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ABSTRACT

In Waitsburg, Washington, the community was actively involved in a rural school facilities improvement project. The district serves approximately 410 students in three buildings on a single campus. Spurred by growing enrollment and aging facilities, the project included the complete renovation and restoration of a historic school building to serve as a junior high school, as well as remodeling and new construction for the elementary school building. A new superintendent, hired after efforts to build a new elementary school failed, established a facilities steering committee of key community members, launched a monthly district newsletter, held a series of community meetings to gather feedback, and conducted surveys to determine priorities of need for facilities improvement and to offer the community a range of project options. After the scope of the project was established, a bond issue was narrowly passed and state matching funds were obtained. Separate committees worked on the design of each building, with the local historical society involved in decisions about the historic junior high building. To offset the limited funding available, crews of community volunteers did the initial interior demolition work, moved furniture to temporary classrooms in churches and community buildings and then back to the schools when the renovation was complete, and did landscaping. (Contains 26 references and a brief literature review on rural school-community involvement.) (SV)

CHAPTER 3

Preserving Heritage While Restoring and Improving Facilities: A Rural Community's Experience

BURTON EDWARD DICKERSON

This chapter provides a brief overview of the literature on community involvement and a case study of community involvement in a rural school facility project in Washington State.

Within the education literature references to school-community partnerships and parent involvement in schools abound. Popular education journals such as *Educational Leadership* and *Phi Delta Kappan* have devoted entire issues to this concept.[1] The *International Journal of Educational Research* dedicated its first issue in 1996 to the publication of reports from a dozen different countries, all focused on the movement toward "boundary crossing" in education to involve families and communities.[2] A recently published book by George J. Michel on education reform emphasizes that community and parent involvement are integral elements to successful implementation of reform initiatives.[3] One study even found school-community partnerships to be the third most common topic of doctoral dissertations on rural education issues over a four-year period.[4] This topic was topped only by studies on the overall effectiveness of rural education and studies of human resources available for rural schools. In addition, research conducted by Bruce Miller at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory focused attention on identifying ways that rural

schools can become catalysts for community rehabilitation and development.[5] Subsequently, the Rural Education program at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory developed and piloted a school-community renewal program in five school districts. Further, in a keynote address at the 1994 International Conference of the Rural Education Research and Development Centre, Paul Nachtigal emphasized the role of the school in community development, asserting that rural schools have the potential to play a significant role in the economic and cultural health of their communities.[6]

A limited review of the literature also reveals numerous references to community involvement in school construction projects. The majority of these are opinion pieces or "how-to" guides that appear primarily in journals and guidebooks intended for use by school facility design consultants and planners. Several articles stressing the importance of community involvement have appeared in the journal *Educational Facility Planner.* Beyond merely describing the importance of gaining support for obtaining public financing, these articles stress the importance of using public participation to assess needs, determine the scope of the project, and interpret the project for the general public.[7] Guidebooks also have been published that provide extensive direction in applying various approaches to community involvement in planning school facilities projects.[8]

Writing for the *American School Board Journal,* Sally Banks Zakariya observes that decisions surrounding school facilities improvement projects evoke a politically charged environment, and that community involvement can be the key to success.[9] Ben E. Graves advises readers to involve the public at the early stages of facility project planning and suggests that advisory committees should include broad-based representation.[10] Randall Yearwood suggests that architects should complete large portions of their work on site in the school district, rather than in their offices, to assure ample input from school and community representatives.[11]

Another type of community involvement documented in recent literature is the trend toward joint-use projects.[12] For example, a school district may agree to share the use of a newly constructed gymnasium with the community in return for funding from the city, or a performing arts auditorium may be shared with a local arts council in return for financial support.

While literature addressing school-community partnerships and citizen involvement in school construction projects is ample, empirical studies specifically addressing community involvement in rural school facilities projects are far less common. Brief references to a few such pieces follow.

