Grand jury to launch hearings on school construction program

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A state grand jury will begin investigating the Broward school district’s embattled construction program on April 24, said Assistant State Attorney John Countryman.

The long-expected hearings — which will not be public — will come in the middle of the district’s campaign to regain public confidence before asking voters to approve a bond issue for new schools in November.

But the announcement is a relief to School Board members who want the investigation and any resulting reforms to be ancient history by election day.

“It’s fine that they got to it,” School Board member Don Samuels said. “Let them get to it, get it done and get it over with.”

Countryman has said the grand jury does not plan to consider indictments, although he would not rule out the possibility if evidence supports a criminal case.

Instead, the grand jury would likely write a re-
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The investigation has focused in recent months on more than 50 schools, built from the same few architectural designs, which have similar defects.

The associate superintendent Ray de la Feuillieze have acknowledged mistakes were made, such as opening schools so quickly that no one knew whether the prototype designs were sound before they were used again.

But most of those problems have been corrected, he said.

De la Feuilliez said last month that he was frustrated that investigators had never asked for his side of the story.

The roots of the case stretch back to 1993 and 1994, when union leaders complained to Countryman's office about problems in the construction program.

Then, in early 1995, complaints by district employees and critics prompted the school system's internal investigators to begin a yearlong inquiry into allegations of mismanagement and corruption in the construction program.

The inquiry documented mismanagement that resulted in a 10-day suspension for the associate superintendent for construction. The results of that inquiry were turned over to Countryman.

But those interviewed by the state investigator also have been asked about a wide range of topics, including whether anyone benefited improperly from land purchases by the School Board.