

Building for the Future

A strong facilities plan considers many variables. Are you asking—and answering—the right questions when developing your road map for the school of tomorrow?

uturists would have us believe there will be no school buildings within the next 50 years. Facilities planners are talking about wireless schools and schools without books, paper, or even walls.

That might not be the case, but there's no question that student learning methods are shaping design trends. Too often, today's schools are built without consideration for growth and change of curriculum development



or instructional design. Tomorrow's schools must be adapted to meet individual learning levels.

As you might expect, this raises significant questions for board members and administrators who are in charge of building the "perfect school." Among them: How are emerging educational practices affecting the way we think about school construction? How is the demographic composition of our community changing the way education should be delivered? What are taxpayers willing to support? And finally, how can education be delivered in a more efficient, effective manner?

The good news is that, with today's construction and mechanical capabilities, there is no limit to the adaptability of school facilities. But any facilities plan worth its weight must answer these questions-and ask some more.

More than a partnership

Beyond bricks and mortar, a school construction project is more than a simple partnership. On one side, you have the school district with its culture, climate, organizational behaviors, curriculum designs, and instructional delivery systems. On the other, you have the architectural and design firm with specialized skills that can transform an institution's visions and missions into reality.

They meet, they negotiate, and they finally agree on a plan of action. If the process works correctly, administrators and staff take a leadership role in the planning process from the beginning. The architect must consider each school's unique needs; a one-size-fitsall concept will not work.

As strange as it may seem, problems occur often. Usually it's when the district's leadership team doesn't really know what they want and have selected the architect based on a visit to a school in another district. The building might be terrific for that district, but not yours.

Remember: The architects are not there to build a monument to themselves or to showcase their abilities to create a beautiful edifice but to provide a design that carries out the function and purpose of the education programming of the school district.

One often-overlooked aspect of school design is the community's role. The school of the future likely will serve the educational needs of the private and public sector, as well as provide continuing education for adult learners. Are you taking these considerations into account?

Different districts have different needs and desires. A small rural school district building its first new school in many years will have expectations quite different than the large city system spending millions of dollars every year on remodeling, upgrading, and construction.

Variables to consider

What are some of the many variables that your facilities planning team and the architect's planning and design team need to consider?

- Grade span: One of tomorrow's trends emerging today is that of lifelong learning. Elementary schools should address the needs of a student population that can start as early as age 3 and go up to age 13 or 14. Middle-grades facilities should be prepared to handle students from 10 to 15 years of age. And high schools should be able to facilitate programs for students from age 12 to adult.
- Inclusion: Done properly for and with all students in mind, inclusion programs can solve the need for special programs and facilities that serve students with disabilities. Will your facility be inclusion friendly?
- Non-graded education: Once out of fashion and even disparaged, nongraded groupings for primary and sometimes upper-elementary students once again are being studied and implemented in many schools across the U.S. Non-graded education is the practice of grouping different age and ability levels together in the same classroom, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by grade designations.
- Instructional design: Schools operate under a myriad of instructional

theories. Have you spent time discussing how learning should be designed and whether your facility will enhance your programs? Do you have areas for small group meetings and large group presentations?

■ Community integration: Often, a new school has an impact on traffic patterns and pedestrian walkways. Safeguards such as stop signs and signals likely will be required. Will the final site plan be compatible, pleasing, and a good neighbor to the surrounding community?

Looking ahead

The school of the future, at its best, will be a place where thinking, learning, and creativity can thrive. But that provides special challenges to planners and designers. How do you utilize the rapidly changing technology available today? And how do you build the facility with the flexibility and forethought to deal with newly created curriculum designs and instructional techniques?

Tomorrow's school will not be highly regimented, with rows of identical classrooms, stereotypical classroom organization of grades, and pupil assignments reflecting solely their age. By analyzing class scheduling, curricu-

lum changes, teaching methods, and enrollment fluctuations, schools can manage classrooms for optimal efficiency and varied usage.

Are new buildings necessary to provide new programs, learning experiences, and utilization of modern technology? Some argue that old buildings cannot be remodeled successfully because of the technology demands, while others say that a skillful internal redesign of facilities can often work with classic buildings.

Most of all, remember that competition is a fact of life. Communities demand quality schools and compete with one another in the race for various quality-of-life factors. Business leaders recognize the value of good schools and good school facilities, and people are becoming more sensitive to that need as time goes on. The prospects for new and better facilities and programs are bright, but thoughtful planning and good design will be the keys to success.

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