TEXAS SCHOOLS AREN’T AVERAGE
The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts has published various reports about local debt in Texas. A major topic in all of these reports has been public education debt in Texas. In Your Money and Education Debt, the comptroller averages the cost and sizes of school buildings across the state, unfairly compares them to one another and later publicly claims “wasteful” spending by those districts that spent more per square foot than others. Since publishing the series of reports, the comptroller has sent out another request for information to school districts to collect more data about school construction costs for future reports.

“No Two Regions Were Created Equal (In Texas)”

When you lump together every school of any type that was built in a region on a given year, a pattern starts to emerge. For example, there is a noticeable difference in cost between regions, and Central Texas could be considered the most expensive region in which to build a school. In 2005, the average cost per square foot of schools in Central Texas was 5 percent more than in North Texas and 38 percent more than southeast Texas. In 2012, the average cost per square foot of schools in Central Texas was 6 percent more than in North Texas and 24 percent more than Southeast Texas.

Why would this cost difference between regions exist?

Explaining Texas

Texas is big... 268,820 square miles big – that’s approximately the size of France. It’s big enough to cover two time zones. It has 254 counties, 1,215 incorporated cities, 1,024 public school districts and 5,075,840 students enrolled in public schools. It also has 10 climate regions and 1,300 types of soils, which make up 21 major land resource areas. Climate and soil conditions are significant to a construction project because they have a direct impact on the building’s foundation, which subsequently affect the overall construction cost. The climate in which a project is built can also affect heating and cooling requirements for a building, which, once again, can cause an increase in cost.

Construction 101: Everything Costs Money

Every last nut and bolt of a building costs money, but there are integral parts of a building that cost a lot more than most people would think. When you think about the costs of maintaining and operating a facility for 40 to 50 years, it makes good financial sense for school districts to invest
in high quality, durable materials, even at a higher cost initially.

As an example, the type of foundation can significantly alter both the initial and long-term cost of a building. The cost difference between the most expensive foundation and the least expensive could be millions of dollars.

**The Community Rules**

The cost of construction takes into account more than just the cost of all of the parts combined. There are other factors, such as the way the project is managed, building codes as well as school district standards and input from the local community. All of these factors have a significant impact on a school building’s overall cost, on top of any regional issues or construction components.

Due to its sheer size and geographic location, Texas sees a variety of socio-cultural and socio-economic landscapes, which means local communities in Texas are very different from one to another. Acknowledging the differences between communities in Texas is extremely significant for any conversation regarding school buildings because it supports the following idea: in Texas, decisions regarding public education are made by local communities, and since local communities are all different, that means, decisions about educational programs and school buildings are going to vary considerably across the State of Texas.

**In Conclusion**

Averaging the cost of schools in Texas is ridiculous. School buildings are and should be unique because students have different ways of learning. Communities are different as well and may choose different ways to meet the unique needs of their students. Some communities will invest more up front to save costs later; others choose to save more up front and pay more to maintain the building over its lifecycle. Neither decision is bad. Neither decision is “wasteful.”

In Texas, it’s the local community that supports the local school district with their local tax dollars. That means, it’s their local decision to build whatever type of school facility they desire.

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**For Additional Information**

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