

URBAN SCHOOL FACILITIES

Because of aging school buildings, changes in educational programming and shifting demographics, the entire urban school facility inventory in America needs to be modernized.

It has only been in recent years that there is the realization that something significant needs to be done to address the mammoth urban school facility issue, let alone the issue of urban education.

We have already seen that the cost to address this issue, for many, is beyond comprehension. From our own experiences, it is evident that in cities like Cleveland, Dallas and Washington D.C., the cost is well over a billion dollars in each situation. And for smaller urban areas like Charleston, S.C.; Richmond, Va.; and Toledo, Ohio, the costs can range from \$500 million to \$1 billion dollars.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are roughly 16,992 public school districts in the U.S., serving nearly 48 million students. Of these, approximately 332 are considered "urban" school districts serving more than 17 million students. Approximately two percent of the school districts have more than one-third of the students.

The United States Department of Education defines urban school districts as "one in which 75 percent or more of the households served are in the central city of a metropolitan area." For purposes of this article, this definition has been expanded to include the following: in student enrollments of 20,000 or more, 51 percent or more of the student enrollment is an ethnic minority; high percentages of low-income households and districts located in or on the fringes of older cities.

Typical challenges associated with urban school districts include: low academic achievement; invasive politics; financial crisis and limited funds; and education impacted by crime, drugs, vandalism, teen pregnancy and gang violence. Additional problems may include a rapid turnover in administrators; conflicts with teachers' unions; disengaged or angry parents; and apathy, if not outright antagonism, from state lawmakers.

The achievement gap is alarming for urban school districts. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 60 percent of urban children are not meeting minimum academic standards. More than half of fourth and eighth graders fail to reach the most minimal standard on national tests in reading, math and science. At the high school

level, slightly more than half of urban students fail to graduate in four years.


In October 1998, the U.S. Department of Education and Justice issued a report on school safety. During 1996, students were the victims of approximately 3,000,000 thefts or violent crimes at school. On average, for each year from 1992 to 1996, there were 123,800 violent crimes against teachers and 192,400 thefts from teachers at school. Every hour, on school grounds, more than 2,000 students and 40 teachers are physically attacked. In 1996, five percent of all twelfth graders reported that they had been injured with a weapon during the past 12 months while they were at school. An additional 12 percent reported they had been injured on purpose without a weapon.

Statistics need to be challenged. Contrary to what is read in the media, by interviewing students, we have also found schools are one of the safest places in America. Often we find the issue more associated with traveling to and from school or in students' homes and neighborhoods than in the school itself.

A huge challenge facing urban school districts is concentrated poverty. The most recent evidence comes from the "Prospects" report, a congressionally mandated, four-year study of about 27,000 students under Title I. The report concluded that "school poverty depresses the scores of all students in schools where at least half of the students are eligible for subsidized lunch and seriously depresses the scores when more than 75 percent of students live in low-income households."

In urban districts, school buildings are old and programmatically inadequate. Even though the task of modernizing the facility is daunting, there are a few essentials that characterize the successful development and implementation of an educational facility plan. These include a shared vision, agreed upon process, external consultant leadership, internal capacities to plan and deliver, adequate funding and broad-based community involvement.

In subsequent issues, we will be exploring what works in urban school planning, design and construction. The next generation of school children is far too important and valuable to be forced into learning environments that are neither conducive nor appropriate for teaching.

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PLANNING REQUIRES COOPERATION

Planning and building urban school facilities is an enormous task that requires a lot of coordination among various district and nondistrict officials. The simple task of compiling assessment data and demographics can be daunting, let alone dealing with big picture items such as land acquisition, funding and educational programming.

District leadership undertakes many of these tasks. However, leadership is constantly changing. Urban districts have historically experienced rapid turnover of superintendents and key administrative positions, including administrators in charge of school facility improvement programs.

To develop and implement a plan to modernize an urban school district facility inventory requires leadership continuity, shared vision and collaborative planning. An analogy would be the planning and building of an expressway. The cooperation of many agencies, community members and government leaders is required. Once the plan is developed, it may take five to 10 years to build the expressway. Therefore, changes in direction cannot be made every year. Likewise, in school facilities planning efforts, a shared vision, an agreed upon plan and leadership continuity are critical to improving a school district's facility inventory.

