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## **We're Burying Our Kids in Debt (Just Not the Way You Think).**

For the Philadelphia teacher Freda Anderson, setting up her classroom involves clearing plaster, dust and paint chips from tables, chairs and desks. Somewhere, a leak has allowed water to seep through the walls. Years of deferred maintenance have caused dust and paint chips to scatter across the room. This debris is not just a brazen reminder of state abandonment of public education — it is an active vector of harm. A report released this spring revealed an asbestos epidemic creeping through Philadelphia schools.

During the 2019 school year, 11 schools closed because of toxic physical conditions; a veteran teacher is suffering from mesothelioma, a lethal disease caused by asbestos. Ms. Anderson used to believe the best way to fix schools would be to hire more teachers, counselors and mental health providers, “but, honestly, now the first thing I would do is start reallocating money to fix the buildings,” she told me. “They’re just really dangerous.”

The question of how to finance Philadelphia schools’ \$4.5 billion of unmet infrastructure needs — as well as hiring more teachers, counselors and nurses — has been a vexing issue for the community. Despite high levels of affluence in the city, inequitable distribution of state aid and regressive taxation, including hundreds of millions of dollars in local corporate tax breaks, have exacerbated budget shortfalls.

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**The New York Times**

By Eleni Schirmer

Aug. 27, 2021

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