
COMMUNITY

CONSENSUS AND SUPPORT

Available funding is seldom sufficient to fully meet a school district's long-term capital facility needs. Sources of additional revenue typically involve bond issues or sales tax referenda.

This essay describes effective ways to manage school facility programs to create the broad base of community consensus and support required to pass referenda and fund school construction projects.

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LINK FACILITY INVESTMENT TO LEARNING RESULTS

If asked to pay more to repair leaky roofs, upgrade HVAC systems or build new schools for those who are not yet part of the community, citizens tend to be reluctant. What if you frame the question differently?

If your child could measurably improve his or her performance to learn skills needed to compete and succeed, would you increase your investment by less than the monthly cost of cable TV?

Typically the answer is yes. Thus, the challenge is to show that adequate schools are essential to learning results. One approach is to make educational technology a part of the capital facility plan.

Effective educational technology is not learning to use computers—it is using computers to learn.

With today's technology, teachers are able to provide a prescriptive education for each student. Individual lesson plans keep students fully engaged in learning—they are never ahead or behind. It works. A pilot technology program in Florida called *Teaching and Learning with Computers* achieved sustained improvements of 20 to 30 points on standardized tests. Discipline problems were reduced by 24 percent. Absenteeism plummeted. Teacher retention reached record highs. Elementary schools that had been on the state's critical list moved to the top of their districts. When asked why his middle school went from last place in his district to a tie for first place, a principal replied, "Now we are getting children who are prepared to learn."

But computers don't work under leaky roofs. And spaces must be configured to support the educational programs they house. So, the educational adequacy of facilities becomes an essential part of the equation for learning success. In this way, the facility issue can be framed as "a prudent investment in educational results." Creating a compelling vision of learning for the children and the community can become an extraordinary stimulus of widespread support.

PREPARE A FRUGAL, BULLETPROOF PLAN

Polling has shown that people believe that government entities do not manage capital expenditures well. The perception can be exacerbated for school districts when very large capital facility budgets are involved. Meet this challenge head-on by developing a Capital Improvement Plan that stands up to the rigorous scrutiny that is certain to come from citizens and traditional opponents. Here are the steps:

1. Assessment Assess all short term and long-term capital facility needs. To be credible, the assessment must be based on realistic demographics and frugal standards uniformly applied across the school district. It must also be consistent, verifiable and repeatable, which means it must employ state-of-the-art computer technology to organize, manipulate and analyze data.

2. Facility Plan Address project priorities, funding options and alternative solutions. Ideally, the planning process should be grass-roots based—hold meetings in schools and invite parents and boosters. Principals should be active participants. Consider their ideas professionally and thoughtfully, and provide feedback to participants. The planning process should not only evaluate the costs and benefits of moving forward, but also the penalties of inaction. The result will be a Facility Plan that identifies projects to be undertaken in each school, that represents tangible value, and that can be reasonably funded from existing and proposed sources of revenue. And, since people tend to support that in which they have participated, it is likely to enjoy community approval.

3. Management Plan Develop a Management Plan. By implementing required work as an integrated program, rather than as a series of discrete projects, significant economies can be captured to lower cost and improve quality. Structure the delivery process to eliminate waste and duplication. Use prototypes for new schools and “kit-of-parts” prototypes for additions; cluster similar projects together into work packages; and use horizontal packaging and bulk purchasing to harvest economies of scale. Align procurement packages with the capability and availability of the local work force. Where permitted by law, use program-wide direct purchasing of materials and equipment to save sales tax. And, for programs in excess of \$100 million, use a controlled insurance program to reduce cost and improve safety. Do not assume that such complex and interrelated concepts happen automatically. Experienced professionals are required on staff or as consultants.

A bulletproof Capital Improvement Plan need not be encyclopedic, although it may have plenty of backup data. It should be a graphic description of the projects, costs and delivery method. The costs should be broken down into component parts that can be understood by ordinary citizens. Finally, the Capital Improvement Plan should be a compelling statement about why investment is needed and how the school district is committed to frugal management of taxpayer dollars.

ASSURE PERFORMANCE

It is entirely possible to avoid budget busts, schedule overruns and excessive change orders. You can reduce litigation substantially and enhance trust.

