

# Educational Inequities Are Driven by the Physical Environment, Too



***Underfunded buildings exacerbate educational inequities. But there is a way educators can fix this, without delay.***

Educators are examining how to strive for equity in all opportunities and outcomes to level the playing field for students being left behind.

Inequity exists in education in many forms, most notably in the provision of billions less in school funding to predominantly nonwhite school districts, despite having the same amount of students as predominantly white school districts. In addition,

there is a lack of diversity in the teaching and administration ranks and a lack of parity in student experiences like access to course offerings, field trips, and extra-curricular activities.

There is less discussion, however, about **the significant negative impact that decaying and overcrowded school buildings have on students**, particularly those in low-income, minority districts. The quality of physical classroom environments must be championed at the highest levels of student advocacy, and is deserving of a much stronger focus in our nation's quest to banish educational inequities.

## **School Buildings are Fundamental to Equity**

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has reported that low-income African American and Hispanic students are more likely to attend poorly maintained schools. Some school buildings have been called "deathtraps" because they have so many physical problems and many have been deemed unsafe.

**Low-income African American and Hispanic students are more likely to attend poorly maintained schools – The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.**

**A 2017 report by the American Society of Civil Engineers gave our nation's deteriorating school facilities a D+.** In addition, the report said that 53 percent of schools need improvements to reach good condition and 24 percent were rated as fair or in poor condition. Unfortunately, maintaining these old buildings costs more than \$58 billion a year and improving them will be \$77 billion a year.

**Poor infrastructure leads to an unhealthy learning environment and a negative impact on student success – Harvard University Healthy Buildings Team**

Meanwhile, aging and deteriorating buildings affect student health, learning and student success, according to a study by the Healthy Buildings Team at Harvard University. The study made the scientific case that school buildings are foundational to student success and can directly impact health, thinking, and performance. Their research took decades of scientific evidence and distilled them into nine key fundamental building factors that influence the health and performance of students, including ventilation, air quality, lighting, moisture, water quality and more.

**The quality of physical classroom environments must be championed at the highest levels of student advocacy.**

Addressing some of these key factors can have a huge impact on the school building and the health and academic performance of students. Investments of these kinds directly impact the overall success of students today and in the future.

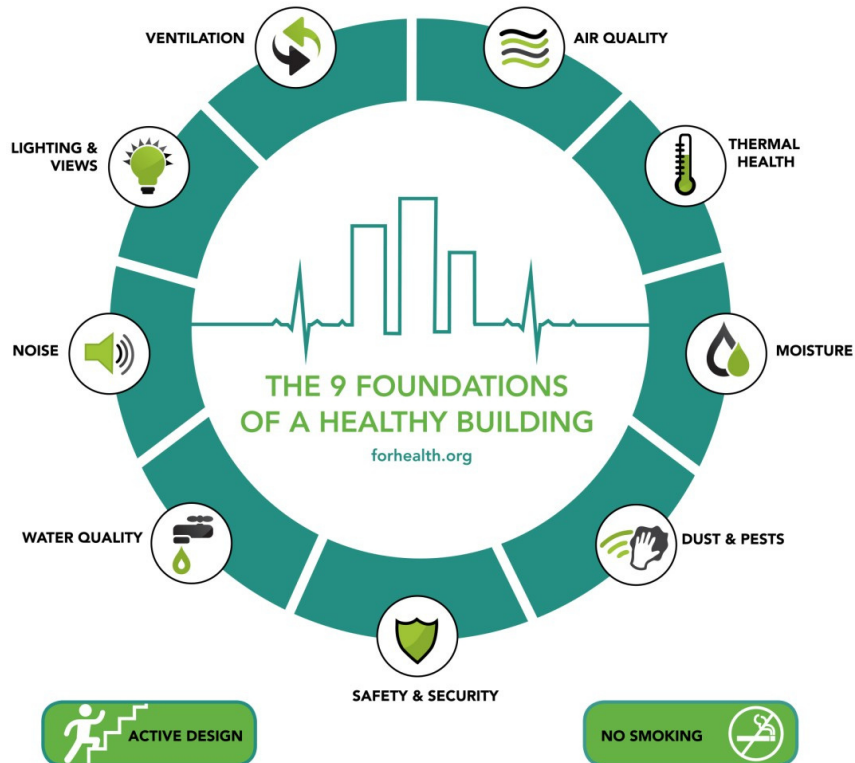
## **Financing Building Inequities Can Be Done NOW through Energy Savings**

There is a way school districts can prevent the inequities caused by the physical classroom environment from deepening in the face of a recession and painful cuts caused by the pandemic.

**The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that our nation's school districts are spending \$6 billion a year on energy, and that 30% of that energy is used inefficiently.** One unique finance option is to reinvest guaranteed energy savings generated from a no out-of-pocket-cost, budget neutral energy performance contract to fund modernized learning environments. **Out of the nine foundations of a healthy building**

according to the **Healthy Buildings Harvard Team**, at least six of these fundamental building factors can be addressed in an **energy performance contract**.

**At least 6 of the 9 foundations of healthy buildings can be addressed in an energy performance contract.**



## Minority Owned Businesses Can Benefit From Your Action

In the process of their energy performance contracts, some school districts have promoted equity further by adding in a requirement for a high amount of minority and women business enterprise (M/WBE) participation. It is a clear opportunity to advocate for the advancement of the disadvantaged, a value many school districts hold dear.

To help abolish educational inequities, school districts and their communities can work to create environments that reduce the predictability of who succeeds and who fails. And while programmatic and social change is a large part of what is needed to address this problem, don't ignore the impact that your students' physical learning environments have on their daily state of mind and ultimate success.