

education

October 5, 2023

Opening

Good morning senators, representatives, and staff members. I would like to thank the Basic Education Funding Commission for having me here today.

My name is Michael Kelly. I am a registered architect in Pennsylvania, an accredited member of the Association for Learning Environments organization, and the architectural representative to the Governor's School Safety and Security Committee. I am the Principal of Design at KCBA Architects, a firm that specializes in Pennsylvania public school facilities. We have partnered with school districts from across the Commonwealth and are currently working on school upgrade initiatives in nine counties. I am also a proud 1993 graduate of The William Allen High School in Allentown and parent of two children currently enrolled in Pennsylvania public schools, so it is truly an honor to speak with you today.

Existing conditions of public school buildings

Seven years ago, I testified in front of the PA Public School Building Construction and Reconstruction Advisory Committee to talk about PlanCon and the program's critical role in maintaining appropriate learning environments for our children. I showed images of subpar learning environments in a variety of school districts where children were learning in poorly ventilated, windowless classrooms with outdated equipment. Unfortunately, many of these images still reflect today's conditions. I know this firsthand as I have visited hundreds of schools that have outdated, unhealthy, and often unsafe spaces that are hindering our children during a time when they should be feeling safe and excited to learn.

I am sure we can agree that all children should be provided a safe and nurturing environment for learning. We agree that a quality education is essential. But I can again tell you from personal experience that the conditions of our schools can drastically vary from one school district to another and sometimes from one school to another inside a school district.



Existing Classroom Conditions



Your zip code should not determine the quality of your education or the environment in which you learn. Public education exists to provide every student with an equal opportunity. But with school funding stretched so thin, too often building maintenance, safety, and quality fall short of modern standards. Our school districts desperately need funding to upgrade, repair, modernize, expand, and sometimes replace obsolete or inadequate buildings.

Existing Classroom Conditions

How big is the problem? How do we find out?

An essential part of the PlanCon process was a requirement for any school district seeking state funding to have completed a district-wide facilities study within two years of beginning any potential project. This ensured that school districts were evaluating multiple building options before making an investment. It required a list of all district owned property, the size of each building, the grade alignment that made up each building, and the year the building was constructed. Existing facilities conditions were evaluated as part of the report. An enrollment projection was also needed to evaluate a district's building capacity needs and what future growth or reductions should be considered. The study was to be conducted and certified by a Pennsylvania licensed architect chosen by the school district.

A Facilities Conditions Assessment (FCA) is a valuable tool and exercise ahead of any major investment in a building project. It is meant to study the physical conditions of school buildings but often does not consider the educational needs or academic limitations within the school. While it is certainly important that a school's roof doesn't leak, if the spaces underneath that roof are not an environment conducive to teaching and learning, then the building is not functioning well as a school. This is why simply evaluating only a building's HVAC system does not provide a full assessment of the facility. A knowledge of current building codes, modern safety standards, and the qualities of an educational environment are an essential part of any needs assessment.





Collaborative process of a district-wide facilities study

It is critical that school districts can choose their facilities study partners. There are many well qualified architectural firms here in Pennsylvania that specialize in education design. Typically, a school district will interview several firms and then choose the team that best aligns with their values, goals, and process. The most successful studies are truly a collaborative process with many representatives of a district.

Understanding the statewide scale of these issues is a reasonable request. However, the cost and time it would take for any singular entity to study every school building within Pennsylvania's 501 school districts would be enormous. And we know the results already; there are A LOT of building needs in our school districts. So instead, the Department of Education could consider a survey of our districts to inquire about the number of buildings they have, the size and age of each, and how many students each building serves. Additional inquiries could ask when they last conducted a facilities study, if they are planning for any building improvements in the next five years, and which area of focus they find the most needed (building infrastructure, school safety, modernizing educational spaces, ect.). There is no question that many Pennsylvania school districts have critical building issues and lack the funding to address them. Fortunately, the adopted PlanCon 2.0 already has the necessary means to distribute funding assistance and the requirement that a district-wide facilities study be completed.

