

CA public schools not meeting seismic standards

Dan Noyes, KGO (San Francisco television), 4-8-11

Thousands of public schools around the state are not meeting mandated seismic standards. That is the finding of our media partner California Watch, the non-profit, bi-partisan project of the Center for Investigative Journalism. They sifted through documents provided by the Division of the State Architect (DSA) and found serious lapses that may put your kids in danger during a major temblor.

In the small coastal town of Pescadero, Bryan Burns has spent years trying to track down answers to find out whether his son's school would be safe in an earthquake.

"I've never done investigation work," said Burns. "I knew something wasn't right."

Because under a state law known as the Field Act, all school construction projects must be earthquake-resistant. The act was put into place after the devastating 1933 Long Beach earthquake; 70 schools collapsed and 120 people died. Yet, Burns and fellow resident Jeff Gananian found structural work at Pescadero High had been done without the state's approval.

"That's when the light bulb went on," said Gananian. "And we began to realize that there are potentially thousands and thousands of other projects."

And it turns out, they're right. A year-long California Watch investigation finds thousands of school construction projects completed statewide don't comply with the Field Act. California's DSA, the agency in charge of enforcing the law, has never approved those projects as safe.

"There's upwards to \$20,000 school projects that do not conform to these Field Act standards," said California Watch reporter Corey Johnson.

And not just in small districts like Pescadero. The Los Angeles Unified School District finished this new middle school just five years ago. Yet state records indicate that huge window walls, three stories high, may not be properly anchored and could pose a risk to students in a quake. When California watch reporters went to ask district officials for answers, they were asked to leave school property and escorted off campus.

"It's not a perfect system on any part," said DSA spokesman Eric Lamoureux.

DSA officials concede that thousands of school projects lack state certification, but Lamoureux claims most are simply missing paperwork.

"At this point, we don't believe that any of those projects pose a significant threat," he said.

But some experts, like earthquake engineer and consultant Peter Yanev, aren't convinced.

"Obviously the system is not doing what it's supposed to do," said Yanev.

Especially given this 2006 report where the DSA itself said some school projects were being completed without adequate testing and inspection, sometimes with "dangerous construction flaws."

"What that tells me is we're building schools in California that are not properly designed and checked in the field to make sure they're properly built," said Yanev. "That's a problem."

And worse, back in 2002, the DSA prepared a list of schools the state itself called "likely not to perform well" in an earthquake -- more than 7,500 additional buildings statewide. But nine years later? California Watch found most sit unrepaired.

Former state architect David Thorman says many of those schools need to be looked at right away.

"The priority has to be, the safety has to be, answering the questions that you're answering in terms of are the schools truly safe," said Thorman.

"I think we should be doing whatever we can to make sure that these rules and laws that were placed on the books are being enforced," said State Sen. Ellen Corbett when California Watch brought its findings to her. She chairs the earthquake and disaster preparedness committee. "We definitely need to ask some very tough questions and find out where the problems are and do something about it."

Corbett plans to call on hearings at the state capitol.