

Visioning Improves Educational Facilities for Large School Districts

By Troy Glover

The author comments that an educational facility vision is an important step in moving the facilities agenda forward in large school districts. In a slow economy, it is paramount that large school districts develop a vision that reorganizes school facilities and serves as an impetus for modernization.

For many Americans, large school districts conjure grim images: too many school buildings to maintain; an inability to address the educational needs of diverse student populations; lack of parental involvement; low academic achievement of students; safety issues; bureaucracy/red tape; and so on. For people closer to the daily operation of large school districts, the image is quite opposite: administrators working hard to establish a vision for their district; staff diligently trying to maintain schools in good working condition with limited resources; and caring teachers and principals who believe their students can achieve academic success.

Despite long hours and tireless efforts devoted to improving educational facilities, large school districts are still faced with competing interests and limited resources, which makes the crucial decision-making process more difficult. A new educational vision is needed and required to move the facilities agenda forward in large school districts.

A prescription for establishing a new educational facility vision for large school districts is far too great to be developed by one or even a few people. This task calls for the collective thinking of individuals

and organizations with vested interests within the district. One way to achieve this is by gathering input through an all-day visioning conference, which includes presentations and group work sessions. Presentations are made on a new generation of schools, trends impacting educational facilities, and schools of the 21st century (and beyond)—all of which focus on providing information on best practices and trends in education, as well as examples of current collaborative efforts nationwide. Following each presentation, corresponding questions are asked of attendees. Stakeholders and participants include board of education members, school district administrators, elected governmental officials, teachers, parents, students, businesses, and community/civic organizations.

Based on visioning conferences held with large school districts in different parts of the United States, several recurring themes have emerged relative to mapping a course for improving school facilities. These plans, though not unique, have been and are currently being implemented in school districts throughout the country. A new vision for large school districts

can be established by utilizing and capitalizing on available resources and assets by:

- Developing smaller school facilities and multiplexing schools
- Instituting new academic standards and accountability measures
- Compartmentalizing large school districts
- Allowing for joint use of school facilities
- Establishing district partnerships with area businesses and higher education institutions

Developing Smaller School Facilities and Multiplexing Schools

Research shows that smaller schools lead to higher academic achievement, fewer discipline problems, and safer environments because teachers and students know each other well. Since it is more costly to maintain small schools, districts should explore the possibility of multiplexing, which means locating more than one school in a facility. Multiple schools within a single facility can operate independently of each other since each school is housed

on a single floor or wing of a building. An example of multiplexing is the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City, where several high schools share space with an elementary school and an early childhood program.

Instituting New Academic Standards and Accountability Measures

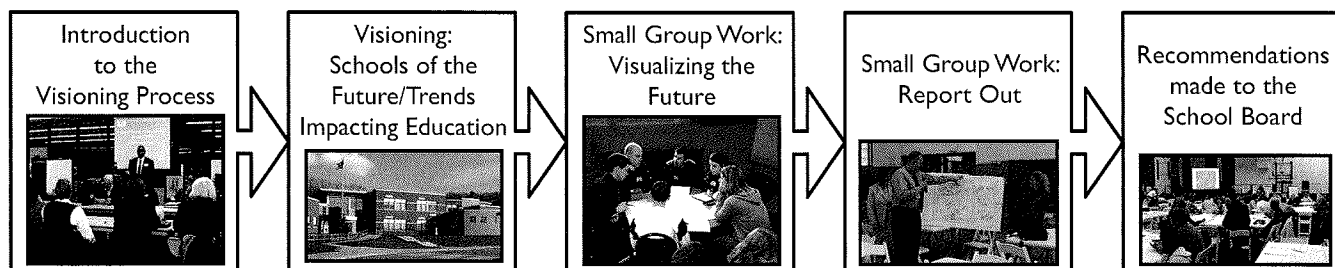
In an effort to equalize educational opportunities for all students, the federal government's No Child Left Behind legislation promulgates guidelines for failing schools and affords students the right to transfer to non-failing schools. Other educational standards and proficiencies have been established at the federal level, while standardized tests to determine core competencies in English, Math, and reading have been established at the state level.

grapple with problems of increasing academic standards, student behavior, safety issues, and building repair work. To compound these problems, they must abide by reporting and testing requirements mandated by federal and state agencies, as well as respond to advocacy groups lobbying for school improvements and increased programming. This becomes an overwhelming situation, and prioritizing items becomes very difficult.