The old PlanCon and the new PlanCon 2.0

Pennsylvania began providing school construction reimbursement in the 1950s, with the PlanCon

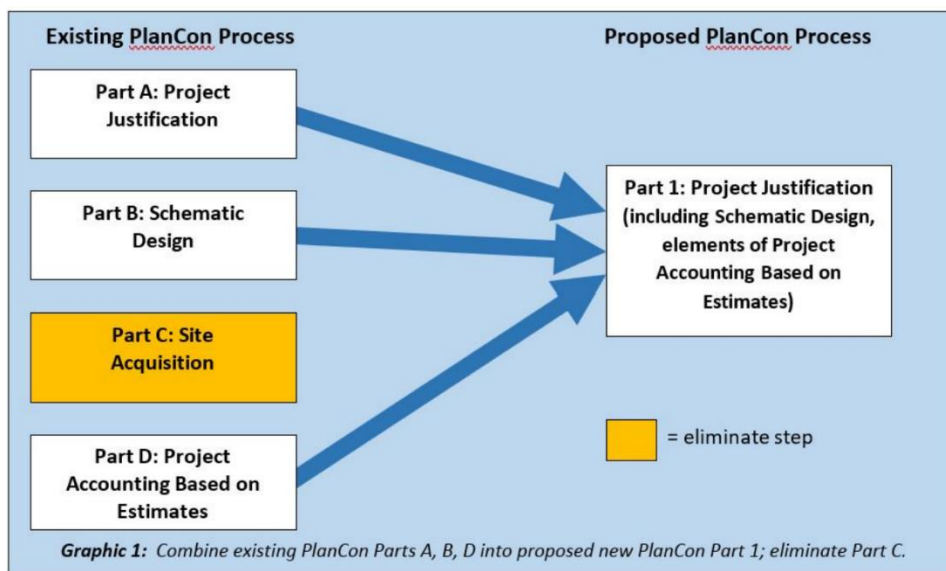


Existing Classroom Conditions (Open Pod Classrooms)

system adopted in the early 1970's and its accompanying set of forms that are still in use today. In 2015 the commonwealth stopped accepting PlanCon applications, establishing the moratorium that is still in place. Almost 10 years later, conditions in many schools have stagnated. We still see, today, schools without walls separating classrooms. Many buildings lack ADA compliance leaving some of our most vulnerable students and teachers unable to gain entry or access

certain portions of a school. Many mechanical systems do not meet baseline standards for indoor air quality. Dark, hot, windowless, uncomfortable classrooms house students struggling to listen and learn. Additionally alarming are conditions related to school safety. Examples include schools without secured vestibules, exterior doors that don't lock when closed, and interior classroom doors that can only be locked from the hallway. I can assure you that these unacceptable conditions exist in many schools throughout our state.

While the moratorium has left many school districts without the financial means to improve their facilities, the actual PlanCon program itself got an upgrade. Act 70 of 2019 (SB 700) reauthorized the program with a modernized procedure. The former 11-part process was reduced to a 4-steps. More focus was given to achieving energy efficient, high-performance building standards. Appropriate and realistic values – no longer based on 1970's standards – are assigned for specialized educational spaces such as science labs and technology centers as well as art and music rooms. Previously, these spaces,



which carry a higher construction cost, were valued less than a regular classroom. Additionally, a system was created to support maintenance and repair projects as these were previously excluded from qualifying for public funding. An adjustment factor was also included to allow the commonwealth to adjust the total contribution each year.

