

*You must consider a number of factors when determining whether a building can or should be reused as a school facility*



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# Fix or Flatten?

Chances are that a school in your district is underperforming.

Not the students, but the school itself. And in the long run, that's not good for your students either.

A link has been drawn between adequate facilities and the quality of education, absenteeism, morale, productivity, attrition, and student health. But even though about \$50 billion is spent annually on facility acquisition and construction, many of our nation's 97,000 public elementary and secondary schools need everything from minor upgrades to major overhauls.

A subpar school can jeopardize your students' academic performance as well as their health and ability to participate in activities. A highly functional school, on the other hand, allows both educational and administrative functions to perform at their peak while offering a stimulating environment for students. To do this, computer labs, libraries, special education classrooms, gyms and fitness areas, indoor air quality, lighting, security, and other facets of today's academic environments must be sufficient and effective.

Evaluate your schools throughout their life cycles to determine when and where adjustments need to be made. How a building functions today and how it will meet the needs of future generations should be considered at the forefront of any renovation or new construction project. You should also

engage an architect and/or an engineering firm to spearhead the assessment process and provide a proper evaluation of the building and its physical condition.

The building renewal process is ripe with challenges for a school board, the community, faculty and staff, parents, and students. You must consider a number of factors when determining whether a building can or should be reused as an educational facility. But, if handled properly, the process also is a remarkable opportunity for change and rejuvenation.

## **Evaluate and plan**

It is vital to evaluate a school's physical condition and understand the educational and space requirements before deciding whether to rehabilitate or demolish a building. In some cases, new construction is the most viable option, yet in many instances renovating or adding to a current facility is the best approach from both cost and environmental perspectives.

In many cases, decisions are made based on cost and the building's historical significance. On average, to be economically viable, renovation costs need to be less than 70 percent of new construction.

Several years ago, my firm worked on the renovation and conversion of what is now the Peoria Elementary School, in

Aurora, Colo. Constructed in the 1950s, the facility started as an elementary school, but was converted into an alternative high school. Our challenge was to convert it back.

The master planning process often involves members from the community, district staff, teachers and administrators, students, and the design team. The school's overall objectives should be at the forefront, with an inventory of items that are inadequate or insufficient to meet the facility's current needs. A district may choose to create a wish list of items to fuel the design process.

In Peoria, our team's goal was to identify how to take advantage of the existing building with thoughtful additions to the programmatic needs. We developed an advisory group with the district's facilities staff and school principals to help us in the process.

In the building renewal process, an architect reviews every space for adequate requirements, including size, location in the school, and relationship to other areas of the facility. Amenities, such as adequate storage and technology, are considered along with the school's structural, mechanical, plumbing, electrical, and fire protection systems. A consultant also determines whether updates are needed to comply with local and state building codes and the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

Building renewal assessments also look at the school's indoor air quality and security challenges. Site issues, including parking, drop-off, delivery, and play fields, will be considered, as will the condition of interior and exterior materials. In Peoria, for example, we decided to construct a new entry for the school, which is adjacent to a high school and located on a high-traffic street, and reconfigure the site for play areas, drop-off, and parking.

Once the assessment is complete and deficiencies are identified, the team develops the scope of work and a master plan, which drives the process forward.

### **Scheduling and design**

Once you decide whether to renovate or build new, your advisory group should discuss the anticipated construction schedule and phasing requirements. Can the work be done while school is in session? How will we address student safety issues? How will we present our decision to the public?

In this phase, challenges are addressed and proposed solutions are presented. If you decide to reuse the building, the design team prepares options to integrate existing elements while upgrading those that do not meet current requirements. Based on the projected budget, necessary items are addressed first and then work begins to incorporate as many proposed elements as possible. In many instances, renovating a building involves one or more additions because of inadequacies with the current facility or increased needs.

In Peoria, classrooms were of adequate size but most support spaces—including administrative offices, the cafe-

teria/kitchen, and library—were too small to meet an increased student population. We decided to relocate the administrative offices and build a new cafeteria and library.

The new improvements offer revitalized spaces for learning. Relocating the administrative offices and moving the school's entry from a busy street has allowed for a more efficient use of space and a safer environment. The new addition provides for the relocated entryway along with more space for administration and the library.

The new corridor intersection, where the existing building meets the addition, has prominent directions to help guide visitors to the new main entry. Existing classrooms were renovated with new windows and finishes. Six classrooms originally had clerestories—sections with block windows that were popular in 1950s-era construction—but those were blocked off due to roof leaks and vandalism. The clerestories were reopened and new translucent panels were installed to take advantage of daylighting.

Adhering to a streamlined process and a sensitive design provided an opportunity to integrate the existing architecture and deliver an improved environment for students, faculty, and staff. By addressing functionality, flexibility, accessibility, and safety throughout the design process, the district is now making the best use of the existing facility. ■

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## **Renewal Reminders**

Adhering to a streamlined process provides you with a solid base in any building renewal effort, but there are several additional things to consider as well:

- **Establish leadership:** Too many cooks in the kitchen is a sure recipe for disaster. It is important to establish leadership on the board. Creating a design advisory committee and having a point person committed to working as a liaison between the school and the design team can be an advantage in any renovation project.

- **Outline a plan:** A plan will minimize the impact during construction is important. Be prepared for challenges that will undoubtedly arise, from cost issues to scheduling constraints, and keep realistic expectations of the process and the people involved.

- **Communicate:** Keeping the lines of communication open will help things move smoothly during what may be a lengthy process. Establish a communications schedule among pertinent groups, including parents, students, and the public, so everyone is informed when normal activity is interrupted or changes are made to the estimated timeline.

- **Collaborate:** A collaborative approach with community leaders, administrators, teachers, students, and others may be the single most important element of any building renewal project.