How? Let's apply the lessons of experience.

School building projects themselves are relatively simple. Failures in school construction programs generally result from inadequate preparation to meet management challenges. The key to success is proper management of the right people and the right resources at the right time. The staffing levels, delivery processes and management procedures of a successful, day-to-day school facility management operation may be completely inadequate for a new program. Launching a program is no time to develop a learning curve.

Because a school district administration's primary area of expertise is education, not school construction, the administration should not hesitate to bring in experts.

Local firms can contribute expertise in real estate, planning, architecture, engineering and construction. As members of the community, they will be committed to success. Their work must be integrated under a management structure that minimizes bureaucracy and gets results. For large capital facility programs, consideration should be given to professional program management. A program management firm can provide seasoned managers, sophisticated control systems and the specialized knowledge of educational facilities that is required to effectively integrate the capabilities of the planning, design and construction team members.

When a school district outsources professional services, there is an expectation to optimize value and avoid problems. Consultants should be held accountable. Compensation should be based at least in part on satisfactory performance.

A commitment to using community-based planning, design and construction firms together with a delivery approach that capitalizes on the expertise of a seasoned program management firm enables a school district to assure the public that projects will help the local economy and be delivered on budget and on schedule.

GET THE MOST VALUE FOR THE INVESTMENT

The goal of professional program management should be to create savings that dramatically exceed the cost of services. The following is a list of potential savings.

Frugal, functional planning can save 5 to 10 percent in construction cost. There is no better way to eliminate extra cost in a project than to eliminate extra building. For example, by optimizing the use of space, you can reduce floor area. Careful planning can produce additional operating and energy cost savings for the life of the building.

New school and kit-of-part prototypes can save 30 to 60 percent in professional fees together with continuous improvement in quality and reduction in cost from project to project.

Standardization can save 5 to 15 percent in initial construction cost of materials and equipment

Sales tax exemption can save 3 to 5 percent in construction cost. Where permitted by law, coordinate with contractors to use a school district's tax exempt status to procure construction materials and equipment.

Controlled insurance programs can save 3 to 4 percent of construction cost in worker's compensation and general liability insurance premiums with additional incident rate savings of 2 to 3 percent.

The savings listed above can offset the cost of program management services, leaving significant additional savings to meet other capital facility needs.

ENGAGE THE PUBLIC

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Citizens tend to be highly skeptical of government, so top down planning generally doesn't work well to gain consensus and support. What works is the engagement of the public in a bottom-up participatory planning process. This sounds easy when you say it fast, but it is challenging and time-consuming. To be effective, community participation must be structured and guided by specialized communication professionals. A participatory planning process that effectively engages the public includes these steps:

- Research on community attitudes
- Polling to “talk” to those citizens who can't attend meetings
- Workshops in every school to familiarize the public with facility problems, link the required investment in facilities to educational results and develop school investment priorities
- Incorporation of citizens' priorities into the Capital Improvement Plan
- Development of an “Amway” network of thousands of people who understand the issues and the benefits
- Providing feedback to citizens on how the Capital Improvement Plan responds to public priorities
- Creating a compelling theme and message
- Training volunteers in effective communication
- Carrying the message to civic organizations, homeowners' associations, neighborhood groups and other governmental subdivisions
- Providing useful information via the Internet, press, radio and TV
- Providing information to a private sector “Vote Yes” committee

Does this kind of process work? Yes. School districts that have not been able to pass referenda for decades have used this process to achieve pluralities in bond issue and sales tax referenda above 60 percent. Public engagement personalizes the mundane facility needs, creating a broad basis of community consensus and support.

SUMMARY

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When it is understood that learning success is linked to the adequacy of educational facilities, a community is inclined to support investing in school infrastructure. People may reasonably demand to know how their dollars will be managed. Thus, a frugal and bulletproof plan is a necessary tool. The most defensible plan is one that is developed with community participation; it sets out a road map to optimize value, avoid problems and save money. Providing accountable, professional management helps. And communication is essential—the community must be kept informed. The rewards of a successful capital facility program are an adequate environment for learning and the community’s trust, confidence, consensus and support that will be needed for future programs.



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