

Boon poised for vocational schools

\$100m rehab funds may be OK'd today



Assabet Valley Regional Technical in Marlborough, where a student trained in 2001, is one of nine such schools in line to receive money for renovations. It plans a new roof and HVAC system. (Bill Greene/Globe Staff/File)

By [Matt Collette](#)

Massachusetts vocational and technical schools are doing better than ever these days, with administrators boasting of massive waiting lists, improved test scores, and lower dropout rates than students statewide.

Discuss



But those same administrators say their school buildings are in desperate states of disrepair. Some have not been renovated since the 1960s. Without updated facilities, the officials say, they cannot adequately train students for the jobs of tomorrow.

Today, the Massachusetts School Building Authority will vote on a proposal that would make \$100 million available for nine vocational and technical schools that have requested money for renovation and modernization projects.

“If the schools don’t have the facilities to teach these kids new techniques, they can’t go into the business world,” state Treasurer Timothy P. Cahill, who chairs the authority’s board of directors, said in a telephone interview yesterday.

The state helped fund the construction of a number of regional vocational and technical schools in the 1960s and ’70s, but few have had major capital investments since then, school administrators and authority officials say. Because most schools serve several

communities, it can be difficult to persuade local taxpayers to commit money for them, Cahill and school administrators said.

“In most cases, we found that vocational schools sort of take the backseat to regular high schools, college prep high schools,” Cahill said.

In recent years, school administrators have felt the pinch, with budgets that have stayed the same or decreased, while they contend with a growing demand for vocational education. Currently, about 2,800 students in Massachusetts are on waiting lists to get into such schools.

“We have 1,100 students here and we really are bursting at the seams,” said David P. Papagni, superintendent of Bay Path Regional Vocational Technical High School in Charlton, which is requesting funding for a major renovation, the first since the school’s construction in 1972. “We’re just hoping to be able to do a better job to host the students we presently have.”

Papagni said his school simply cannot accommodate the number of students seeking a vocational education. During his tenure, the school built new walls inside existing labs and workshops to create more classroom space. Many teachers are without their own

classrooms and shuffle like nomads from room to room, with papers and grade books stashed in rolling suitcases.

In the past two years, the School Building Authority has committed more than \$200 million to similar work at 16 regional vocational, technical, and agricultural schools. The new funding, together with what Massachusetts has already given out since 2007, would amount to the largest infusion of state money for such schools in decades, according to the authority.

The \$100 million proposal, scheduled for a 10 a.m. board meeting today, is expected to pass, Cahill said. The School Building Authority is financed through proceeds from the state's sales tax, and 90 percent of its budget goes toward paying debts on school projects.

"It's \$100 million, but it's going to a lot of different schools," Cahill said. "It's going to help more students, and that makes it easier for people to go for it."

The funding would come with a catch, though. To receive the state money, the schools would need to get matching contributions from their communities, either from public or private sources. Some school administrators say that will be a challenge.

“We don’t even have a budget for the next year,” said John X. Crowley, superintendent of Northeast Metro Tech in Wakefield, which enrolls 1,250 students from a dozen surrounding communities. “So for me to expect [the communities] to float a bond for that kind of dough, that’s highly unlikely.”

Ed Bouquillon, superintendent of Minuteman Career & Technical High School in Lexington, said his school needs funding to build new labs and workspaces where students can prepare for careers in burgeoning fields such as biotechnology, criminal justice, and animal science.

“When we look five or 10 years down the road, this school will not sustain the programming we need to offer,” Bouquillon said. “We’re on [Route] 128, a prime high-tech corridor, but we have serious problems offering the programs we need to.”

Minuteman has, in recent years, modified its buildings and expanded its curriculum, adding courses in barbering, hospitality, and legal, business, and financial services, Bouquillon said. But new workshops and lab space would mean the school could add even more courses, he said.

Bouquillon said he is confident the school will find the matching funds - if not from taxpayers then from local businesses, especially high-tech companies that would benefit from a specially trained workforce.

“We’re not just a high school,” Bouquillon said. “We’re part of the economic development system, and that’s finally being recognized.”

Matt Collette can be reached at mpcollette@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company.

Retrieved on 07/30/09 from:

http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2009/07/29/vocational_schools_vying_for_funding/