

The Other End of the Work Order

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After the renovation at my former worksite, there were a few places where you could see how somebody had saved a couple of dollars. One of them was the exterior door to my classroom. It was a big, heavy metal door, but there was no door sweep along the bottom, which left enough of a gap for things from the outside to become things on the inside. A door sweep isn't expensive. I owned a drill. For a few bucks and a few screws, I could have fixed it myself. But it was the principle of the thing for me. Why was I going to start repairing my classroom? Why was I going to paint my own walls, patch holes or buy parts for a building owned by the school system?

A lot of teachers know that dilemma. You get tired of waiting, stop at the hardware store and fix it yourself. I knew another teacher who got tired of waiting for his door sweep and just bought one. I didn't. I followed the procedure, talked to the people I needed to talk to and had work orders submitted. Months went by. The school year ended and another one started. I still had no door sweep, but I did have an increasing variety of wildlife. There were spiders and insects, an occasional little snake and, one morning, a field mouse next to my trash can.

Then, around 6:40 one morning, I walked into my classroom and found a black widow spider. I killed it, and a few feet away I found a juvenile black rat snake. Young rat snakes don't look like the big black snakes we normally see around here. They're gray, sometimes a little blue, with dark markings down their backs. I picked it up to take it outside, which the snake didn't appreciate. It started biting the hell out of me. So I walked up to the main office with this little snake hanging off my finger like some kind of finger puppet and went to see our principal. I asked her if she would put in another work order for the door sweep. I figured a snake dangling from a teacher's hand might help move things along. It did, although not at the speed I had hoped.

A missing door sweep is a very low-priority work order, and it should be. If a roof is leaking somewhere, an HVAC unit has quit, a pipe has broken or somebody has an electrical problem, I want that handled before somebody comes to my classroom with a strip of rubber and a few screws. I understood that at the time. What I didn't understand was the scale of what the people in Maintenance were dealing with. On my first visit to the Division of Supporting Services as EASMC president this summer, someone handed me a paper copy of the FY2026 Comprehensive Maintenance Plan for Educational Facilities. I had never read it before. I'd never had a reason to. It is 120 pages of staffing, work orders, budgets, equipment, building

conditions and square footage. Somewhere in those pages, I started thinking about my door sweep again.

SMCPS maintains more than 2.5 million square feet of building space across 31 facilities and 65 relocatable units, along with almost 770 acres of property. What caught my attention was the staffing table. The plan listed one dedicated painter for all of that. It also listed five HVAC trades staff, three electrical trades staff, two plumbing trades staff, two roofing trades staff and three building-repair trades staff. There are team leaders who work across trades, other specialized employees and contractors who perform some of the work, so those numbers do not describe the entire operation. They do, however, give you some sense of how much property a relatively small group of people is being asked to maintain.

The workload has been growing at the same time. SMCPS received 10,030 maintenance work requests in FY2015. By FY2025, that number had reached 12,647, an increase of about 26 percent. The plan says SMCPS should have 38.03 maintenance full-time-equivalent positions under the APPA staffing calculation. It reported 33.85. SMCPS also points out that the calculation is based largely on square footage and does not account for the age of the buildings. Even those 33.85 positions do not spend all of their time on building maintenance. According to the plan, two maintenance employees spend about 95 percent of their time maintaining the vehicle fleet. Four others spend roughly 25 percent of their time moving furniture and equipment and handling other logistical work. SMCPS estimates that those duties create the need for another two maintenance FTEs.

The work-order numbers put my little classroom problem into perspective. The plan reports an 11-day backlog, which sounds at first as though somebody should get to your work order in about eleven days. That is not what the number means. At the time the plan was written, more than 1,511 work orders were waiting for attention. Health and safety problems move ahead of lower-priority repairs, as they should, and SMCPS acknowledges that non-emergency work orders can take months to address. My door sweep was somewhere in that system, competing with leaking roofs, broken air conditioners, plumbing failures, electrical problems and everything else that comes with maintaining millions of square feet of school property.

This month, as I have visited worksites and read through employee forums, I have seen plenty of complaints about building problems. People have every right to expect their workplace to be maintained. I also think we need to spend more time looking at the other end of the work order. None of this information is hidden. SMCPS published the staffing levels, workload and benchmarks in its own maintenance plan. The FY2027 plan should be released soon, and I want to see what changed. How many people are doing this work now? Has the backlog improved? What has been added to the workload? What is still waiting?

The FY2026 numbers give us a useful baseline. Maintenance was 4.18 FTEs below the APPA benchmark, and SMCPS said fleet and logistics duties created the need for another two positions. Building Services was listed at 129 FTEs against a benchmark of 155.64, a difference of 26.64. Put those published figures together and the gap is 32.82 FTEs. That does not mean there are 32.82 empty jobs sitting on an organizational chart. It means the amount of work described in the school system's own plan exceeds the staffing level by the equivalent of nearly 33 full-time positions, and that calculation still does not account for the extra demands that come with aging buildings.

My missing door sweep was frustrating. I was right to expect it to be fixed. I also understand the wait a lot better now. Somewhere on a maintenance list, my strip of rubber and a few screws was sitting behind a leaking roof, a broken air conditioner, a plumbing problem or an electrical failure. The question I have now is less about why my door sweep took so long and more about how many people we are asking to handle everything that came before it.