

The Dangers of Deferred Maintenance: Penny Wise & Pound Foolish

By Lyall Smith

Budget pressures on schools are mounting and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. School boards are faced with difficult choices as they seek to trim budgets. Being “penny wise and pound foolish,” which is already common practice, becomes especially tempting when budget funds are restricted. Preventative routine maintenance can extend the life of any facility and is, therefore, an excellent investment. Unfortunately, many school districts have decreased their investment in maintaining facilities. The Vermont School Custodian and Maintenance Association members are faced with caring for some of these buildings and we can point to real Vermont school stories that we hope people will consider when making the hard choices ahead.

You need only look at your local newspaper to find stories of Vermont schools in need of huge repairs and renovations. This is often due, in part, to short-sighted people trying to pass a budget by delaying much needed maintenance and repairs to our schools in the interest of saving a buck.

My current school district was one such story. On the surface, the buildings continued to be in operation and met their education purpose. But monumental problems were brewing just out of sight. Over a period of years, decisions about building repairs were made to save money that ended up costing the taxpayers in the long run. The attempt to save the district money by eliminating the facilities director position backfired, ultimately costing millions of dollars, a year of renovations, and unnecessary stress to staff, students, and the community.

Proper maintenance of school facilities will create a safe, healthy, comfortable and efficient environment that is conducive to their educational purpose. A competent and trained facility manager will not only ensure that the district’s investment in the physical plant retains its value but will also save money by properly managing the buildings energy systems and use of contractors. A facilities director and sufficient staffing is the first line of defense when facing many of the common issues Vermont schools have.

Reduced funding affects the quality of maintenance in many ways. Schools may be reluctant to follow manufacturers’ recommendations if certain equipment appears to be functioning properly, but neglecting routine maintenance may reduce the life of the machinery and systems, increase the cost of operation, and decrease performance. Maintenance personnel may receive insufficient training both before and during their employment, and fewer people become responsible for more work.

Deferred maintenance does not only affect the health and safety of those who use the facility; it can also effect performance of teachers, staff and students and threaten the school itself. We respectfully ask that every effort be made during the difficult budget process ahead to ensure that adequate funds are made available to properly maintain our public schools.

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