

THE MIAMI HERALD | EDITORIAL

Timing is crucial

OUR OPINION: Extending the construction bond for renovation of dilapidated schools is vital

With public schools about to open next week, the Miami-Dade School Board has before it a no-brainer of a plan to refurbish old schools, build some new wings where needed and close schools that are under capacity. Come November, county voters would get to decide if construction bonds that soon will expire should be extended for 30 more years.

This long-needed fix at minimal cost — about \$10 more a year on a typical, homesteaded \$158,000 house — comes at an ideal time.

With interest rates at historic lows, construction costs affordable and the county's longterm economic development plans smartly putting quality education front and center to attract and expand businesses, the timing is crucial. The state last week gave the nod for the \$1.2 billion bond issue, as the need is clear. When the school board meets Wednesday, it should approve the ballot language so that voters can decide on Nov. 2.

Consider: Half the county's schools are more than 40 years old — one-third are older than 50 years — and most classrooms still are operating with outdated projectors and no computers or Wi-Fi. Leaky roofs, moldy air-conditioning, stinky, pipe-exposed bathrooms and peeling paint are not selling points for executives looking to move their companies here.

The quality of school buildings does matter. They may not be the determining factor for whether a child learns, but surely the most dilapidated schools are a health and safety threat to students and teachers. And the lack of technology in many schools leaves a broad swath of students — particularly those in the urban core — without the tools they need to succeed.

That's no way to prepare today's generation for the jobs of the future, and it's no way to sell Miami to prospective businesses.

As detailed in the Beacon Council and Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's long-range economic development plan, One Community One Goal, the quality of education remains a critical issue. And as reported in The Herald's Crumbling Schools series earlier this year, the district faces almost \$2 billion in unmet construction needs and deferred maintenance.

Yet despite all the challenges of dwindling state dollars and a recession that plunged property values and reduced revenue to school districts, Miami-Dade schools are producing more graduates and showing increasing signs of student improvement on the FCAT and national tests.

Imagine how much more students would learn in a tech-savvy environment.

The \$1.2 billion plan presented by Superintendent Alberto Carvalho and supported by the district's business advisory council, which includes the region's top business leaders, would offer the most bang for the taxpayers' buck by extending the tax property owners already are paying under a 1988 construction bond issue that is set to expire in 2017. Some school board members say the state should just give the district more money for construction, but the reality is Tallahassee has yet to fully restore education funding to pre-recession levels.

By continuing the bond — instead of increasing, say, the sales tax by one penny or increasing the discretionary local schools property taxes — the district would deliver on long unmet needs at 280 of its almost 400 schools. If approved by voters, the first bond issue of \$200 million would create about 9,219 jobs over three years to fix 100 schools.

Mr. Carvalho has included checks and balances in the process, with a community advisory council (appointed by the board) to check on construction costs every step of the way. As it is, politics already has been removed from the bidding process and staff make those recommendations to the board.

In effect, every change order for any construction cost that goes up by more than 1 percent has to go before the school board for approval, and that keeps costs low.

The district has a long-term solution at very little cost to the taxpayers, and Mr. Carvalho has been a good steward of the public's money during the toughest economic climate Miami-Dade has ever faced. Let's not miss this opportunity.