

State of disrepair



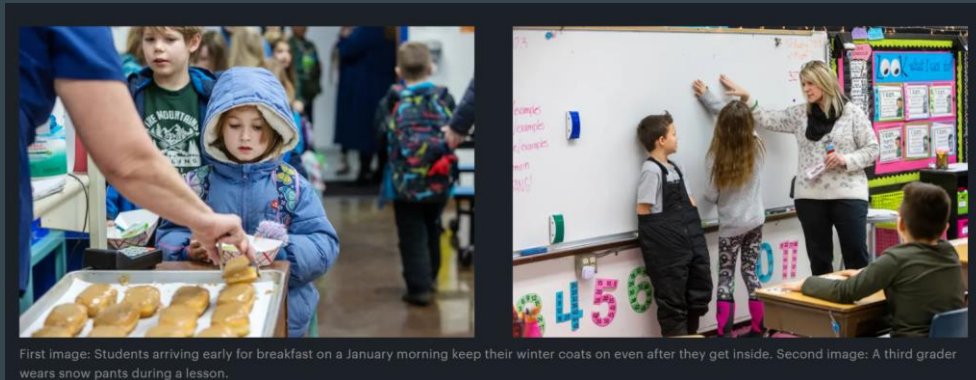
Restrictive policies created a funding crisis that's left Idaho schools with collapsing roofs, deteriorating foundations and freezing classrooms.

How the project started

- Heard from education stakeholders, superintendents and others about widespread issues in Idaho schools (leaky roofs, discolored water, asbestos)
- Idaho has a uniquely high threshold to pass bonds (one of the few ways districts could pay for new schools) and the state offered little funding to school districts for capital projects
 - The result was schools in Idaho were literally crumbling and there was little administrators could do
- Supreme Court case from 2005 said the state needed to do more – but decades later, it remained a problem
- Legislators knew it was an issue – and had been for decades – but they didn't have a comprehensive idea of how bad the problem really was
 - Limited data (inspection reports had little info)
 - The state hasn't conducted a statewide facilities assessment in 30 years

Visit to Boundary County

- Analyzed bond data over the past two decades in Idaho - found most bonds failed, but had the threshold been a simple majority, they would have passed
- Visited small, rural district in North Idaho where two recent bonds to replace its largest elementary school that had been in disrepair for decades failed
- Had issues with: heating + cooling, leaks, roof, plumbing, accessibility and safety
- Talked with students, teachers + administrators about the impact on learning
- Went beyond numbers + bond elections to show why this should matter to people in the community



First image: Students arriving early for breakfast on a January morning keep their winter coats on even after they get inside. Second image: A third grader wears snow pants during a lesson.

Why we used engagement reporting

- After the first story, we turned to engagement reporting
- We wanted to fill a gap and create as comprehensive a look as possible about what school facilities looked like across the state and how Idaho's restrictive policies + lack of funding were impacting students, teachers and communities
- The pitch had many of the qualities that make up a successful engagement reporting project
 - People were eager to talk and what they could share – information about their school buildings – could help us show the scale and impact of the problems
 - This became essential to the project after we realized that we wouldn't be able to show that through data or records.
- We knew from bond data that most bonds failed because districts couldn't reach Idaho's two-thirds threshold
 - We wanted to illustrate the impact and show state legislators how their inaction caused this

Defining goals

- We wanted to hear from all 115 superintendents in Idaho
- We wanted to hear from someone (teacher, student, parent) in every school district in Idaho
- We wanted as many pictures as possible to illustrate the issue – but many of the biggest issues couldn't be pictured
- Ultimate goal: Show how the lack of state funding for school facilities and Idaho's high threshold affected students and staff members and impacted their learning and how they viewed their schools.

Superintendent survey

- We knew we couldn't visit every school in person so we wanted to put together a survey to hear from every superintendent
- Went back and forth on a list of questions, which included a list of facilities issues that were looked at in the last state assessment; Consulted with data editor
- We asked ourselves how the data we collected would lead to actual lines in a story.
- Conducted user testing by showing a draft to sources and asking them to talk us through their input
 - We wanted to identify anything that might confuse people or make it less likely they would participate and to create buy-in for the project.
- Asked superintendents of school districts of varying sizes in different regions of the state to test the survey
 - Asked: whether anything was missing, why they did or didn't think other superintendents would fill it out and their thoughts about the best time and ways to share it.

Callout

- To reach students, educators and community members, we decided to create a callout form asking about their experiences.
- We came up with a list of associations, organizations and social media groups that could help us spread the word.
- User tested the callout with facilities experts and education stakeholder groups
- Shared it in English and Spanish

STATE OF DISREPAIR

Idaho: Help Us Show Readers and Officials Issues With Your School Building

The Idaho Statesman and ProPublica have reported on poor conditions in school buildings. Here's how to get in touch with your own stories and photos.

by Becca Savransky, Idaho Statesman, and Asia Fields, ProPublica, April 13, 2023, 5:05 a.m. EDT



Water seeps across the floor in the boiler room at Valley View Elementary School in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. The aging school is part of the Boundary County School

Visiting schools + hearing from students

- Planned reporting trip using superintendent responses, callout responses, data on previous bonds that had failed, demographic data (particularly regarding income), news stories and school location.
- Visited a total of 39 schools and put up flyers in the towns we visited
- Challenges: In some districts, the superintendent was eager to host us and helped us set up meetings with students. In others, superintendents were worried about having us talk to students
- Spoke to classes of students in several schools, shared a presentation on our project and planned an activity using notecards
 - Also gave students at some schools polaroid cameras to take photos of the issues in their schools
 - Found students were engaged and knowledgeable about their community, and knew how bond and levy elections impacted their schools



Students documented problems in their schools using a camera from the Idaho Statesman and ProPublica. They photographed old boilers, stained ceilings, broken tiles, decaying lockers, exposed wires and cracks in their buildings. Photo courtesy of ProPublica. Source: Images courtesy of students at Canyon County High School, Canyon High School, Idaho City Middle High School and

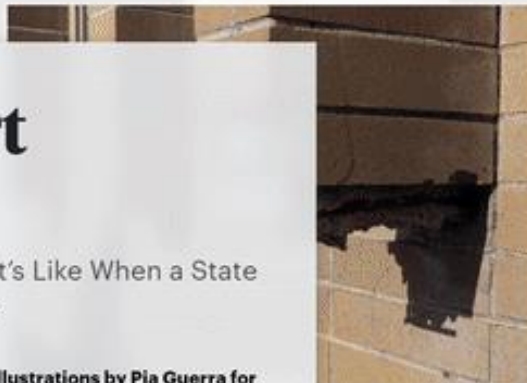


Falling Apart

Students and Educators in Idaho Show Us What It's Like When a State Fails to Fund School Repairs

by Asia Fields, ProPublica, and Becca Savransky, Idaho Statesman, illustrations by Pia Guerra for ProPublica, design by Anna Donlan, ProPublica

Dec. 15, 2023, 5 a.m. EST



Impact

- Heard from 91% of superintendents and 233 students, parents teachers and others
- Governor called funding school facilities “priority No. 1” during State of the State address and cited our reporting
- Passed bill investing \$2 billion to help schools repair and replace their facilities and pay off their bonds and levies
- Largest investment in school facilities in state history
- Salmon, a district we highlighted, passed a bond after trying for decades and running around a dozen

Want to learn more?

We're putting together a reporting recipe for other journalists. Sign up to get an update when it publishes by scanning the QR code or visiting propub.li/ewa24

