

Investing in California’s School Facilities

A Research Brief on How Local General Obligation Bonds Shape Student Outcomes

Prepared for the California School Facilities Research Institute

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School facilities represent one of the largest and most visible public investments in K-12 education. Funding for California’s school facilities comes from a mix of local revenue and state aid. Local revenue is generated primarily from local general obligation (GO) bonds and accounts for approximately 84% of facility funding in the state.¹ This means many major repairs and construction projects depend on whether local voters approve a facility bond, and whether districts can successfully access state matching dollars.

This funding structure creates substantial differences in school facility spending across the state. While local GO bonds are common across California, the ability to translate voter support into meaningful capital funding varies by local tax base strength and district characteristics. State support through the School Facility Program (SFP) can help offset these differences, but state facility funding is not always available on a predictable timeline; gaps between statewide bonds and delays in accessing matching funds can stall projects. Districts with limited administrative capacity also struggle to navigate state funding requirements, which often call for specialized expertise and staffing that smaller and rural districts may lack.²

Understanding whether school facility investments improve student outcomes is essential, given the differences in districts’ ability to raise and access local facility funding. This evidence can help policymakers and education stakeholders identify where state policies can be improved so districts have access to facility funding that meets their needs and does not depend on local wealth, geography, or district size. Yet, despite their central role in keeping classrooms cool, circulating clean air, and supporting modern learning standards, school facilities have historically received limited attention in education research and policy debates. This study aims to provide updated, California-specific evidence on the relationship between school facility investments and student outcomes in an effort to inform state and local policy debates.

About This Study

To study the effects of local GO bond elections in California, we compare districts where a school bond barely passed to districts where a bond barely failed between school year (SY) 2009-10 and SY18-19. When bond elections are decided by small margins, the districts that pass and fail look very similar. The analysis tracks what happens in the years following a bond election, recognizing that facility projects take time to plan and complete. This approach allowed us to assess not only whether bond passage leads to increased facility spending, but also whether those investments are followed by improvements in student learning.

¹ Mary Filardo, *2021 State of Our Schools: America’s PK-12 Public School Facilities 2021* (Washington, D.C.: 21st Century School Fund, 2021).

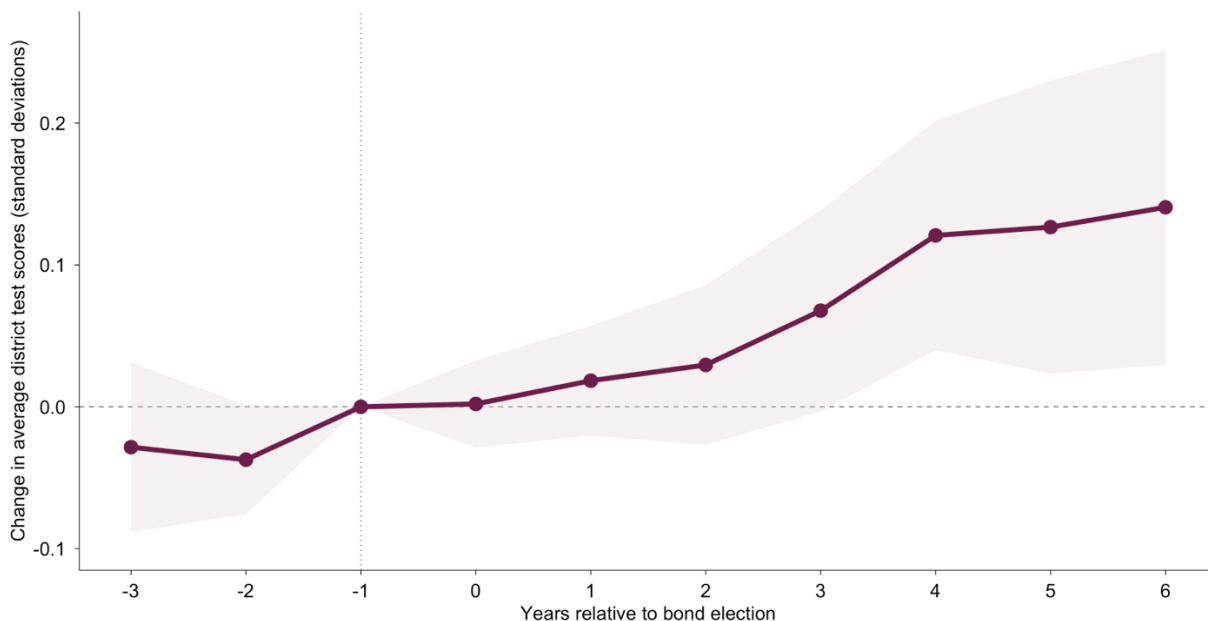
² California State Auditor, *School Facilities Program: California Needs Additional Funding and a More Equitable Approach for Modernizing Its School Facilities*, 2022.

Key Findings

This study produced **strong causal evidence that increased facility spending improves district test scores.**

- **Passing a GO bond is linked to higher test scores after a delay.** Districts that narrowly passed a GO bond experienced increases in average test scores four to six years after bond authorization, aligning with the time required to plan and complete capital construction projects (Figure 1). The gains are also largest in districts serving higher shares of low-income students, consistent with prior research.³
- **The size of the gains is meaningful.** The estimated test-score increases translate to roughly **three to four months of learning**, or approximately **60-70 instructional days**, compared with districts that did not pass a bond during the same period.

FIGURE 1. CHANGES IN DISTRICT TEST SCORES FOLLOWING LOCAL GO BOND PASSAGE, CALIFORNIA



Notes: This figure shows changes in average district test scores in mathematics and English language arts (pooled across grades 3-8) for districts that narrowly passed a bond relative to those that narrowly failed, compared to the year before the election. Effects are shown in standard deviation units, so differences can be interpreted as changes in average achievement relative to the statewide distribution. Points represent estimated effects, and shaded bands show 95% confidence intervals.

This study adds to a growing body of evidence in California that facility investments can support student learning, particularly in under-resourced districts.⁴ The final report outlines policy considerations – informed by this study’s findings and conversations with district leaders – for strengthening California’s facility funding system to promote greater adequacy and fairness in school infrastructure investments.

³ Barbara Biasi, Julien Lafortune, and David Schönholzer. “What Works and For Whom? Effectiveness and Efficiency of School Capital Investments Across the U.S.,” EdWorkingPaper 24-898, 2024.

⁴ Stephanie Riegg Cellini, Fernando Ferreira, & Jesse Rothstein, 2008, “The Value of School Facilities: Evidence from a Dynamic Regression Discontinuity Design,” NBER Working Paper 14516, 2008; Emily Rauscher, “Delayed Benefits: Effects of California School District Bond Elections on Achievement by Socioeconomic Status,” EdWorkingPaper 19-18, 2019.

About CSFRI

The California School Facilities Research Institute (CSFRI) is a 501(c)(3) that was established in 2016 to conduct and publish validated research to raise Californians' awareness of the positive impact quality school facilities have on student academic achievement and community success.

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people – especially those furthest from opportunity – achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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