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Declining Enrollment

Time to Rethink, Resize and Retool School Facilities

By William S. DeJong

Enrollment in most school districts across the country is declining. This change in enrollment, coupled with changes in program delivery, is causing district administrators to rethink, resize and retool their school facilities.

The enrollment decline is most acute in urban and rural districts, but it is also occurring in suburban districts. With the recent downturn of the housing market, rapidly growing suburbs are no longer experiencing the phenomenal growth of the past 15 years.

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Declining enrollment is certainly not an anomaly. The first significant decline occurred during the late 1960s and '70s, following the baby boom. This decline, along with economic conditions at the time, resulted in multiple school closures from 1975 through 1985.

When baby boomers began having children, the United States experienced an increase in enrollment. This increase, and an increasing number of

immigrant children, boosted enrollment in the late '80s. New elementary schools were built, followed by new secondary schools in the mid-'90s.

There is conflicting data about national enrollment figures. The National Center for Educational Statistics projects public elementary school enrollment will increase through 2017. The NCES also projects a 3 percent decline in public secondary school enrollment between 2006 and 2011 and then an increase through 2017. NCES expects enrollment in 2017 to be about 5 percent higher than in 2008.

However, a study conducted by the American Association of School Administrators shows a much different picture. A survey of 14,692 districts nationwide indicated that between 1999 and 2006, 3,780 districts experienced an enrollment increase, while 5,002 experienced a decrease.

Another factor that impacts enrollment at school districts is the increase of students attending charter schools. Charter schools play a very important role in the United States, but as more children attend them, enrollment in traditional public schools decreases.

School district demographic studies, recently completed by my firm reveal that the number of districts

that will experience declining enrollment in the next few years will increase substantially.

The current enrollment bubble is at the high school level and declining enrollment is already affecting the elementary level. This trend is occurring in most urban districts around the country, including Baltimore, Cleveland, Houston, and Washington.

Many districts are finding that

declining enrollment is paired with an increase in the number of students who

have special needs, economic disadvantages or language barriers. It is not uncommon for 30 or more languages to be spoken in these districts.

These factors are causing school districts to rethink their educational programs and their school facilities, especially those that are aging.

Simultaneously, districts are reviewing their educational strategies in response to No Child Left Behind, adequate yearly progress and the push to increase graduation rates. This is all compounded by tight operating budgets.

The simple answer calls for fewer schools or for school buildings that have been "right sized" or resized. For example, in some cases it may be more



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cost effective to renovate an existing school to accommodate the population from two existing schools. Or, it may make more sense to combine a low-enrollment elementary school with a low-enrollment middle school to create a K-8 school that can still serve the neighborhood.

Many of the existing school buildings also need to be retooled. Most of them were built in a different era when we didn't consider technology or energy conservation and had not yet heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Most of these buildings consist of rows of classrooms and a gym and/or a cafeteria. They lack areas for individual and small group instruction and project-based learning.

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There is a definite need to redefine facility adequacy. Even if a building is in satisfactory condition, it does not mean it can adequately deliver current and evolving educational programs.

The bottom line: There is a need to rethink, resize and retool school facilities, which means there is still a market for school construction. It's just not the same market as the past 20 years.

This market will likely involve more renovation than new construction. The good news is that school districts experiencing declining enrollment have an opportunity to create facilities that provide environments conducive to effective teaching and learning, now and into the future.

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