps to **plan for implementation**, and learn from other states. Other Public-Private Partnership opportunities exist for school renovations and energy efficiency upgrades, as well.

Provide technical assistance for green schools

States can engage the K-12 community and implement initiatives such as technical assistance, potentially without new legislation:

- The state education agency, or agency most relevant to school facilities, can create an **Office of Green Schools** to provide expert assistance, to facilitate learning and an exchange of knowledge and experience, and to increase awareness of green school benefits across the school community – including parents, educators, and school boards.
- The state education agency can identify other **relevant expertise within the state**, which could include an environmental agency, energy office, capital facilities agency, and others. State energy offices may be able to offer access and support for energy services performance contracting. The states can also consider a working group to collaborate and coordinate support for efficient and healthy schools.
- **Case studies** of local green schools are very valuable to share knowledge and encourage accomplishment of green school goals and could be developed and disseminated.
- The state can hold or publicize available **webinars** and other education on green schools topics.
- The state could conduct **outreach** and **training for school facilities staff** on COVID-19 reopening guidance as well as related green schools operations.

Additional resources

For green school information tailored for state legislators, visit the Center for Green Schools' regularly updated resource page: <https://centerforgreenschools.org/state-legislators-and-green-schools>

For policy information on a specific green building topic or from a specific location, visit USGBC's [searchable database of policy resources](#).

For COVID-19 resources from USGBC, visit <https://www.usgbc.org/about/covid-19-resources>.

Contact

Contact us anytime at publicpolicies@usgbc.org

BRIEFING: Federal Outlook

COVID-19 Relief Package

USGBC and the Center for Green Schools have joined ally organizations and [asked](#) Congress to provide dedicated school facilities funding in the next relief package. Through the summer and fall, we have [educated](#) lawmakers about the connection between school facilities system condition and science-based risk reduction practices. This collective effort has increased awareness for school facilities funding to support safe reopening. Notably, the House-passed Heroes 2 bill included such dedicated funding for key uses, expressly including:

- school facility repairs and improvements to enable operation of schools to reduce risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards, and to support student health needs;
- Inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, replacement, and upgrade projects to improve the indoor air quality in school facilities;

and other COVID-related facilities needs.

As of early December, calls for a relief package before the end of the year have intensified, but the outlook is uncertain. We are continuing to advocate for these priorities.

Long-term School Construction & Renovation Funding

Reopening and Rebuilding America's Schools Act

The Reopening and Rebuilding America's Schools Act ([RASA](#)), supported by Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia and Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, outlines a five-year, \$100 billion plan to reinvest in school facilities. In 2020, RASA passed the House, and we see momentum growing with prospects for enactment as part of an infrastructure investment in 2021.

School Energy Efficiency Retrofits

Another key bill is the [Open Back Better Act](#), supported by Rep. Blunt-Rochester of Delaware and Sen. Tina Smith of Minnesota. This bill provides Federal funds to be leveraged with private finance to deliver resilience and energy updates to schools and other critical facilities, in programs run by state energy offices. Open Back Better was included in two House passed bills: H.R. 2 and H.R. 4447.

Additional Schools Efficiency Programs

Energy retrofitting assistance for schools – The Department of Energy would establish a clearinghouse of funds and financial assistance available to schools to implement energy efficiency retrofitting and renewable energy projects. Included in House-passed H.R. 2- Sec. 33221 as well as in S.2657-Sec. 1003

Grants for energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy improvements at public school facilities- Establishes 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, among other things. Included in House-passed H.R. 2- Sec. 33222 as well as in S.2657-Sec. 1004