

Keeping Students Safe Amidst Renovation All Around

School renovation when school's in session doesn't have to become a safety issue.

By Matt McGregor



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Creating a new school bus drop-off/pick-up area that is clearly outside of a construction zone is a key element of keeping children safe during a renovation project.

Renovating a school building while simultaneously educating the students safely is no small feat. But by focusing on communication, coordination, and teamwork, you'll meet your building goals and your education goals, and keep students, staff, and the community safe.

Keeping Communication Lines Open

Communication between the construction manager, the school district leaders, and the school administration is vital.

Before construction begins, create a safety management plan specific to the project and its site conditions. The plan should set forth the necessary policies and procedures to maximize the safety of those on site during construction. This includes school staff, students, visitors, and construction workers.

The safety management plan usually is developed jointly by the construction manager and the school district, and includes elements such as:

- **Construction Access Zones.** Set up areas of construction that are fenced and secured, where only trained construction personnel are allowed to enter.
- **Emergency Exit Routes.** Depending on the project, you may need to establish an emergency exit route through the construction access zone.
- **Site-Specific Safety Program.** Identify in advance how each task associated with the project will be performed safely to head off potential problems.
- **Safety Coordination Meetings.** Schedule weekly meetings of the construction management staff, subcontractors, and school and district representatives to review current construction as well as upcoming events.

- **Safety Director.** Designate a construction management staff member to be responsible for the overall safety of the job site. This person should be available at all hours to address concerns and questions.

The school/school district representatives and the project manager address specific site items such as traffic patterns, bus routes, pedestrian crossing areas, drop-off and pick-up areas, and playgrounds. It is wise to make the broader community aware of what's going on with the project as well. If they understand how traffic will be affected and what areas to avoid, safety will increase for everyone.

Coordinating People, Schedules, and Information

Coordinating construction without disrupting the learning taking place in the school requires precision and teamwork. The construction schedule must be carefully choreographed by the construction manager and the school district team. Thoughtful consideration of how the construction schedule affects the school schedule at the onset of the project provides ample time for necessary changes to schedules, procedures, and processes so neither construction nor education is inhibited.

The site plan should identify what areas of the building and the campus will be affected and when the various construction activities will take place. Don't be tempted to only discuss the construction; the visual tool of the site plan can spotlight areas that might be hazardous or troublesome.

When considering site issues, look at the surrounding area as well. How are the adjacent properties utilized? What unique circumstances might arise because of their usage? Are there traffic patterns (such as shift work) that

should be taken into account when considering traffic disruptions or detours?

The construction schedule must be carefully choreographed by the construction manager and the school district team.

Selecting staging areas that minimize conflict between construction traffic and parent and bus drop-off/pick-up is a key to safe and effective site circulation. Creative thinking can move the project forward with little disruption to staff and students.

Working as a Team

The combined knowledge of the construction manager, the school district leaders, and the various subcontractors promotes project success by integrating the various points of view. But, everyone must be on the same page—and that requires communication, coordination, diligence, and teamwork.

Regular, frequent coordination meetings between the construction manager and the school/school district are essential for evaluating progress, making changes, and looking ahead. These meetings improve synchronization and reduce risk.

If the project is small enough, most activities can be scheduled to take place during the summer—when the school is less occupied and access and hours of work can be expanded to accommodate subcontractors. If this isn't possible, it's important to minimize those times when subcontractors need access to the building and



Setting up areas of construction that are fenced off, secure, and only accessible by trained construction personnel is a critical component of any safety management plan.

work to coordinate all such requests through the contact at the school.

Safe Renovations in Wisconsin

The renovation/new construction project in the Berlin Area School District in Berlin, Wisconsin, included expansion of the district's elementary school, renovation at the high school, and the construction of a new middle school.

The new middle school, which will be attached to the existing high school, will provide the district with a 21st-century learning environment and operational efficiency, including shared areas of the high school, such as the cafeteria and elective classrooms and workshops spaces. At the elementary school, a kindergarten addition will allow programs such as speech therapy, guidance, and physical therapy to move into more appropriate rooms. Improvements to the elementary and high schools include creating secure day-time visitor entrances.

Safety elements of the renovation in Berlin include:

- The construction schedule and list of events to be tackled during the coming summer was provided in February. This allowed the school plenty of time to address items such as professional development events for teachers or camps for sports, band, drama, etc.
- The hospital across the street from the campus has a helipad. Additional consideration was given to ensure cranes and other equipment didn't interfere with the emergency vehicles or helicopter.
- Student access to busses was directly through a construction area. Gates and fencing were erected to get the students through the construction area and safely to the buses. In addition, 30-45 minute periods were established each morning and afternoon during which no trucks were allowed in the bus area.



Regular communication between district personnel and their construction manager can help ensure a safe and successful construction project.

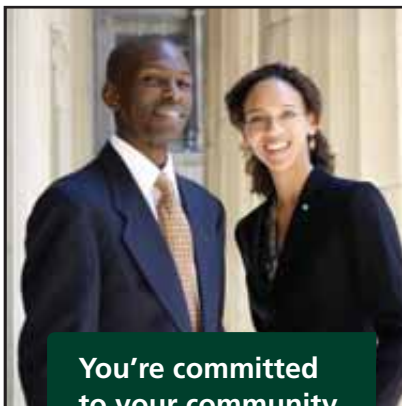
- The new middle school is being connected to the existing high school. The demolition areas where the connection is being made have temporary partitions. This keeps debris and dust out of the existing school area, while also keeping curious staff members and students out of the construction zone.

Keeping Everything on Track

Renovation projects can be exciting, but can also prove challenging. Construction personnel and

administrators must work together to ensure that noise, dust, and the disruptions/distractions to learning are minimal, and that the learning environment remains a safe one. With quality communication, coordination, and teamwork, you'll be well on your way to a successful renovation.

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