

The Arizona Daily Star

Opinion

Guest Opinion: School buildings waste energy, but new law provides remedies

By Jeff Hatch-Miller

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By almost a 2-1 ratio, Americans favor adequate funding for education. We support funding for classrooms, teacher salaries, athletics and new school construction. But we do not support wasting millions of dollars each year through energy inefficiency.

Arizona's school buildings waste energy.

With rising energy prices, schools have begged the Arizona Corporation Commission, on which I serve, and the state Legislature for relief from their energy bills. Yet, when questioned about their energy-conservation efforts they admit that, statewide, very little is being done.

Many of Arizona's older schools are in need of significant energy-conservation improvements. Sadly, even our newest schools are typically designed to meet only the minimum building codes.

This choice to minimize initial construction costs leads to higher ongoing electric and water utility bills forever. These unnecessarily higher bills are paid by taxpayers in the form of higher property taxes. You pay the price, and our children and teachers suffer. Millions of students across the country learn in unfavorable conditions. Various studies show that poor conditions in the classroom, such as poor air ventilation and lighting, lead to increased illness, absenteeism and decreased student achievement.

Consider the following facts from Energy Star and The Alliance to Save Energy:

- America's K-12 schools have a staggering annual energy bill of \$6 billion — more than is spent on textbooks and computers combined.
- The least energy-efficient schools use three times more energy than the best energy performers.
- The best energy-efficient schools cost 40 cents per square foot less to operate than the average energy performers.

We all want our schools to succeed. One way to accomplish that is to provide our schools with the means to design classrooms to be more energy efficient.

Fortunately, Arizona has taken some important first steps to correct those problems.

Thanks to the Legislature and the governor, House Bill 2496 became law. It allows school districts to partner with their utility companies to make investments in cost-effective energy measures.

Schools can tap those funds for better lighting, high-efficiency heating and air-conditioning systems, and energy-efficient building design. Those investments typically pay for themselves in five to seven years.

Reducing energy use is an effective way to help cash-strapped schools direct more money into classrooms while helping utilities lessen their need to build more power plants and transmission lines.

Pursuing energy efficiency in our schools creates a better environment for learning, and conserves our natural resources for future generations.

As an elected member of the Arizona Corporation Commission, I will continue those efforts. I will push the Arizona's School Facility Board to release the funds for more energy- and water-efficient schools and insist that our utilities make school energy savings a priority.

Jeff Hatch-Miller serves on the Arizona Corporation Commission and is a former member of the state House of Representatives. Write to him at hatch-web@azcc.gov.

