

— ISSUETRAK —

A CEFPI Brief on Educational Facility Issues

Topic: Urban School Facilities: An A-Z Primer

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Date Filed: July 2004

CEFPI BRIEF

The greatest challenge facing America is rebuilding our urban school systems. What we have before us can be considered both a daunting task and tremendous opportunity. Because of aging school buildings, changes in educational programming, and shifting demographics, the entire urban school facility inventory in America needs to be modernized.

Many urban school buildings are old and programmatically inadequate. In cities across America, the typical building dates from the 1920s or earlier. "New" buildings, built to serve the baby boomers, date from the 1950s and 60s. Many of these buildings, in their current condition, have survived beyond their life expectancies and may inhibit efforts to reform and restructure America's public education.

Urban districts must develop and implement an educational facility plan that is systematic, informed, and one that involves the community. While the details will vary from district to district, there are essential elements that characterize the successful development and implementation of an educational facility plan. A shared vision, an agreed upon process, external consultant leadership, internal capacity, adequate funding, and broad based involvement are essential elements of any successful educational facility plan.

Shared Vision

A shared vision expresses common goals and agreed upon direction. It establishes an agreement with an altruistic focus to improve education and educational facilities. The leadership of the community must own this shared vision.

A Interagency Leadership & Leadership Continuity

Interagency leadership is described as a commitment by the school board, superintendent, mayor, city manager, city council, business community and other decision-makers to work collaboratively toward the development and implementation of a long-term educational facility plan. Participants should consist of actual decision makers, not their representatives.

Developing and implementing facility master plans is a ten plus year effort. At the same time, leadership in urban districts often has rapid turn over. By developing ongoing interagency structures of community leaders and policy makers there is a higher probability of leadership continuity.

B Educational Facilities Established as a Priority

In order to be successful, an urban district needs to have a sustainable commitment to its educational facility planning effort. This commitment includes opportunities for and involvement of all stakeholders in the planning and decision-making processes.

C Commitment from the Media

The media need to be engaged from the onset of the process as collaborative partners. They need to buy into and support the overall effort. Commitment from the media does not preclude critical reports of relevant issues; rather, the media need to agree to assist in the development of the facility plan so that the facilities serve the interests of the entire community.

Agreed Upon Process

From the beginning, the planning process and vision need to be one that all participants, especially boards of education and superintendents, agree upon and support.

D Horizontal Planning Process

The planning process should not be a top-down or bottom-up process, but rather an inclusive one, which simultaneously involves all aspects of the school community and the community at-large.

E Break the District into Planning Areas

A successful educational facility plan cannot be developed from the district level or from the individual school level. Large school districts need to be divided into manageable areas with plans simultaneously developed by area. Area plans are then consolidated into an overall district educational facility plan.

F Community Involvement

A genuine commitment to broad-based community involvement is an integral part of the educational facility planning process. Efforts are needed to fully engage the community in a meaningful way. Structured activities at critical junctures provide community participants with true involvement in the decision-making process. The school district will build trust with residents and gain community-wide support.

Consultant Leadership

A highly qualified person needs to be given the authority to facilitate the overall plan development and implementation process. This facilitator should be a person outside the district with the ability to cross political and bureaucratic lines, engage the board of education, city council and district staff, and have license to convene meetings when necessary.

G Ethics and Integrity

Selection of consultants should be handled in the most open and public manner possible. All federal, state, and local laws must be respected. This applies throughout the planning, design, and construction phases, and includes the selection of firms, internal staff, assignment of projects, and overall accountability.

H Highly Qualified Consultant Team

Districts need a highly qualified team of consultants, not necessarily one firm that attempts to provide every service. The consultant team should consist of planners, architects, and construction managers. In addition, there is a need for expertise within these firms to address unique issues focused on public relations, legal matters, technology, bond strategies, and finance.

I Clarifications of Roles and Responsibilities among Consultants

There is often a great deal of confusion regarding the roles and functions of consultants, resulting in a lack of leadership, a redundancy of efforts and extra costs. Roles and responsibilities of all consultants need to be clearly defined, and leadership should be determined by function. During the planning phase, planners should lead; during the design phase, architects should lead; during the construction phase construction managers should lead. This operational strategy continues through all aspects of a project, with each professional providing expertise toward the completion of a project. This approach will eliminate competing interests and may contribute to cost savings and timely completion of projects.

J Need for a New Form of Service Delivery

To be successful, urban districts will need different forms of service delivery. Many of the systems for smaller districts or even the Construction Manager/Project Manager arrangement borrowed from the private sector are not overly effective for urban schools. New systems need to be developed. These systems could include using in-house mechanisms, forming new construction authorities or employing private initiatives.

K Minority Participation

Deliberate efforts should be made to actively recruit and involve minorities in all aspects of the development and implementation of an educational facility plan. Urban districts have predominately ethnic minority populations. Consulting firms typically have few minority staff and owners. Cultural and ethnic issues need to be addressed in order for consultants to effectively plan and build appropriate facilities within the urban setting.