As noted previously, school construction projects have the potential to become politically charged community issues. This may be due in part to the fact that schools deal with two very sensitive areas of people's lives—their children and their money.[13] A case study by Robert V. Carlson documents how a rural school project can also become the focal point for drawing a divided community together.[14] Steven C. Deller studied the effects of an aging rural population on financial support for schools. He found that a higher percentage of retirees does not necessarily have an adverse impact on the passage of school bond elections.[15] Writing about a successful effort to pass a bond referendum to build two elementary schools in rural Virginia, Richard D. Greig offers four recommendations: start the campaign early, establish a grassroots organization, stress school needs, and reach the public.[16] Laurie Freeman writes about how a school board member in a small community used a homemade video to garner support for a facilities improvement project.[17]

In many cases, rural areas are also characterized by poverty, making the task of providing local financial support for improving school facilities even more daunting. The capacity to harness local resources is crucial. H. D. Tamang and K. C. Dharam write about how community participation has been encouraged and harnessed to help plan and construct low-cost, technically acceptable school facilities in Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world.[18] Voluntary community organizations may also play a significant role in building support for and doing the work of improving school buildings. A recent issue of *Small Town* included an article that described how diverse volunteer organizations have emerged to address community needs and described their impact on community improvement, local activities, and area schools.[19]

There are many common themes in the literature on community involvement in school facilities planning. Previous research suggests that citizen support is critical for the success of school construction projects, and that such projects can create cohesion and become a

symbol that unites communities. Successful school construction efforts provide open, honest communication about the project and give the community a sense of ownership. Many of these themes will also be apparent in the community case study provided in this paper.

A Case Study of Community Involvement in Rural School Facility Planning: Waitsburg, Washington

The community of Waitsburg, Washington, which recently worked to improve local school facilities, provides an interesting case study of community involvement in a rural school facilities improvement project. Located in rural southeastern Washington State, the town of Waitsburg is situated along the Touchet River near the foothills of the Blue Mountains. The town is surrounded by rolling wheat fields and is positioned directly along the route taken by Lewis and Clark in their historic overland expedition to the Pacific Ocean. Before the town was founded in 1865, Native Americans made their camps along the streams nearby.

With a population of just over a thousand people, Waitsburg is a quiet community that boasts of being "one of a kind." It is the only city in the state that still operates under the terms of its territorial charter. Other nearby towns include Dayton, located 10 miles to the north (population 2,000); Prescott, which is eight miles to the west (population 300); and Walla Walla, located 20 miles to the south (population 30,000).

Although not exceptionally isolated, Waitsburg has a very strong sense of community. Many area residents make some type of community involvement a priority. Local service clubs carry out a variety of fund-raising and development projects specifically for the benefit of the community. The school district is the largest employer in town with 55 employees, followed by the McGregor farm chemical dealer, which provides jobs for about 30 employees. Waitsburg is a wheat farming community, and agriculture is the foundation of the local economy. While a number of residents work on farms or in farm-related businesses, others work in the town's stores and businesses. Still others commute to jobs in nearby towns. Waitsburg is also home to a number of retired citizens, as well as those who are not employed and receive some form of public assistance.

Waitsburg School District, in many ways, is the hub of life in the

community. High school athletic, music, and drama programs provide the primary "place to go" for many local residents. School facilities are also a central location for a variety of community meetings and activities.

The district serves approximately 410 students in a physical plant consisting of three school buildings located on a single campus. The elementary school (K-6) is located in the center of the campus in a building constructed in 1949. The junior high school (grades 7-8) is housed in a 1913 building known as Preston Hall. The high school, originally built in 1926, serves students in grades 9-12. A gymnasium and vocational-agricultural shop were added to the high school in 1964. Athletic facilities, which include football, track, and baseball fields, and a field house, are situated about three blocks from the main campus.

The Project

The Waitsburg, project included the complete renovation and restoration of a historic school building to serve as a junior high facility, as well as remodeling and new construction upgrades for the elementary school building. The need for a major school facilities improvement project in Waitsburg became clear in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The key factors were growing enrollment and aging facilities.

The elementary school building, initially constructed in 1949, was struck by a fire in 1964 that destroyed the multipurpose room, kitchen, and music room. Although this section of the building was rebuilt, the classroom wings remained in their original state. The use of low-cost construction materials and methods, coupled with aging or inadequate mechanical and electrical systems, made the need for serious upgrading evident. In addition, asbestos was present in nearly every part of the building, and energy efficiency features were almost totally lacking. Classroom space for special education and technology were not adequate, and the library, which serves all district students in grades K-12, had also been outgrown.

Preston Hall, a three-story brick building initially constructed in 1913 as a community building, had served as a school building over the intervening years. With enrollment decline in the 1960s, the building was essentially closed and became little more than an

oversized storage space. Students in grades 7-8 were housed in the high school building. As enrollment began to increase again, the high school became more crowded, until classrooms were overflowing and every available space was being utilized throughout the entire school day. With additional enrollment growth on the horizon, more space was clearly needed. In addition, community members (particularly parents) became more and more vocal about the need to provide a facility just for junior high students, so they could have their own identity and be separated from the older students.

