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Op-Ed Columnist

Falling Further Behind

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Harrisburg, Pa.

One section of the Maytown Elementary School in rural Maytown, Pa., was built in 1861.

Another section was built in the late-1920s. There's a time clock in the ancient gym that was donated by the class of 1946.

This is a school that could use an update. No, scratch that. It needs to be replaced.

Shelly Riedel, superintendent of the Donegal School District, which includes Maytown, told me that teachers can't mount smart boards in their classrooms because of the asbestos "encapsulated" behind the walls. The asbestos is not dangerous as long as the walls are not disturbed. The electricity is not particularly reliable. A teacher who is using, say, an overhead projector has to check to make sure that other teachers are not using similar devices at the same time as that might cause an outage.

There is no air conditioning. And there is no money right now to replace the school, which has an enrollment of 237.

You can travel the United States and find comparable, or worse, conditions in schools

throughout the country. It's part of the overwhelming problem of maintaining and modernizing American infrastructure. It's hard to even get good data on the physical condition of the nation's schools. But Lawrence Summers, President Obama's chief economic adviser, has said that 75 percent of the public schools have structural deficiencies and 25 percent have problems with their ventilation systems.

The Donegal district is planning to build a bare-bones regional high school with money from its general budget. The existing school, which was built in 1954, has many problems, including a sewage system that saw its best days when names like Eisenhower and Kennedy were on the mailbox at the White House. The proposal for the new high school does not even include an athletic field for the kids.

Getting the nation's schools up to date is an enormous problem, but it's only a small part of the overall infrastructure challenge. In Pennsylvania, a state in which the governor, Ed Rendell, is all but obsessed with infrastructure, there are still thousands of bridges that either need a lot of work or should be replaced.

Fifty-one miles of Interstate 95, the main north-south highway on the East Coast, make their way through southeastern Pennsylvania. Construction of the highway began more than a half-century ago, before Barack Obama was born. Rina Cutler, Philadelphia's deputy mayor for transportation and utilities, noted that long stretches of I-95 are now reaching the end of their useful life and will have to be rebuilt.

In a report titled "Just Because You Ignore It Doesn't Make It Go Away," Ms. Cutler wrote:

"These stretches require reconstruction that is conservatively estimated to cost \$6 billion to \$10 billion over the next two decades. This badly needed investment could be expected to

support tens of thousands of jobs over that period. The Federal Highway Administration has estimated that every \$1 billion of investment in the Federal Highway Aid program generates 42,100 full-time equivalent jobs.”

Schools, highways, the electric grid, water systems, ports, dams, levees — the list can seem endless — have to be maintained, upgraded, rebuilt or replaced if the U.S. is to remain a first-class nation with a first-class economy over the next several decades. And some entirely new infrastructure systems will have to be developed.

But these systems have to be paid for, and right now there are not enough people at the higher echelons of government trying to figure out the best ways to raise the enormous amounts of money that will be required, and the most responsible ways of spending that money. And there are not enough leaders explaining to the public how heavy this lift will be, and why it is so necessary, and what sacrifices will be required to get the job properly done.

In an era of historically high budget deficits, the case has to be made that this is not wasteful spending but essential investments that will yield powerful returns. “If you’re not willing to invest,” said Governor Rendell, “you have to be willing to accept an inferior product. That’s the danger we’re facing.”

There are sound ideas available for raising the money to rebuild America’s infrastructure. These include, most prominently, a proposed national infrastructure bank, which would allocate public funds and also leverage private capital for the most important projects. In the absence of a national bank, it might be possible to establish regional infrastructure banks.

The point is that top government leaders should be seeking as many solid and creative ideas as possible, with the goal of moving with dispatch on the best ones. The only thing at stake is the

economic future of the United States.

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