

Redefining Infrastructure: Schools in a Care Economy

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What is infrastructure and how should it be defined politically? This question is central to current debates about what infrastructure consists of and how it should be funded.

The traditional definition of infrastructure involves the repair or construction of transportation nodes such as bridges, highways, ports, airports, rail lines, and other roadways that transport people and goods. Typical definitions also include water systems and electric grids that require repair or upgrading as well as communication links such as high-speed broadband. Many of these physical improvements appear in both current Democratic and Republican infrastructure proposals, including the American Jobs Plan proposed by the Biden Administration.

The Biden Plan, in its initial release this past March, expands the typical definition. Biden's infrastructure plan includes a green energy and climate focus, such as building new charging stations for electric vehicles and expanding opportunities for solar and wind. The plan adds physical improvements for residential housing, commercial buildings, health and childcare facilities.

Beyond its physical infrastructure proposals, the Biden Plan notably highlights a social infrastructure approach it calls the "care economy." This new approach includes raising wages and benefits and creating new and better jobs for care workers and expanding opportunities to provide home and community-based care for those in need.

This care economy approach, we argue, needs to extend to what we call the "infrastructure of everyday life" by providing the goods and services necessary for human and ecological well-being. This includes foundational needs such as home care and housing, education, and health care. A care economy approach can influence and structure relationships, institutions, and workplaces, and can build on practices such as trust, connection, fairness, mutual aid, and empathy, among other community attributes. A care economy approach also involves addressing both physical and social infrastructure needs.

Schools are an important component of this care economy approach. During the pandemic, for example, many schools became critical infrastructure sites, providing food access and distribution, on-line support to students learning virtually, childcare, health and social service assistance, and vaccination sites. In New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and other communities in the US, efforts to relieve the pandemic's ravages relied on the existing community school networks that served as centers for family and community support and care. Community schools and their collaborating community-based organizations have been providing health services (including emergency care and dental and eye care); developing community gardens and farm-to-school provisions; and offering social and emotional supports such as counseling, restorative justice programs and varieties of adult education. The pandemic extended many of these essential care programs as schools became even more central to preserving and supporting local life.

Schools have always been centers of community and civic support in urban neighborhoods and suburban and rural settings. Whether as hubs of community gatherings for sports, arts, theatre and civic functions such as voting and forums to examine and debate critical local issues, schools have provided essential settings for convening and facilitating discussion and dialogue. As one result of their constant daytime and after-school use, schools also have increasing needs for physical infrastructure improvement. These needs include ensuring safe and working drinking water; providing air-conditioning for the hot summer months and effective heating for wintertime use; weatherizing facilities for increasing climate change-related events such as extreme heat or storm



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surges; keeping working bathrooms in good order; repairing existing foundations and building new educational and community facilities.

Linking schools to a care economy and integrating them into an infrastructure of daily life approach would not only generate much needed new support for schools, but could also reframe the infrastructure debate about how to effectively meet individual and community needs in our everyday lives.