After attempts to generate voter approval for funding to build a new elementary school failed in 1989 and again in 1991, the school board decided to hire a new superintendent and advertise for an architectural firm to complete a new study and survey of district facilities. The board's most urgent mandate for the new superintendent was to develop a plan to achieve the needed school facility improvements and to generate public support that would translate into the public financing required to launch the project. The new superintendent believed that clear and open communication coupled with community input were the keys to success.

After listening to a wide variety of residents and district employees to obtain background information and a sense of the main issues, the new superintendent formed a school facilities steering committee. The purpose of this group was to gather and review information and make recommendations to the board and superintendent. The superintendent appointed four committee members who were key figures in the community. One was a city council member who had retired from a career as a school administrator in another town. A second member, also a city council member, was an employee of the local newspaper, an active member of the Waitsburg Historical Society, and the widow of a former school maintenance and custodial employee. Two other appointees, both well known community leaders, were members of the school board. One was a young farmer and long-time community resident. The other was a machinist who was employed in a neighboring town. The committee was chaired by the superintendent.

The first task faced by the steering committee was the selection of an architect. An architect had worked with the district previously to develop plans for project proposals that were voted down. However, the board believed that part of the reason for the lack of public

support was a lack of confidence in the architect. The committee discussed and established selection criteria, screened the proposals that had been submitted, and interviewed the finalists. Key characteristics desired in the architect were the ability to interact effectively with members of the community and the ability to listen and respond to the concerns and wishes of the district and community regarding the development of project plans. On the basis of the selection process, the committee made a recommendation that was subsequently approved by the school board.

At about the same time that the steering committee was being established, a monthly district newsletter was also introduced. The newsletter was mailed regularly to every resident of the district to effectively begin the flow of information about the operation of the schools. Each month news of events related to a possible school facilities project was included, along with invitations for community involvement and feedback.

With the newsletter in place, the steering committee established, and a new architect on board, the next step was to hold a series of community meetings. These meetings were to provide information to the public and gather feedback to help provide direction. The first meeting was scheduled with both a luncheon session and an evening session to accommodate the varying schedules of local citizens. Advertised in both the district newsletter and the local newspaper, as well as with posters placed strategically about town, the meetings were fairly well attended. About 30 citizens attended each meeting. At the meetings, the superintendent welcomed the audience, acknowledged the members of the steering committee, provided basic information about the purpose of the meeting, and introduced the architect, who shared clarifying information about school construction projects. A survey was distributed and attendees were asked to complete it before leaving. The survey asked for responses indicating the priorities of need at the various school facilities. The superintendent promised that a summary of survey results would be made available in the local newspaper promptly.

The clear conclusion from the survey results was that remodeling or replacing the elementary school was the highest priority. However, an interesting outcome of the survey was evidence of a growing interest in making the renovation of Preston Hall a part of the project.

This interest also emerged from informal conversations with citizens and the steering committee meetings. In previous attempts to push forward a facilities project, renovations to Preston Hall had not been included. In fact, some had even considered recommending demolition of the building. It became clear that demolition was a very unpopular idea to at least a segment of the community. Many community members remembered attending classes in Preston Hall, and many more recalled the days when the building's small gymnasium was the only gymnasium in the district. Nostalgic ties to the historical significance of this old school building were strong.

On the basis of feedback obtained from the first round of community meetings, a range of project options was developed. A second round of meetings was scheduled. Again information was provided, responses were heard, and people were asked to respond in writing to a survey. This survey listed three project options: elementary school only, elementary school and Preston Hall, and all three district buildings. Although large numbers favored options two and three, the steering committee settled on a recommendation of option number two, since the third option would be too costly.

With the scope of the project identified, the next step was to obtain funding. State matching funds were available to cover about 50 percent of the total project cost, but this funding could only be obtained if district voters approved issuance of bonds to cover the local share ($2.1 million). Community involvement played a large role in this process. A Citizens for Schools committee was formed to provide information and get out the vote on election day. The committee included a nucleus of about 12 citizens representing a broad cross section of the population. Activities included staffing an information booth at the school carnival, mailing an information brochure to all district residents, generating letters to the editor, advertising in the local newspaper, giving presentations at local club and organization meetings, distributing yard signs in support of the election, calling to remind district residents to vote, and driving voters to polling places.

