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SCHOOL DEFECTS RAISE QUESTIONS

Critics push for changes at agency that oversees construction projects

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By Roger McCoy

WAVERLY, Ohio -- They called it a "dream campus" -- 112 acres featuring plazas, parkways and state-of-the-art classroom buildings.

Nine months after dedicating the \$48 million complex, officials of Waverly schools are grappling with uneven floors and various heating and cooling problems that have required more than \$160,000 in repairs.

At Adena schools, in Ross County, administrators are dealing with leaky roofs, cracked masonry and bumpy floors -- problems that appeared soon after they opened a new K-12 building in 2001.

Zane Trace High School in nearby Chillicothe is only 5 years old, but its roof leaks in numerous places. Although the district has spent \$200,000 to correct flaws, plastic buckets still hang from the rafters of the school's gymnasium.

"You'd think that with a facility 5 years old, you wouldn't have these problems. It's new," said Mike Kelly, building supervisor for Zane Trace schools. "If we've got the problems that we're having now, what's it going to be like 10 years down the road?"

Some advocacy groups say such problems raise doubts about the effectiveness of the Ohio School Facilities Commission, created in 1997 to provide funding, oversight and technical assistance to school districts embarking on construction or renovation projects. It has distributed more than \$3.5 billion.

Crystal Canan, the commission's interim director, said she thinks the agency has "accomplished the legacy of quality."

Canan pointed out that the commission has helped build or renovate more than 300 school buildings.

"To have no problems would be unusual," she said. "To have the limited number of problems that we have -- we're very proud."

The Northwestern Ohio Building and Construction Trades Council, which represents union workers, said the commission's record shouldn't instill pride.

The Toledo organization said it has documented problems at at least 30 projects overseen by the commission. Among them: leaky roofs and damaged floors at Frontier schools in southeastern Ohio and sewer lines that backed up into Gibsonburg High School in the northwestern part of the state.

Alan Adams, a council official, said the commission's desire to reduce costs has jeopardized construction standards. The absence of minimum training requirements makes it easy for contractors to use unskilled workers, he said.

"In the long run, it's going to cost taxpayers a lot more," said William L. Phillis, executive director of Ohio's Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding.

Phillis' group has called for a moratorium on projects overseen by the commission.

"The legislature ought to establish a joint select committee to hold hearings on just exactly what are the problems on these new facilities," he said.

The moratorium idea hasn't taken hold, but some Ohio lawmakers are starting to question the commission's performance.

"Some of the people who are putting the school buildings together are not qualified to do that," said state Rep. Jim Hughes, R-Columbus.

Hughes cited one commission report that noted some workers were installing school fixtures and equipment incorrectly, thereby voiding their warranties.

"That's where we should be going back to the builders and asking them to remedy the project," he said. "If not, we're using more taxpayer money to fix what

should have been done right in the first place."

Hughes said he has encouraged the commission to tighten its oversight.

"If not," he said, "I'm not ruling out any legislative remedies to do something, because I think this is just atrocious in terms of what has been happening."

State Rep. Jimmy Stewart, R-Athens, said construction problems have plagued many districts in his area, including Meigs, Morgan, Alexander and Fort Frye schools.

"At the end of the day, I am not interested in pointing a finger at anyone, but rather figuring out how this system can quickly be improved," Stewart said. "We must do so before we as a state build more schools with shoddy craftsmanship that wind up costing us millions more in repairs and renovations."

Canan said the commission is aware of such concerns. The agency, she said, is working to resolve any lingering problems with school projects it has overseen.

Nevertheless, Canan said, establishing minimum training requirements for school contractors would hurt Ohio taxpayers. The commission's current approach "keeps the bidder pool as large as it can be and gets the best product for the best price," she said.

Although Ohio law requires that every public project be awarded to the lowest responsible bidder, the commission evaluates that bidder to ensure that it has the expertise necessary "for that contract, for that project, for that district," she said.

"I think it's a flexible system that really works."