

[K-12 EDUCATION](#)

Voters agree to fix up California schools. \$10 billion construction bond passes



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Students line up to enter their classrooms at Keyes Elementary School in Keyes on Nov. 15, 2023. Like many other small districts, Keyes is in desperate need of facilities funding. Photo by Larry Valenzuela, CalMatters/CatchLight Local

Overview:

The last California school bond measure in 2020 failed, so school officials say they are desperate for money to fix crumbling buildings and other infrastructure.

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With California's fund for school repairs on empty, [voters approved](#) a \$10 billion bond to pay for much-needed upgrades at K-12 schools and community colleges.

"This is very good news for all students," said Adam Clark, superintendent of Mt. Diablo Unified in Contra Costa County. "In our district, we have so many fundamental repair needs – electrical, plumbing, roofs, windows – and this relieves the pressure. It means we can get to work."

[**Proposition 2**](#) will help fix dry rot, mold, malfunctioning electrical systems, gas leaks and other health and safety hazards that plague hundreds of aging campuses. At least 38% of the state's K-12 students attend schools that don't meet the minimum safety standards, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

"This is critical for the education of our students, in every community, up and down the state," said Rebekah Kalleen, a legislative advocate for the Coalition for Adequate School Housing, a nonprofit that pushes for school facilities funding. "Students need to be in safe facilities. Learning outcomes depend on it."

Schools are especially desperate because the state's last school facilities bond, a \$15 billion bond in 2020, failed. That has left the state's school repair fund depleted, with an ever-growing list of needs. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates that it would cost more than \$100 billion to fix every leaking roof and broken heater on California's campuses.

Since California overhauled its school funding formula in the late 1980s, state and local bonds are the only source of money for school repairs and modernization. Prop. 2 gives \$8.5 billion to K-12 schools and \$1.5 billion to community colleges. It needed a simple majority to pass.

Voters appear to favor Proposition 2

Californians showed steady support for Prop. 2, according to polls. A survey in October found that [52% of voters](#) favored the proposition, with higher levels of support among Democrats and voters in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and Inland Empire. That support has been fairly consistent since the Legislature in June [approved](#) putting the bond on the ballot.

Prop. 2 garnered bipartisan endorsements, including from the state Democratic and Republican parties, the California Teachers Association, the California Chamber of Commerce, as well as a slew of education organizations.

Supporters are confident that Prop. 2 will not meet the same fate as the previous school facilities bond. That bond, Proposition 13, was confusing to voters because it shared a name with the famed 1970s tax reform measure, Kalleen said. Other factors contributing to the defeat were the election date, which was March 2020, as pandemic shutdowns began, and the large dollar amount of the bond.

As of Oct. 24, Prop. 2 backers had raised \$12.3 million, with the bulk coming from the California Teachers Association, California Building Industry Association and Kalleen's group.

The only formal opposition to Prop. 2 was from the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and [Assemblymember Bill Essayli](#), a Republican from Corona, who argued that taxpayers already give ample support to schools, and the state should pay for school repairs out of the existing general fund budget. They also argued that sooner or later, state bonds translate to higher taxes.

“Bonds are borrowed money that must be paid back, plus interest, even if that means cutting vital programs to do it,” the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association wrote in its ballot argument. “Governor Newsom recently declared a budget emergency because California spends more than it takes in. Children in school today will be drowning in new debt for decades if Prop. 2 passes.”

As of Oct. 24, opponents had not reported any campaign donations to the Secretary of State.

“Right now, we have classrooms that are so badly rusted that chunks of iron beams in the roof regularly fall off the buildings.”

— ERIC GROSS, SUPERINTENDENT OF PACIFIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The San Francisco-based, nonprofit public interest law firm Public Advocates agrees with the need for school facilities funding, but has opposed the way California would distribute the money. The state would give out most of the money based on matching grants, which means that school districts that can raise more money through local bonds — typically, larger and wealthier districts — [can collect more Prop 2 funds](#).

Prop. 2 sets aside \$1 billion for smaller and lower-income districts and includes a sliding scale that would give more money to smaller districts, but the scale is not nearly wide enough, Public Advocates argued.

Public Advocates had threatened to sue if the measure passes, but on Tuesday night the firm's managing attorney John Affeldt said no decision had been made yet.

“Voters appear to be correctly recognizing the desperate need for capital financing for our public schools, but I don't think this is an endorsement of the Legislature's plan to distribute the funds,” Affeldt said Tuesday night.

But even with the inequities, Prop. 2 is a lifeline for most school districts, especially those with limited abilities to raise local money.

“Right now, we have classrooms that are so badly rusted that chunks of iron beams in the roof regularly fall off the buildings,” said Eric Gross, superintendent of Pacific Elementary in Davenport, near Santa Cruz. “If Prop. 2 passes, we can replace dilapidated classrooms and build new classrooms to accommodate our growing enrollment.”

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