The school construction project was a heated issue in the community. Many were passionately supportive of the plan to remodel the elementary school and Preston Hall. There were also those who were vehemently opposed, believing the costs were too high and that too

great a burden was being placed on taxpayers. Based upon assessed property valuations at near market value, the proposed levy rate was $3.46/$1,000 over a 20-year period. On the Saturday before the Tuesday election, a one-page anonymous mailer opposing the bond measure was placed in the mailboxes of all district residents. The Citizens for Schools committee quickly responded with a mailing countering the opposition, which residents received on Monday. After the election results were tallied Tuesday night, there was jubilation among supporters when they learned that the measure was approved by a margin narrowly above the required 60 percent "yes" vote.

With the green light of a successful bond election, the district was set to move ahead with design work. Separate building committees were established for each of the two facilities. Each committee included representation from the staff and administration of the district, as well as the community. In the case of the Preston Hall building committee, two community members were also members of the Waitsburg Historical Society. Actively involved in community affairs, this group was particularly interested in seeing that the historic integrity of Preston Hall was retained throughout the process of remodeling. Society members had actively sought to place Preston Hall on the National Register of Historic Places. Each decision regarding the development of design and specifications was considered in light of the special interests of the historical society. At one point during design development, a joint meeting of the building committee and the Waitsburg Historical Society was convened to review a variety of decisions regarding specific aspects of the work to be completed. Compromises were necessary, but a cohesive working relationship was retained. This collaboration built support for constructive involvement of the society in other aspects of the work to follow.

During the planning and design process it became clear that limited funding would place some restrictions on what the building committees wished to include in the projects. Interested community members, led by one of the Preston Hall building committee representatives, began to inquire about how local citizens could help with the project and thereby stretch funding resources. It appeared, in particular, that some portions of the demolition work could be successfully accomplished by a volunteer work crew. A local farmer and bulk petroleum distributor led a group of volunteers who completed the

challenging task of removing most of the plaster and lath interior wall covering in Preston Hall, a three-story building of approximately 15,000 square feet. Wheat trucks were called into service to haul the debris, while crowbars and hard physical work did the rest. This effort alone saved the district several thousand dollars. It also seemed to cement the enthusiasm and support of the community for the project and served to mark the beginning of visible work beyond mere planning.

To make construction funding stretch as far as possible, the general contractor was given full access to the entire elementary building during the school year set aside for remodeling. In order to make this possible, alternative spaces for approximately 200 students in grades K-6 had to be found. Again, the school district looked to the community for the answers. Agreements were reached with three local churches, the city of Waitsburg, and the McGregor company to provide classrooms and storage space. In every case, these spaces were provided either free of charge or for minimal fees. The spirit of cooperation and support from the community was overwhelming. This arrangement called for a great deal of patience and flexibility on the part of staff and students and also required the support and understanding of parents.

Cooperation and support from the community were further demonstrated when it came time to move the contents of classrooms and other areas of the building into the temporary spaces. A moving day was organized and carried out by local community members, and spearheaded by the Waitsburg Lions Club. On moving day, each room's contents had been labeled according to destination. Farm trucks and pickups hitched to stock trailers and flatbed trailers lined the parking areas around the building. Volunteers arrived at 8:00 a.m. and were assigned to various crews. The work commenced, and the building was completely empty before noon. Members of the Waitsburg Commercial Club provided refreshments for the work crews.

As construction began in earnest, community involvement continued in the form of building committee meetings and the public's observation of the full scale demolition and construction work. The district continued communication through the district newsletter and contact with the local newspaper publisher, as well as through reports

at public meetings. When construction activities were nearly complete, community volunteers moved into action again, this time to do landscape work and install an underground sprinkler system for irrigation.

The Waitsburg Lions Club was instrumental in organizing these projects. Volunteers assembled at the school at 8:00 a.m. on two weekends, working in 100-degree temperatures to move dirt and level it to be planted in lawn and shrubs. They also installed underground pipes, valves, and sprinklers. The district purchased the materials and hired a contractor to design the irrigation system and provide supervision and direction during the work sessions. Again, the assistance of community members saved the district thousands of dollars.

Once construction was complete, the next step was moving back into the elementary school and Preston Hall. Once more, Waitsburg residents stepped forward to get the job done. This time there was a feeling of celebration in the air as volunteers moved furniture, equipment, and supplies into the newly refurbished facilities. For many, this was their first chance to get a look at the finished project. Shortly after the school year began, an open house was held to celebrate completion of the projects, thank those who helped, and allow district residents to view the completed work.