Shared Vision

There needs to be a shared vision toward the development of a new generation of school facilities in urban communities. The leadership of a city must own the vision. The leadership not only includes the school board and superintendent but also the mayor, city manager, city council, business and other community leaders. Leadership doesn't need to address the nuts and bolts of the planning and construction, but needs to own and sustain the vision. At the highest district and community level, a leadership group needs to be formed to ensure that the vision is followed. Members of the group leadership may change, but collectively, the group should carry the vision and provide the overall continuity.

Establish Educational Facilities as a Priority. Because of the complexities of an urban district, there are many competing agendas. District officials often move from one crisis situation to another. These may involve academic achievement, finances, personnel and lawsuits. In order to be successful, an urban district needs to have a sustainable commitment to its educational facility modernization effort. This commitment includes development of structures that provide opportuni-

ty for and involvement of all stakeholders in the planning and decision-making processes.

Commitment from the Media. The media need to be brought into the process early as collaborative partners. They need to buy into and support the overall effort.

Agreed Upon Process: Collaboration

At the outset, the planning process and district vision need to be one that all participants, especially boards of education and superintendents, agree upon and support.

Horizontal Planning Process: The planning process should not be top-down or bottom-up, but rather an inclusive one which simultaneously involves all aspects of the school community and the community-at-large. The horizontal planning process recognizes the value of input at all levels and seeks to involve all aspects of the school community and the community-at-large. The horizontal planning process' impetus is inclusion.

Break the District Into Planning Areas: A successful educational facility plan in a large urban school district cannot be developed from the district level or from the individual school level. A districtwide look will not adequately address each individual area. At the same time, developing the plan based on the needs of each individual building will not address how neighboring buildings impact each other. Large school districts should be divided into manageable areas with plans simultaneously developed by area. Area plans should then be consolidated into an overall districtwide educational facility plan.

Community Involvement: A genuine commitment to broad-based community involvement is integral to a successful educational facility planning process. Structured activities at critical junctures provide community participants with true involvement in the decision-making process. Trust will be developed and community support gained.

The process to modernize urban school facilities is a tough business. New structures and systems that result in leadership continuity throughout the project, shared vision among all stakeholders and community participation are critical for the successful modernization of urban school facilities.

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CONSULTANT LEADERSHIP

During the past 30 years, there has been a major shift in large school districts from staffing internally to outsourcing. Based on the magnitude of the facility issues in large districts, numerous consultants are being hired to perform a wide variety of tasks. In some cases, it is too many consultants; in others cases, not enough; and yet in other situations, they are being hired for the wrong scope of services.

In developing overall facility master plans, we have found it effective when one highly qualified consultant is given the authority to facilitate the overall plan. This is not to say there shouldn't be a "team" approach, but the team needs a single leader.

The consultant should be a person outside the district with the authority to cross political and bureaucratic lines; engage the superintendent, board of education, city council and district staff; and have authority to convene meetings when necessary. In addition, the outside consultant needs to be given the responsibility and the authority to lead the facility planning effort and do all that is necessary to ensure the creation of a viable and credible plan.

The consultant should report to the school district's person in-charge of school facilities. It is critical that the consultant help position the organization and help empower the persons responsible for facilities to do their job. However, if this consultant is going to be effective, there should be no issue associated with her/him having direct and open lines of communication with the superintendent, school board members or other political leaders in the community. To cut through the bureaucracy, this person also needs to be given immediate access to all data, personnel or anything else needed.

Qualifications

Consultants should know the appropriate processes and tools of their trade. They should have extensive experience and proven track records in working with large districts. They should be the best of the best. Urban school districts are not the place to break in new consultants. These districts are far more complex than smaller suburban or rural districts. The reality is that there are few really good people that know school facilities, especially the school facility issues in large districts.

Ethics and Integrity

Consultants should maintain the highest ethical and moral standards possible. Maintaining honesty in consulting practices and providing quality work should be standard operating procedure. Fees should be the same as those charged in nonurban

districts. Selection of consultants should be handled in the most open and public manner possible. All federal, state and local laws should be respected.

