

**Opening Statement of Chairman Bobby Scott (VA-03)**  
House Committee on Education and Labor Full Committee Hearing  
*Underpaid Teachers and Crumbling Schools:  
How Underfunding Public Education Shortchanges America's Students.*  
Tuesday, February 12, 2019 | 10:15 a.m.

This hearing is now called to order. This morning, we are here to discuss how chronic underfunding of public education is affecting students, parents, teachers, and communities.

This is a discussion our constituents are eager for us to have, and a challenge the American people are calling on us to solve. In Oklahoma, West Virginia, Virginia, Arizona, Los Angeles, and many cities and states in between, voters are demanding greater support for public education.

In a time of extreme polarization, support for public education is a rare bridge across our political and cultural divisions. In a poll conducted after the 2018 midterm elections, the overwhelming majority of Americans, both Democrats and Republicans, said increasing K-12 funding is an “extremely important priority” for the 116th Congress.

The widespread support for public education makes our longstanding tradition of failing to prioritize public education both confounding and frustrating.

Look no further than Title I-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – the largest grant program in K-12 education. Title I-A supports public schools with large concentrations and numbers of students living in poverty. In the 2017-2018 school year, Congress gave schools *less than a third* of the full authorization amount for the basic grant program.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, known as I-D-E-A, is another example. I-D-E-A protects the right of children with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment.

To help achieve this goal, it authorizes grants to offset extra costs associated with supporting students with disabilities. I-D-E-A has not been fully funded at any point in its 44-year history. In fact, funding for I-D-E-A has never reached even half of the authorized levels.

And despite the evidence linking well-resourced facilities, well-supported teachers, and healthy buildings to better academic and life outcomes, the federal government dedicates **no money** to public school infrastructure improvements.

The lack of federal support has exacerbated the issues caused by a lack of commitment to robust public education funding at the state level.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 29 states spent less per student in 2015 than they had in the 2008 school year, before the Great Recession. In 17 states, funding per student was cut by at least 10 percent.

Today, despite the long and growing list of school building failures that have endangered students and educators, twelve states contribute no money to support school facilities, and 13 states cover between 1 percent and 9 percent of school facility costs.

The combination of chronic federal and state underfunding in public education has left many schools at a literal breaking point. According to a State of our Schools report published in 2016, public K-12 school facilities are – on average – underfunded by \$46 billion every year compared to building industry and best-practice standards.

In 2014, a Department of Education study estimated that it would cost \$197 billion to bring all public schools into good condition.

This problem is not limited to physical infrastructure. As technology becomes increasingly central to providing a quality education, the lack of funding for basic school upgrades has forced schools to put off needed investments in digital infrastructure.

A 2017 “Education Super Highway” report found that more than 19,000 schools serving more than 11.6 million students, nearly a quarter of public school students, “are without the minimum connectivity necessary for digital learning.”

In a nation that primarily funds public education using property taxes, the erosion of federal and state support has had a particularly harmful impact on low income school districts, where schools are chronically underfunded, and the needs are the greatest.

For example, in September 2018, dozens of New Jersey schools closed for weeks because of mold. Baltimore also closed schools the same month during a heatwave because many schools did not have air conditioning. Notably, only three percent of Baltimore schools are less than 35 years old.

Five years after the discovery of lead contamination in the water, schools in Flint, Michigan finally have water filtration systems, but only because of a private donation.

Two weeks ago, I joined Congressman Norcross and Senator Jack Reed, along with 180 Members of Congress, to introduce the *Rebuild America’s Schools Act*.

This bill would create a \$70 billion grant program and \$30 billion tax credit bond program targeted at improving the physical and digital infrastructure at high-poverty schools.

In doing so, it would also create roughly 1.9 million good-paying jobs. In fact, the *Rebuild America’s Schools Act* would create more jobs than the Republican tax bill, at just 5 percent of the cost.

At the start of his presidency, and again in the State of the Union last week, President Trump called for a massive infrastructure package to rebuild America. School infrastructure must be part of any package we consider.

This should be a bipartisan effort. An overwhelming majority of Americans understand the clear line between the consistent, nationwide failure to support public schools and its role in perpetuating inequality in education. Unfortunately, not everyone has drawn the same conclusion.

Rather than understanding the achievement gap as the inevitable result of structural inequality and chronic underfunding of low-income schools, some attribute the achievement gap to the failure of individual parents, students, and educators.

Rather than seeing the urgent need for a robust public education system, some see an opportunity to cut funding and expand the role of private schools and voucher programs.

Others have also argued that our existing investment has not produced uniformly positive results and, therefore, it is time to divert funding into private options. But those individuals fail to acknowledge the larger community-based issues that contribute to student performance. Students succeed when they are surrounded by strong local economies, thriving businesses, successful human services programs.

They need access to health care, adequate transportation, affordable housing, and nutritious food. As other developed nations have demonstrated, this support system is a critical component for students' success.

Critics of public schools also ignore the chronic underfunding of education to date. Total U.S. spending on education accounts for two percent of the federal budget, which is less than many other developed countries.

And supporters of funding cuts for public schools do not acknowledge the devastating impact that efforts to privatize public education have had on low-income communities.

It will take a long-term commitment to public schools in order to see the consistent results we all expect. And we must be willing to make that commitment.

I want to close by recognizing the burden we continue to place on America's educators. While crumbling school buildings are a visible risk to students, the effect of chronic underfunding on America's teachers is equally, if not more concerning.

Accounting for inflation, teacher pay fell by \$30 per week from 1996 to 2015. Public school teachers earn just 77 percent of what other college graduates with similar work experience earn in weekly wages.

Teachers – who live at the intersection of declining salaries and under-resourced schools – continue to demonstrate their dedication to their students. Teachers spend an average of \$485 of their own money every year to buy classroom materials and supplies.

If we cannot attract and keep talented and passionate teachers in the classroom, we will fail to provide students the promise of a quality education. That is simply not an option.

I look forward to this discussion and I now recognize the Ranking Member, Dr. Foxx.