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A School Construction Mess Proves Money Doesn't Solve Everything.

Twice in the past eight years, San Diego school officials have convinced voters to support big bond measures to pay for construction. They have raised a total of \$5 billion that way, and have already spent \$1 billion. Despite all this, the school district's buildings are now in worse shape overall than when they started.

A report by the district's Independent Citizens' Oversight Committee uses a standard measure called the facility condition index. It calculates how much would have to be spent to replace, repair or renovate buildings, compared to the cost of new construction. An index score under 5 percent is good; above 10 percent is poor. The latest report showed San Diego at 22.7 percent — up from 18 percent in 2012, when the most recent bond measure passed, and much higher than the 15 percent score when voters approved the first measure back in 2008.

School district officials have sought to play down the findings, saying essentially that they found more wear and tear because they started looking harder. But the same consultant performed each of the recent assessments, and the district has yet to show why the different sets of data shouldn't be viewed as apples and apples. So why are buildings apparently in worse shape, despite pretty significant spending?

It's because maintenance isn't sexy. The district has simply devoted a lot more money to new initiatives than upkeep. "San Diego Unified has spent large swaths of bond money on things like wireless Internet and iPads," reports the Voice of San Diego. It has also taken some of the bond money targeted for construction and used it for operations.

Meanwhile, some actual construction projects, such as new stadiums, haven't done anything to strengthen or repair existing buildings.

That's not just San Diego's problem. Schools throughout the state seem to do a bad job assessing their maintenance needs. A recent study from the University of California, Berkeley, found that 62 percent of state districts are inadequate on upkeep. "Building is sexy, maintaining is not," says Jeffrey Vincent, the study's author.

Vincent notes that there's no broadly recognized standard in the state for assessing school buildings. Some districts, such as Los Angeles, do sophisticated analyses annually. Others seem to play it by ear. Not knowing what the needs are, it's impossible for them to target funding where it would do the most good.

That is something California voters might want to ponder as they consider a \$9 billion statewide school construction bond that's on the November ballot.

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