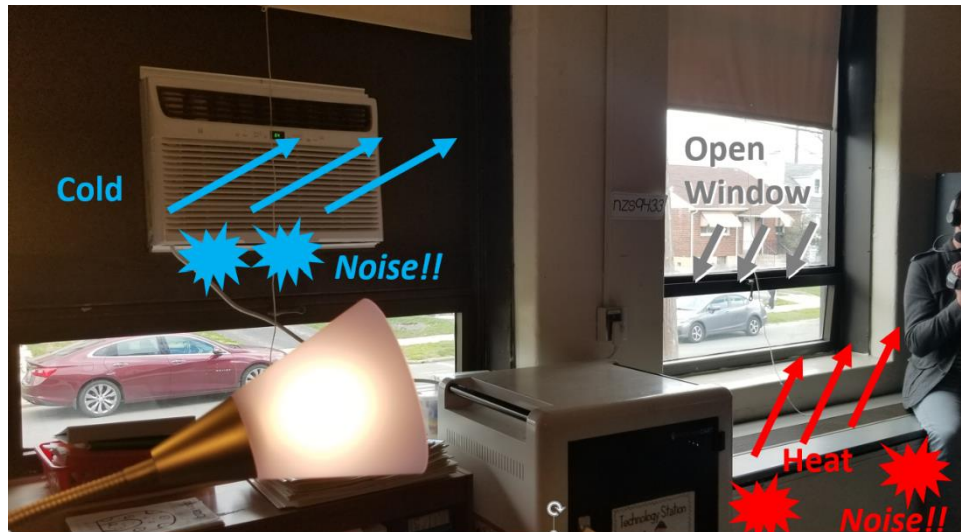
Act 34 of 1973 applies to all new schools or any project where an addition is constructed that equates to over 20% of the existing building. This sets the "Aggregate Building Expenditure Standard" which essentially dictates the maximum construction cost of a new building or addition. This number is generated by taking the building capacity and multiplying it by the Per Pupil Cost Limit. There are several things to note here. First, the building capacity is calculated by using the old 1970's 11-part system that does not account for current educational standards as I mentioned previously. This can result in school districts being forced to actually build larger and more expensive building projects than they desire in order to meet Act 34 requirements. In the 1970s method, elementary schools are not given credit for spaces that are not a regular classroom such as libraries, gymnasiums, art, and music rooms. In a recent project I was involved with, we found that a school district could only build a new 800-student elementary school due to Act 34 requirements instead of a 500-student elementary school more that aligned with their actual capacity needs. In the new PlanCon 2.0, the capacity of all school buildings is determined equally, eliminating this type of outcome.

Want to make a difference? PlanCon 2.0 is already set up to do it.

The Pennsylvania legislature continues to look at ways to properly fund public education and reengage with school districts on the importance of quality learning environments. The good news is that there is a new, modern funding structure already in place. Act 70 of 2019 approved the new PlanCon 2.0 program with many positive updates and improvements. It's just that we forgot to hit the "start" button.

To be clear, there are two important attributes of PlanCon 2.0 that influence school construction. The new system would become the method used to verify a project's Act 34 requirements. As previously stated, these updated capacity calculations would more accurately represent modern usage of instructional spaces. The second advantage is that PlanCon 2.0 would serve as the catalyst to reignite Pennsylvania's commitment to improving public schools. So many of the issues impacting our school buildings can be addressed by lifting the 10-year funding moratorium.

For years before the Covid pandemic, and certainly since, indoor air quality has been a vital factor to creating a successful environment for learning. If you want to improve these conditions in our schools... fund PlanCon 2.0.



Existing classroom running heat and A/C at same time with the window open

In too many of our schools, hazardous materials such as asbestos, lead paint, and mold are present in learning environments. Often this has forced the closure of buildings, pushing students into already overcrowded classrooms elsewhere in a school district. If you want to address these potentially toxic environments in our school buildings... fund PlanCon 2.0.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1992. Yet far too many of our school buildings still do not meet the basic requirements of making all spaces accessible to everyone. Countless schools still do not provide wheelchair access to all building levels or appropriate provisions for toilet facilities. If you want to make our school buildings accessible for all who enter them... fund PlanCon 2.0.

Lastly, school safety, a topic that I am very passionate about, is too often a focus of the public only after a tragedy has occurred. While some school districts have begun to address recommended safety measures, far too many school buildings that I have visited are woefully inadequate when it comes to even the most basic safety measures. If you want to address safety and security issues in our school buildings... fund PlanCon 2.0.

Equitable funding is needed NOW!

If we truly value our children's safety and the environment that they are learning in, we must fund PlanCon 2.0. The current 10-year moratorium has impacted all school districts but particularly our poorest communities. I am aware of several who continue to defer maintenance repairs and building improvements due to lack of funding. They haven't ignored these needs. In fact, they are well aware their buildings are in poor condition. It's simply that they can't afford to improve these spaces and are waiting. Waiting for you to help. Waiting for the day when Pennsylvania will once again join the 37 other states in our country that provide funding for school construction and upgrades.



We ask you to restart public school construction funding in Pennsylvania so we can provide modern, safe, secure, and healthy learning environments for our children. PlanCon 2.0 is the right mechanism to achieve this. It is ready. It was approved by this legislature in 2019. We just need to hit that "start" button.

Thank you.

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