

Special-Needs Districts to Get Aid

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Special-needs school districts across New Jersey that have struggled to address health and safety issues such as deteriorated roofs and broken boilers at their schools will soon get state funding to make the necessary repairs.

The state Schools Development Authority announced this week it will spend as much as \$60 million in the coming months to pay for emergency projects at 114 schools in 27 of the state's poorest 31 school districts.

South Jersey school districts receiving assistance are Bridgeton, Burlington City, Camden, Gloucester City, Millville, Pemberton Township and Salem.

The state agency posted a complete list of the 137 projects on its Web site on Tuesday. It is expected each project will range from \$100,000 to \$3 million, depending on the work involved.

The funding for emergency repairs is separate from the \$2.9 billion in a law signed by Gov. Jon S. Corzine last month that authorized construction projects in the special-needs districts. That money is designated for longer-term, typically larger, projects such as new schools and major additions, officials said.

The SDA established the \$150 million reserve fund for emergency projects in April 2007. As of last month, the fund stood at \$144 million.

"We need the flexibility to handle emergencies when they come up. Districts shouldn't be left stranded because we didn't put money away for a rainy day," said SDA spokesman Larry Hanover.

The SDA and the state education and community affairs departments worked together to select the 137 projects after reviewing 400 potential emergency conditions at 250 schools. State officials visited each of the 250 schools between mid-February and the end of March to see the conditions for themselves and determine if they rose to a level that required immediate action, Hanover said.

"I am pleased with the collaborative effort with DOE and the districts that resulted in an unprecedented, comprehensive list of emergent projects statewide," said Scott Weiner, chief executive officer of the SDA. "This collaboration has produced a plan that will ensure the immediate health and safety of students is addressed."

About 30 percent of the projects deal with roof repair or replacement. Other problems include crumbling facades, poor ventilation, water leaks, outdated fire alarm systems and broken toilets. The Newark and Paterson school districts lead the list with 30 and 18 projects, respectively.

Long Branch in Monmouth County will receive funding for two projects at its alternate middle and high school, an older building. The facility will receive an upgraded fire alarm system and repairs to its fire escape, said Joseph Ferraina, the school superintendent.

"The systems are operational now, but we want to repair them now instead of waiting until they break," Ferraina said. "Having this money available is great because now we're able to completely repair the problem, not just patch it. Doing it this way is more cost effective."

Without state funding, the Gloucester City school district would likely have delayed making playground, lighting and roofing repairs at its facilities, said school Superintendent Paul Spaventa.

"The projects would have gotten done, just not as expeditiously," said Spaventa, noting the district had unsuccessfully applied for more emergent projects. "We were told the state was looking for the most serious problems."

About half the projects will be overseen by the SDA. The rest will be managed by the individual school districts based on the projects' scope and complexity.

There won't be as many projects in future years, Hanover said. Now that a reserve fund for emergency health and safety issues is in place, problems will be evaluated and addressed on an ongoing basis with input from the education and community affairs departments, he said.