The positive changes at both buildings have become a source of pride for the community. Preston Hall, in particular, has become the talk of the town. As if to underscore this sense of pride and accomplishment, the project received formal recognition in two separate venues. The Waitsburg Historical Society received a "Historic Preservation Award" from the Eastern Washington State Historical Society for its efforts in "promoting historic preservation through the renovation of Preston Hall." In addition, the project was recognized by the Spokane Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with an Award of Merit for historic preservation projects. In making the public presentation of the award, Clark Llewellyn, director of Montana State University's School of Architecture, stated that he was particularly impressed with "how a small town cared enough about a humble old building to restore it, and how the architects took a number of complex building code requirements and made them look natural."[20]

Conclusion

The experiences surrounding the Waitsburg project represent one example that may be quite typical of what happens in many other rural communities. There can be little doubt that community involvement plays a significant role in the successful completion of rural school facility improvement projects. Although there is a great amount of information on school-community involvement, research on the ways community members may be involved in rural school construction projects is limited. The case study presented in this paper is meant to contribute to the literature on community involvement in rural school facilities projects. Additional reporting or research centered on this topic would add to the body of information available to assist those who face the challenge of providing improved school facilities.

The topic addressed in this paper is significant for a number of reasons. First, there are a large number of rural school facilities throughout the country. Nationally, 46.4 percent of our nation's school districts are rural.[21] Furthermore, two recent reports—a 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office report and a 1997 report by the Council of Educational Facility Planners International—revealed the extensive need for improvement in our nation's school buildings, which include a large number of rural school facilities needing substantial renovation or replacement.[22] The fact that higher levels of poverty are often associated with rural areas makes the task of publicly funding needed improvements in these areas even more difficult.

This topic is also significant in light of the unique role of the school in more isolated and rural areas. The centrality of schools to community life in many rural areas is obvious to those who have lived and worked in such environments. While school-community ties are significant in any community, the relationship may be even closer in small, rural districts where the school is often the hub of small town life. It is also evident that a major school construction project can be a more significant event in a small community than in a larger one. In some cases, the remodeling or replacement of rural school facilities may be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, whereas in a larger city, school construction projects are initiated every few years. In the small community, the project may involve all or nearly all of the district's

entire facility complex, while in the larger district, each project involves only a small proportion of the facilities.

The positive contributions made to these projects by community groups and individuals are a valuable and sometimes critically important part of accomplishing the task. There is a strong sense of community pride and spirit in many small towns such as Waitsburg. If positive involvement in school district operations is invited through open communication, responsiveness to community wishes, and efforts to foster a sense of community ownership, community support may be increased dramatically. There is no limit to what can be accomplished cooperatively.

Notes

1. Volume 53, number 7, of *Educational Leadership* (1996) and volume 78, number 10, of the *Phi Delta Kappan* (1997) were dedicated to this topic.
2. Davis and Johnson, "Crossing Boundaries."
3. Michel, *Building Schools*.
4. Harmon, Howley, and Sanders, "Doctoral Research in Rural Education."
5. Miller, "Rural Distress and Survival" and "Role of Rural Schools in Community Development."
6. Nachtigal, "Rural Schools, Rural Communities."
7. Gardner, "Community Based Facility Planning," and Stewart, "Using Citizens Committees to Assist in Referendum Campaigns."
8. Gwynne, *Guide for Planning Educational Facilities,* and Holcomb, *Guide to the Planning of Educational Facilities.*
9. Zakariya, "Construction is a Hot, New Board Game."
10. Graves, "Community Involvement in the Planning Process."
11. Yearwood, "On-Site Design Bridges the Architectural Gap."
12. Wilhelm and Luce, "Sharing Makes Sense," and Fickes, "Community-Use Trend."
13. Terril, "Architects Don't Build Schools—Communities Do!"
14. Carlson, "Rural School/Community."
15. Deller, "Effects of an Aging Rural Population."
16. Greig, "Board Referendum."

17. Freeman, "Homemade Video Sells Construction Project."
18. Tamang and Dharam, *Innovation in Primary School Construction.*
19. Weber, "Role of Voluntary Organizations in a Small Town."
20. Llewellyn, *Spokesman Review.*
21. Stern, *Condition of Education in Rural Schools.*
22. General Accounting Office, *School Facilities,* and Abramson, "1997 Construction Report."

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