In facility planning, one approach to compartmentalizing large school districts is to break them up into smaller components called sub-districts. Each sub-district has a manageable number of school buildings, and each school is responsible for developing and maintaining its own budget. This

to dedicated or shared space within a school facility. For example, a social service agency might inhabit dedicated space leased by a school. Shared use also can involve before and after-school childcare and recreational space.

One benefit to schools is that these leased spaces are sometimes upgraded by the lessee to accommodate increased use. This occurred in Montgomery Public Schools, where the city government built gymnasiums for school use by day and for community use in the evening and weekends. Another example is in Dearborn, Michigan, where schools share space with the Henry Ford Museum. The result is cost savings for school districts and optimum use of available land in developed cities.



School districts employ various strategies and approaches to develop new academic standards and accountability measures for students and teachers. One method is developing a standardized curriculum (grade and subject specific) that is aligned to standards and benchmarks on the state's tests. This is a good way to determine if teachers provide appropriate instruction and whether students comprehend what is taught.

Compartmentalizing Large School Districts

It is generally agreed upon by educators, consultants, and the community that a new approach is required to effectively manage and operate large school districts. Each day, administrators and teachers

approach helps administrators in each sub-district establish operating efficiency, as well as prioritize school facility issues (which schools to build new, renovate, or consolidate). Defined by geography, census tracks, and neighborhoods, sub-districts also better serve the needs of students and staff. Each includes board representation, administrators, teachers, and support staff. Simply put, sub-districts have all the components and aspects of a school district to ensure orderly and efficient management of administrative, academic, and facility functions.

Allowing for Joint Use of School Facilities

Most school districts have some form of joint use, which refers

Establishing District Partnerships

Many districts have a history of collaborative arrangements involving the schools and the community in which they are located. More district officials should consider expanding such opportunities for academic, social, medical, and recreational services. For example, the Arizona Agribusiness and Equine Center, Inc., in partnership with Maricopa Community Colleges, is a multi-campus, independent high school district in Phoenix. Each campus offers a rigorous college preparatory curriculum and enables qualified secondary students to earn college-transferable credits while completing work for their high school diplomas.

District administrators in Mason, Ohio, have established sev-

eral community partnerships. For example, high school students serve as interns at a bank that was actually built on school grounds. Not only does the bank provide convenient access to teachers and students, but it also gives students real-world, working experience. When the district partnered with Middletown Regional Hospital, the high school gained a full-time trainer free of charge, and the hospital gained a new target market.

Next Steps

The time is right for large districts to develop a vision that reflects a new paradigm and bold approach for reorganizing school facilities and that serves as an impetus for educational modernization. This is particularly true given current economic conditions. The slowing economy has impacted school districts in multiple ways:

- Revenue has decreased because of foreclosures and tax delinquency
- Assessed valuation has decreased as well
- State money earmarked for education is stagnant
- District expenditures have increased:
 - o Fuel prices for school buses and other vehicles
 - o Natural gas to heat buildings
 - o Health insurance

Based on these factors, one district in California is projected to lose \$56 million from its budget for the 2008-09 school year, while another district located in Ohio was forced to cut \$13 million in 2007. This is not the time to decrease budgets.

Stakeholders should form alliances quickly to address the challenges before problems become insurmountable. However, it is important to remember there is no room for turf issues. Solutions are needed now for issues that have been around far too long. To paraphrase a familiar saying, it takes a village to adequately establish and maintain a new vision for large school districts. ■

Troy Glover, REFP, joined DeJONG in 1998. With a master's degree in city and regional planning, he is experienced in working in urban environments, facilitating community meetings, and building consensus. Troy has directed projects across the country, including ones in Arizona, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, South Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. In addition, Troy is treasurer of the Midwest/Great Lakes Region of the Council of Educational Facility Planners, International.