Clarification Among Consultants

Currently, there is a great deal of confusion regarding the roles and functions of consultants, resulting in a lack of leadership, a redundancy of efforts and extra cost. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined, and leadership should be determined by function. During the planning phase, planners should lead. During the design phase, architects should lead. During the construction phase, construction managers should lead. This form of operation continues through all other aspects of a project. The key is having the appropriate professionals providing their expertise toward the completion of a project. This would eliminate competing interests and could contribute to cost savings and timely completion of projects.

We need to be clearer about roles and functions, and discontinue attempts for firms to be all things to all people. We also need to discontinue the practice of forming teams for marketing purposes only.

New Form of Service Delivery

To be successful, urban districts will need different forms of service delivery. Many of the systems for smaller districts, or even the CM/PM arrangement borrowed from the private sector, are not overly effective for urban schools. New systems need to be developed. These could be in-house mechanisms forming new construction authorities or more private initiatives.

Inclusive Participation

Deliberate efforts should be made to actively recruit and involve ethnic minorities in all aspects of the development of an educational facility plan, as well as implementation activities. Urban districts have predominately ethnic minority populations. Consulting firms typically have few minority staff and owners. This issue needs to be addressed.

Consultants are an important component of urban school facilities. Many large districts have limited internal capacity to plan and deliver projects; this will be the topic of the August column.

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URBAN SCHOOL FACILITIES: THE NEED TO EXPAND INTERNAL CAPACITY

Urban school districts embarking on large-scale rebuilding programs are often asked about the depth of their internal capacity. Internal capacity refers to the amount of human resources that a school district has available to plan and implement a construction program.

As urban districts try to jump start large-scale school rebuilding programs, they are finding themselves in a dilemma of whether to hire additional staff or to outsource. For urban districts to successfully implement a large-scale building program, they should consider doing both: increase the capacity within their district and outsource as needed. Where the critical balance lies, is open to debate.

Planning: Planning is an ongoing activity. Even if the district hires external planners, it should consider expanding capacity internally. External planning consulting firms can help develop the overall master plan and address many issues. However, as projects are implemented, these studies need to be continually updated. Large districts need internal demographers, planners and educational specialists.

Design: Designing schools should be outsourced. However, large districts need some level of internal design capacity. Even if a construction or program manager were used, the owner needs to be directly represented in the design process to review and approve designs.

Construction Management: Most urban school districts have chosen the route of external construction management and/or program management. Even though this has proved to be an effective process, it does not eliminate the need for internal capacity. The district will still need to select the external firm and monitor its progress.

Maintenance & Operations: Often overlooked is the need to maintain school facilities. If districts are going to make large-scale investments in building renewal or replacement, they need to make a commitment to ensure ongoing maintenance. Even though much of this can be contracted externally, in most cases, there should be a commitment to hiring the personnel needed to adequately maintain the school facilities.

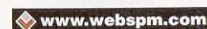
Curriculum & Instruction: The reason for rebuilding urban schools is not only to provide a building that has improved physical conditions, but to also meet the educational needs of the students. Even though the district can hire external curriculum consultants, internal personnel need to be assigned to the building program to provide the educational insight needed.

Empowering Staff: One of the largest pitfalls in urban school districts is not giving the staff the authority to make decisions. This lack of authority is problematic. In the scope of a project, delayed decisions result in cost overruns. It is imperative that staff have the authority to make decisions and that the decision making process is clearly defined.

Communication Structures: Communication among staff, board members, politicians and community members in urban districts is often lacking or inadequate. Effective communication structures need to be developed and actualized at the outset to ensure that the process continues to move forward, and that the school community and the community at large are aware of planning and implementation activities.

Ability to Pay Bills: The school district needs to have appropriate procurement mechanisms in place. Often, urban districts have insufficient staffs to manage the accounting associated with massive rebuilding programs. It may be necessary that an external agency partners with a district or a separate staff be designated to handle the accounting associated with a rebuilding program.

Are we ready to rebuild our urban schools? If so, we need to be ready to make the staffing commitments needed to expand the internal capacity and be willing to empower them to make decisions!

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