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State Assessments: Statewide Facility Assessments Provide Data Needed to Ensure No Child is Left Behind

Monday, February 7, 2005

In this age of "No Child Left Behind," more and more state education officials should consider this adage: "No Building Left Behind."

The condition of school facilities nationwide continues to worsen. The average public school is 42 years old, and many schools along the east coast were built more than 75 years ago. Some education advocates claim that approximately 3 million students attend public schools that require major renovation or replacement.

Several states have already conducted educational facility assessments to determine repair or renovation programs in their individual districts. Now they are in the process of ensuring that all education facilities are safe and provide an appropriate learning environment.

Why should a state conduct a statewide educational facility assessment?

The answer is simple: all children deserve the same educational opportunities statewide. A statewide facility assessment provides education officials with a comprehensive review of all educational facilities in order to develop a master plan to correct inequities. A master plan determines how many buildings are needed, which should be replaced, which should be renovated or modernized, which should be discontinued, and in what specific order that should be accomplished.

The statewide assessment also targets immediate building deficiencies and code issues, such as roofs, windows, mechanical, HVAC, and ADA. However, the intended outcome is to create desirable school environments that are conducive to efficient and effective learning, teaching, and community activities.

What benefits result from a statewide educational facility assessment?

With accountability at the top of the list, there are many rewards resulting from performing a statewide facility assessment. To start, it is a good-faith effort and demonstrates responsibility to the No Child Left Behind Act. Here are a few more benefits:

Budget. A statewide assessment helps government officials determine needs prior to the budgetary process. As legislators determine and develop policies, it is crucial that an overall budget number be available to determine the scope and extent of the problem. In addition, preliminary budgets can provide benchmarks regarding the scale of work that needs to be done.

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Prioritizing. A statewide educational facility assessment determines what districts have exceptional needs and require immediate attention. When officials at the Ohio School Facilities Commission (OSFC) conducted a facility assessment, they discovered that the River Valley High School in Marion, Ohio, had been built in 1963 on a U.S. Army Depot that contained harmful chemicals. Many graduates had been diagnosed with leukemia. As a result of the OSFC Exceptional Needs Program (ENP), a new high school was built on a safe farmland site in August 2003.

Enrollment projections. It's important to obtain enrollment figures within each district so budgets can be planned accordingly. The Arkansas Department of Public School Academic Facilities projected enrollment for the next 5-10 years in each district as part of its statewide assessment. This process enabled the planning team to project how much new square footage would need to be constructed over the next five years to accommodate growing districts within the state. This enrollment growth number can be factored into the decision-making process.

Conversely, enrollment projections become exceedingly important as more and more students leave traditional public schools. For instance, the median enrollment in charter schools has steadily increased (from 137 students in 1998-1999 to 190 students in 2001-2002). Each time students leave traditional schools to attend charter schools, the districts losing students also lose public funds, thus affecting the budgetary process. For example, in Cleveland, Ohio, each school district loses roughly \$5,000 every time a student leaves a traditional school to attend a charter school. Losing students not only impacts enrollment projections, but it also impacts the district's financial resources and its ability to ensure a safe, positive academic environment.

GIS. GIS is a collection of computer hardware, software, and geographic data that captures, stores, updates, analyzes, and displays all forms of geographic information. Some people refer to GIS as a "smart map" because it involves a mapping interface. Unlike a paper map that is one-dimensional, a GIS map is multi-dimensional because it combines many layers of information.

GIS is an incredible resource when state education officials want a comprehensive view statewide of all students, schools, district boundaries, and available land. For example, one of the most important pieces of GIS data that aids in educational facility planning is being able to "see" an entire school district. Each student in the district can be mapped by home address, grade level, ethnicity, socioeconomic level (reduced-price or free lunch) and education classification (regular-ed or special-ed). Multiple layers of information like this give state and district administrators the tools they need to "see" where facility needs are prevalent. In addition, this can help determine future enrollment, plan for special-education services, and compare districts across the state.

GIS also helps locate land for new facilities. Before GIS, school district administrators spent days searching for available and affordable land for a new school. They also spent weeks determining the student population in the vicinity of the property. Thanks to GIS, educational facility planners can show district administrators aerial photographs to determine suitable land for a new school, assess information about acreage and current appraised values of the land, and retrieve student population relative to the property – in a matter of seconds.

Department agencies work together effectively. Since several state agencies

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provide information during a statewide facility assessment, synergy begins to develop. In Ohio, the OSFC works closely with the state Department of Education to help districts solve facility issues. For example, the OSFC offers advice on enrollment figures within a district's master plan while the Department of Education offers advice on specific educational needs of students.

Management of information: During the Arkansas statewide facility assessment, one database was used to store all the assessment information and building specifics. The Assessment Program for Performance Learning Environments (APPLE) allowed the state to store and analyze, through report generation, information regarding 80 million square feet maintained within 6,600 buildings and 1,200 campuses of the state's 254 school districts. In addition, a web-based application was developed allowing the public access to building condition costs, enrollment projections, and baseline district information. For more information or to view reports, go to www.arkansasfacilities.com

Birth of a new agency to focus on educational facilities. Although this sounds like it might generate more red tape, it generates much less. In Ohio and Arkansas, the school facility entities, created in conjunction with the statewide facility assessment, are able to handle all facility issues in a comprehensive manner, rather than different departments handling different sections. The process becomes efficient and effective and goes a long way to ensure no child is left behind.

Tracy Healy, REFP, is a founding member and vice president of DeJONG. With experience in city and regional planning, a master's degree in English, and time spent teaching in the classroom, Tracy combines her 14 years of experience with her desire to enhance learning environments for students around the world.

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