

**April 14, 2011**

**OPINION PIECE**

**California Public Schools Are Among the Safest in the Nation,  
But Many Need Strengthening and Now's the Time to Act**

This week, both California Watch and KQED have done an excellent job of bringing to the public's attention the status of school safety.

They've reminded Californians about the 1999 AB300 list of high seismic risk public school buildings, as well as the importance of the 1933 Field Act, and the slowness with which the risk to some of our schools is being reduced. We, the members of the Structural Engineers Association of California, applaud their efforts.

There are few issues more important. Californians face the prospect of a major earthquake sometime in the foreseeable future. We need to assure that our school buildings will be able to withstand the force. We need to be confident that our children will not be harmed. Recent history has shown us what can happen to schools during earthquakes. Now is the time to identify the necessary resources to upgrade schools that need to be improved.

All of us share responsibility to make this happen. The good news is that nobody truly wants our children in harm's way. The recent press coverage may give the public the impression that our legislators, public servants and school administrators don't care and aren't doing their jobs. But they do care. They're *not* acting out of self-interest. They're *not* acting maliciously. They are simply dealing with limited resources and the need to allocate these resources in the best possible way to bring schools up to seismic standards.

Here are some key points we must remember as we move ahead and fix our schools:

**1. Public schools in California are among the safest in the nation, but many need strengthening.**

It's true, as the AB300 report points out, there are many schools that need attention. But the vast majority of schools in California are seismically safe. Here's why. The State of California has statutes that require licensed

Structural Engineers to be responsible for engineering schools. The mission of Structural Engineers is public safety. Therefore, Structural Engineers specify construction designs so people don't risk injury or death. What's more, the Division of the State Architect [DSA] oversees public school construction. They require very thorough engineering; provide comprehensive and detailed review and checks of construction documents; and have continuous inspections by certified construction inspectors. These reviews and inspections are much more rigorous than for commercial buildings.

## **2. We know which buildings need attention now, but further studies should be conducted.**

Thanks to the investigative reporting of California Watch's Corey Johnson, we have a cleaned-up database of these facilities and this information is now available to the public. As Structural Engineers, we support the public's right to know about the quality of the built environment. Only then can individuals make informed decisions about the houses and apartment buildings they live in, the offices and shops they work in, the hospitals they rely on, and the schools their children attend. SEAOC supports the release of this information and calls for more detailed building evaluations for all public schools.

## **3. There are funds available to fix schools, but they are grossly inadequate.**

The money allocated by the legislature to subsidize retrofits is only 4.3% of the expected statewide cost. Specifically, \$200 million has been allocated to fix the identified schools. According to the initial estimate of the AB300 Report, \$4.7 billion is required to solve the problem. Any way you look at this, the necessary funds are not available.

What's more, the School Facility Program requires local school districts to provide 50% matching funds for building seismic strengthening. Anyone who reads the news knows that every school district in California has decreasing budgets, less money from the state, and increased costs. Seismic safety of old buildings is a complex mix of economics, politics, priorities, and safety. Local school bond measures are one of the few ways that local districts generate money to expand classrooms and upgrade old buildings.

The reporters put a lot of the blame on the administrators for not doing their jobs. SEAOC does not believe the DSA is to blame. The question should be: why is DSA routinely under-funded? The public must demand more state funds be allocated to this effort so that we can continue to lower children and teacher risk in public schools.

**4. The State developed strict criteria to ensure the most needy schools would receive the very limited funds, but these criteria need to be expanded.**

The DSA established criteria to make sure the worst situations would be funded first. However, almost no school districts among the 16 that qualified applied for the retrofit funds NOT because their seismicity evaluation was too low, but because they didn't want to go through the detailed process without knowing if they'd qualify or could raise the matching funds.

So the government took the next logical step. The California Seismic Safety Commission (CSSC) provided a grant to DSA to do the engineering evaluations. Through these evaluations, 20 buildings were confirmed to be "collapse hazards" and therefore eligible for retrofit funds. If all 20 move forward to retrofit they will not exhaust the \$200 million, so it's possible now to relax the eligibility requirements. We highly recommend the eligibility requirements be more flexible so that other school districts can take advantage of these funds to improve their structures.

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