

School Facilities: More than Bricks and Mortar

Effective management of school facility construction, operation, and maintenance is critical to meeting district and community expectations.

By Al Ramirez



When you look at a school building, do you see more than red bricks and a flagpole? Do you see a community's pride and commitment? Do you see its optimism about the future?

There are an estimated 100,000 school buildings across the United States. They represent a tremendous investment by past generations and are a legacy that is passed down to future generations. Think about the last time you traveled to a city center in any large urban area or small town. How many times have you seen the old Central High School with its gothic columns and elaborate facade? Many such schools are approaching a century of service.

Today, we are in the midst of an enormous infrastructure crisis that includes everything from water and sewers to roads and bridges, pipelines, and power generation. Schools are very much a part of this crisis. A recent report by the 21st Century Fund (Filardo 2016)

estimates that our nation should be spending \$145 billion a year on new and current facilities in order to reach modern school building standards. However, we are investing on average \$99 billion each year for maintenance, operation, capital construction, and new facilities—an annual 32% funding gap. And the funding gap grows wider each year.

All schools and school districts are represented in those figures. Even school districts with new school buildings must budget for maintenance and operation. Many districts are, or will be, engaged in capital projects, whether for major repairs, remodeling, or new construction. This article offers suggestions on how to manage this important area of responsibility.

Strategic Planning and School Surveys

District leaders are obligated to see that plans for facilities and capital projects are developed, up-to-date, and implemented. A strategic plan serves as the

North Star by which everyone can orient themselves. A strategic plan

- Imagines a vision of the future to strive for.
- Involves all stakeholders in the process.
- Serves as the benchmark against which all policies and practices are measured.

Ideally, the school district should cycle through a strategic planning process that keeps the plan viable.

Although essential, strategic plans are not sufficient.

The school survey is a versatile tool and is especially valuable when making decisions about remodeling facilities and new construction. In his book, *Educational Facilities: Planning, Modernization, and Management*, Basil Castaldi highlights some of the key features of the school survey:

It is a rigorous and systematic process used to collect relevant, yet wide-ranging information, which in turn can be used for decision making. The school survey process has value before, during, and after school construction.

It can serve as a way to engage and inform stakeholders and should be shared with key groups and individuals. Many school boards or superintendents appoint a facilities committee composed of school district residents, businesspeople, faculty, and staff. This stakeholder group can be involved in the development of the survey and can receive information about its progress and results. They can then serve as informed community members who can help their friends, neighbors, and business acquaintances understand the school district's facility needs.

It facilitates clearer thinking between wants and needs and helps promote rational decision making. It can help minimize emotional appeals for certain features for a new facility to the detriment of essential features. Although you want broad involvement from residents and staff, it is important to avoid turning your school design process into a popularity contest built on personalities. Most participants will view the new school from their perspective and interests. The athletic boosters will advocate for spending on sports facilities, the music and drama supporters will have visions of Broadway theaters, and so on. The school survey will help bring all these important ideas about what your new school should look like down to earth and will help rank the most important features down to the desirable features.

It helps project building needs into the future. Understanding your current status and how facility needs were handled in the past will help you think about the future and may help you find opportunities and avoid problems. For example, many school districts have existed for more than a century. The survey will help them identify where all school district-owned land is located. Some land could be “found money” if it is now in a place that has commercial value and can no longer serve

ASBO BOOK SPOTLIGHT:

Financing Schools and Educational Programs: Policy, Practice, and Politics

By Al Ramirez

Looking for a comprehensive resource on K-12 school finance? *Financing Schools and Educational Programs: Policy, Practice, and Politics* provides a solid framework for understanding school finance in the United States. The book spans both the theoretical and practical aspects of school finance, including equity and adequacy in education finance, alternative funding systems, budgeting, facilities management, and future trends in school finance. Available from Rowman & Littlefield Education: rowman.com. ASBO members receive a 20% discount by using the promo code ASBO20 when ordering.

as a school site. On the other hand, if the survey projects residential growth in a part of the school district that has no school property, the district can buy land with some confidence that it will be needed in the future when the price will be higher.

