Working Conditions Are Learning Conditions

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Kimberly Howe, the Director of Capital Planning for St. Mary's County Public Schools, came before the Commissioners of St. Mary's County on Sept. 22 to talk about the school system's six-year capital plan. Capital budgets have their own language. The plan refers to "Roof Systemic Renovation" and "HVAC Systemic Renovation." What Howe was really talking about were aging roofs, heating and cooling systems, and other parts of our school buildings that eventually wear out. She walked the commissioners through cost estimates, state funding, engineering work and projects that have to be planned years before anyone climbs onto a roof or starts replacing equipment.

The size of what is coming is hard to miss. State facility assessments identify 16 roofs and 15 HVAC systems that will need replacement within the next six years. St. Mary's has traditionally received about $4.8 million a year in state capital funding, while the state share of the projects identified in the six-year plan comes to roughly $160 million. Not all of that work will happen at once, and some systems may be repaired rather than replaced. Still, the plan gives the county and state a pretty good idea of what is coming as buildings and equipment reach the end of their useful lives.

It is easy during a capital-budget presentation to start thinking about buildings as the subject. Buildings are what show up on the spreadsheet. Put the people back into it and the numbers look different. Including the separate emergency roof work at George Washington Carver Elementary School, the projects discussed by SMCPS involve 16 schools serving roughly 10,700 students based on current school-system planning projections. About 1,200 employees have those schools as their primary or secondary worksites. Those are the people who will spend their days underneath these roofs and inside these buildings while decisions about repairs and replacement work their way through the budget process.

Carver is a good example of how those decisions get made. Its roof dates to 2006. Solar panels were installed on top of it in 2011. When the solar system was removed this year, inspectors found water infiltration, wet insulation and damage around the old mounting points. Replacing the roof would cost somewhere around $6.5 million to $7 million. SMCPS is instead proposing a $978,996 restoration. The damaged sections and wet insulation would be repaired and the roof coated, with the expectation that the work could give it another ten years of useful life. That is a fairly easy calculation to understand. If you can reasonably get another decade out of a roof for about a million dollars instead of spending six or seven times as much to replace it now, you repair it. Howe described a similar approach with HVAC equipment. Sometimes a component

can be replaced without replacing the entire system. Sometimes roof and HVAC work can be scheduled together so a new roof does not have to be cut open a few years later to replace equipment sitting on top of it.

Eventually, though, you run out of repairs. Equipment gets older. Parts become harder to find. Another major repair starts costing enough that replacement makes more sense. Figuring out when a building has reached that point is one reason this work has to be planned years ahead. For people who work in the schools, the problem is less theoretical. EASMC's negotiated agreement contains specific language about temperature. Article 7 allows employees to report a room, building or area below 65 degrees or above 80 degrees as an undesirable condition for teaching or supervising children. The agreement also addresses circumstances involving spaces below 60 degrees, above 85 degrees or with unhealthy humidity when those conditions have been determined by qualified personnel. SMCPS lists the current EASMC agreement as running through June 30, 2028.

Those are employee protections, not a separate temperature standard for students. The distinction makes sense on paper. It feels less significant when 25 students and their teacher are sitting in the same hot classroom. They breathe the same air and spend the day under the same roof. Moisture does not stay on one side of a room because only certain people are covered by a negotiated agreement. An air-conditioning system does not know the difference between a student, a teacher and a paraeducator. That is why I keep coming back to the connection between working conditions and learning conditions. Anyone who has tried to hold the attention of a room full of seventh graders when the classroom is pushing 80 degrees already understands it. So does the para working beside that teacher, the employee putting a bucket under a leak or the student wondering why one classroom is comfortable and the next one is not.

The process for fixing these problems can sound more complicated than the problem itself. A roof project can move through an assessment, engineering, state eligibility requirements, local appropriations and construction schedules before anyone replaces a section of membrane. HVAC projects have their own timelines. There are good reasons for that. We are talking about public money, and a school system with dozens of buildings cannot replace equipment simply because somebody thinks it looks old. But at the end of all that paperwork is still a classroom, an office, a cafeteria or a hallway where people spend a large part of their day.

In most cases, nobody will notice when this work goes right. That is probably the best possible outcome. A classroom is cool enough in August and warm enough in January. Humidity stays under control. Rain remains on the other side of the roof. Teachers teach. Support professionals do their jobs. Students have other things to think about.

That should be an ordinary expectation for a public school building. It gets expensive when roofs and mechanical systems across an entire school system start reaching the end of their useful lives at roughly the same time. SMCPS has now put much of that work on paper and shown the county what is coming. The county and state will have to decide, year by year, what they can pay for, what can be repaired and what will have to wait.

For the people inside the buildings, the test is simpler. On an ordinary school day, the building should stay out of the lesson.