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BLAGOJEVICH PRESSURED TO RELEASE PROMISED FUNDS

BY MATT ADRIAN, THE SOUTHERN SPRINGFIELD BUREAU

SPRINGFIELD - Lawmakers and school administrators have called on Gov. Rod Blagojevich to release more than \$148.5 million for school construction that was originally promised more than five years ago.

Blagojevich sparked controversy last week by promising \$1.9 million to repair aging parts of Carterville High School, while 24 other school districts deemed the neediest in 2001 still have not been helped.

"The governor is breaking a promise made by the state to the parents and to those school children. And, that is wrong," said state Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville. "Throwing the current list out the window to fund what he chooses is arrogant and irresponsible."

Some of the school districts have fronted the money to begin construction and are awaiting reimbursement from the state. Others are running up against deadlines to raise local money needed for the projects.

"The district will be back to square one to try and provide a facility for our students. In the meantime we are left with an old, outdated facility in which we try to prepare our students for the 21st Century," said Ruth Schneider,

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superintendent for the Stewardson Strasburg school district. The district is waiting for more than \$2 million.

The Blagojevich administration blasted Republican lawmakers, who organized the press conference, for repeatedly voting against a public works program it claims would have funded school construction.

"The hypocrisy is overwhelming," said Rebecca Rausch, a Blagojevich spokeswoman.

The governor's office plans to make funds available in the coming weeks for schools statewide to make needed repairs.

State school superintendent Randy Dunn will call on school districts next week to apply for the money. A newly formed panel would then decide which districts would get the cash.

"The governor's broader point is that there are needs that go far beyond these 24 school districts," Rausch said. "Those schools cannot be forgotten. Those schools have to be funded too."

The Rochester school district, which tops the priority list, has gone forward with its construction projects.

Rochester school superintendent Thomas Bertrand said: "I'm tired of promises. It's time to act."

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