



The Price of Education

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Let's cut to the chase, shall we?

The legwork has been done. The research has been conducted. The numbers have been crunched. As far as we can tell, it is going to cost the U.S. an investment of nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars to upgrade our nation's schools just to working order, and nearly [half a trillion](#) to bring them into the 21st century.

And the cut-to-the-chase part boils down to one simple but undeniably tough question: How can we possibly afford to do that?

To which I say: How can we possibly afford not to?

Look, I know what you're thinking. We're a nation at constant war with unemployment. We're an economy struggling to regain our footing in what has become an increasingly volatile and evermore global marketplace. We're a nation of far too many displaced workers, millions of whom wake up every morning simply trying to make ends meet.

But before you go too far down that path, let me take a moment to tell you briefly about two of the most remarkable buildings in one of the most architecturally amazing cities on the planet. And let me tell you specifically not so much about the *what* and the *how* of these two buildings, but the *when* of them.

The city is Chicago, and the remarkable buildings are not the Tribune Building, the Merchandise Mart, the Chicago Board of Trade, or even Wrigley Field. No, I'm talking about the buildings that house two public schools: Lane Tech and Senn High School.

The former is an utter marvel in both size and style. Sitting just a few miles west of Wrigley Field, the school is a gigantic gothic brick structure with a huge, stately bell tower sitting smack dab in the middle of 33 verdant acres of prime real estate. And as beautiful as Lane Tech is on the outside, inside the structure at times seems as though it were built for a king. There are numerous original wood relief carvings, magnificent hand-painted murals, a deco-style auditorium and a sprawling majestic library, all that have to be seen to be believed, and a working greenhouse that covers almost the entire fifth floor. There's even a center courtyard that serves as a living memorial to all the graduates who gave their lives in the defense of their country.

The latter, meanwhile, seems as though it may have been relocated from ancient Athens, or maybe L'Enfant's vision for Washington, D.C. It is built of white marble and stone and features a row of magnificent Greek-style columns in front that welcome all who enter as the steps of the U.S. Capitol or some European palace might.

So what's my point? My point is this: the building that houses Lane Tech was conceived after the stock market crash of 1929 and was built at the very height of the Depression.

Senn, on the other hand, was completed in 1913, the same year Congress created the Federal Reserve Board in a response to two massive and almost paralyzing bank panics and a deep recession, all of which had just occurred.

Yet despite that, and despite the fact that millions of Americans were out of work, homeless and regularly hungry, the City of Chicago still commissioned these two cathedrals of education to be built, and be built in a way that would honor the place it felt learning should hold in American society.

Rest assured, I won't try to convince you of the importance of education here. Because if you don't already believe that as a nation we are only as strong as the network of schools that educate our children, there's little I can say in this short space that will make a light bulb go on in your head.

Similarly, if you can't already see how countless decaying and decrepit school buildings will eventually wring the life out of our educational system, I'm not sure I have the words to make you see otherwise.

Let me instead offer this one very real possibility; that we didn't fund and build the finest school system in the world because we were a great nation. We became a great nation because at some point - a point at which it seemed we could ill-afford to do so - we made it a priority and took it upon ourselves to fund and build the finest school system in the world.


My friends, it's all about priorities. You want to see how deeply our grandparents and those who came before us valued education? Look at schools like Lane Tech and Senn. Look at what our forefathers and mothers built and left for us. And most importantly, look at when they built them.

It's our time now, and it's time for this generation of Americans to determine how much we truly value education. Do we want to simply talk a good game? Or do we want to put our money where our mouth is and give to our children and theirs what our parents and grandparents once sacrificed to give us? We don't have much input into what our kids are taught or who they learn from. There are people far smarter and more experienced who handle this part of our education system.


But those of us who are part of the green building movement sure as hell know what to do to improve *where* our kids learn and we should stand up en masse and make sure our children can learn in spaces that enhance their ability to learn, not compromise it. Earlier this month, USGBC, in conjunction with partners that include President Bill Clinton, The PTA, the AFT, the NEA, the American Lung Association and others, joined with the 21st Century School Fund in calling for a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study on the [State of our Schools](#). We haven't had one in more than 18 years, and we desperately need to understand the full scope of the problem so we can attack it head on. Please join us in asking your elected officials to put this on the GAO's agenda this year.

Every child in America deserves to be in a school where the bathrooms work. Where the mold is gone. Where the ceilings don't leak. Where there is adequate HVAC. Where the air is fit to breathe. Where they can be safe. This is the least we can do for our kids.

Yes it will cost some dollars. But if you think education is expensive, wait 'til you see what ignorance costs.



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Member employees, USGBC staff, USGBC board

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