It is comprehensive in scope. The school survey will cover myriad areas that should be considered in the planning, design, remodeling, and maintenance of educational facilities. With periodic updating, the information can serve the community and help the school district spend money for facilities wisely.

It can help form school district politics. As any school superintendent and school board member knows, rumors and misinformation are always swirling around the school district. The school survey—and the process for developing it—is a great antidote to the rumor mill because it collects data and lays out facts.

Because it is systematic and comprehensive, it provides information for many areas and contingencies. It is a source of answers for the public and the media at all stages of the process for a new school facility. It helps stakeholders identify needs, decide on a bond election, decide how much money is required, understand the impact on taxes, decide where and when a school is built, and figure out how to maintain the new facility.

Practical Information

In addition to the systemic thinking facilitated by the school survey, district leaders need to use some common sense and lessons learned from experience. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind as you undertake your capital projects (Ramirez 2012):

Be cautious about considering only the price tag when you hire a construction company to build a new school or other major project. In most states, applicable

statutory language about soliciting and awarding bids uses a phrase such as “lowest responsible bid.” Sometimes, low bids are just about getting the contract and then amending the price upward once work gets under way. You should be in good shape if you are big enough to have an in-house facilities expert with experience in construction bid contracts. But be sure to involve your architect as well. This is an area where several heads are better than one.

Expect pressure to use a local builder. Not only you but your board will feel pressure to use a local builder. The pressure to use a local builder will come from many sources and has many rationales: the taxes for the project are raised locally and should be spent locally; it will create local jobs; it will stimulate the local economy. Encourage the school board to consider this issue and how it will handle it early in the process.

Using a local builder is fine if the builder is capable of completing a quality facility on budget. But your high school should not be a practice run for some company that has never built anything larger than a tract home.

Recognize the importance of an experienced architect who specializes in schools. That person or firm has unique professional knowledge about the design and construction of school buildings and will understand and value your educational survey and other planning documents. The firm’s personnel will help evaluate the construction bids and bidders. They will help the school district make decisions about what the new school should be like and will make themselves available to listen to all stakeholders before preparing the final design.

Visit schools designed by the architect you plan to use. The same applies when you are considering a builder. Talk to the superintendent and other school district administrators. Also talk to current and former school board members. Ask them how they liked working with those professionals. Ask them whether they would hire those companies again. Ask the principal of the building about problems with the facility and whether there are design changes he or she wishes had been included in the original plans.

Be careful about building on the cheap. Consider more than just square feet per dollar. Your new building has a mission to fulfill and should be designed with that in mind. Generic egg crate designs often end up limiting curriculum or costing more for modifications years later. Cheap materials and equipment are cheap for a reason—usually because they need constant repair or replacement.

Appoint a site administrator with school experience at the grade level appropriate for the new school. Do so

at least six months before the intended opening, if not from the beginning. The site administrator will save you a lot of money and headaches. He or she should be at the construction site regularly. This is the person who will notice that the water fountains on the primary grade side of the building are set too high. This is the person who will point out that access to the safety shower in the chemistry lab should not be in the locked preparation room. This is the person who will insist that vehicle access and egress to the school be improved in anticipation of parental drop-off and pickup patterns or because school buses and private vehicles shouldn’t mix. This is the person who will know all these things because of his or her experience running a school.

Project into the future. Spend time thinking about what schools might be like years from now. For example, as personal computing advanced, new schools saw wiring for networking as the big need. Millions of dollars were spent adding this capability to new and old facilities. Soon after, Wi-Fi was developed, and that need disappeared. To the extent possible, build with change in mind.

Plan, plan, and plan again. Be especially careful about setting your opening date. Do not count on a tight time line between the date you get the certificate of occupancy and the opening of school. That is a gamble you shouldn’t take. The last thing you want is 500 children and staff members walking around a construction site.

Concluding Remarks

School administrators have a great responsibility to lead. They are professionals with the skills and knowledge appropriate to the job. That means they have the ability to properly manage the planning, design, remodeling, and maintenance of educational facilities. Effective management in this area is central to meeting community expectations about the good stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

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