L Computer Tools

Technology must be used throughout the entire facility planning process. This includes demographics, maintenance and work order systems, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), data base management software, computer aided design (CAD), accounting, project management, construction, communication, and public relations. Computer tools are needed to access, analyze, and process large volumes of information. Most datum, information, and communication need to be web-based.

M Facility Assessments

The primary objectives of assessments are to determine the overall physical condition and educational adequacy of classroom facilities. The assessment of physical conditions may include an evaluation of architectural, structural, mechanical, and electrical systems. Building conditions, code compliance, health and safety, and environmental conditions are all important elements. Another aspect of the assessment process is evaluating the utilization of school facilities. This means that there should be sufficient space to accommodate the student enrollment and the desired educational programs which requires determining building capacity.

N Educational Adequacy

Educational adequacy of a school facility refers to its ability to meet the needs of the educational program requirements; it does not refer to the quality of the school's academic programs or the success of its students as measured by test scores.

Deficiencies in educational adequacy exist when the space is not designed to support best practices or the programmatic needs of the school. For example, early childhood classes placed in a regular classroom may lack separate toilets, sinks, and cubbies. Science labs may be non-existent or outdated in secondary schools. Special program areas for the arts and music, or computer labs may be lacking or inadequate. Educational adequacy deficiencies also exist when there are insufficient large spaces such as gymnasiums, cafeterias or libraries, and small group spaces for special education, instructional support functions, or administrative offices.

O Educational Facility Guidelines or Educational Specifications

School districts need to develop and adopt educational facility guidelines. The guidelines should clearly describe the educational activities that the school facility should accommodate. The guidelines also serve as a blueprint of needs and should be visionary, yet realistic. The guidelines need to be used as the basis for evaluating existing structures, developing facility options, and describing the replacement, renovation, or consolidation of school buildings. Even though overall guidelines are critical to the development of an overall plan, these should serve as a guide, not a standard as they are applied to each individual school. Site adaptations may be needed for each project.

Internal Capacity

Internal capacity to plan and carry out an educational facility plan is critical. This capacity structure may include planning, design, owners' representatives, oversight, procurement, staff development, technology systems, etc. Systems to address the oversight of planning and implementation activities need to be established and actualized. Each urban district needs to determine the extent of internal versus external services required. Districts that choose to contract for most of their services will still need a viable internal capacity.

P Internal Capacities

Qualified personnel, who understand the district, know the facilities, and who can access databases are essential for in-house capacity. These qualified staff members need to be present in the discussions and decisions regarding facilities, curriculum and instruction, and financial concerns. During the development of an educational facility plan, the capacity to implement a program needs to be analyzed, organizational structures need to be established, and qualified people need to be hired.

Q Communication Structures

Effective communication structures need to be developed and actualized at the outset of facility plan development to ensure that the process continues to move forward and that the school community and the community at-large are aware of planning and implementation activities.

R Maintenance & Operations

Urban districts need a system for maintenance and operations that is adequately funded and functional. Both the planning and implementation phases of the facility master plan need to include a mechanism to maintain existing facilities. Proactive, preventive maintenance programs need to be developed and implemented.

S Empowering Staff

Staff members need to be given the authority to make decisions. Far too often, a “director” of educational facilities is not given the authority necessary to accomplish the job. This lack of authority is problematic when it comes to the continuity of effort, the ability to make timely decisions, and the assurance of a final decision. In the scope of a project, delayed or changed decisions result in cost overruns. It is imperative that district personnel have the authority to make decisions and that the decision making process is clearly defined.

T Ability to Pay Bills

The school district needs to have procurement mechanisms in place to enter into contracts and pay bills in a non-bureaucratic and timely manner.

Adequate Funding

Districts need to evaluate funding priorities if facility planning is to be effective. Appropriate budgets need to be established for planning, construction, and maintenance activities. In addition, adequate funding needs to be budgeted for staff to implement a facility plan.

U Planning

Sufficient funding for facility planning activities is vitally important. Planning budgets can be established by using 1% of a district's annual operating funds, 25 cents per square foot of space, or \$50 per student.

V Construction

Implementation of planning efforts could be based on a rule of thumb that estimated \$15–25,000 per student depending on the condition of buildings and local cost of construction. Monies needed to finance a plan may require passing a bond issue or a combination of other funding mechanisms.

W Staff

Sufficient funding is needed to secure an adequate number of staff members to implement an educational facility plan.

Broad Based Involvement

The continued involvement of all participants and decision-makers is vitally important during the implementation of an educational facility plan. Involvement can be established at different levels and in different forms. The primary goal is to keep the school community and the community-at-large informed of activities and allow for input and feedback as the plan develops.

X District Committee

A committee consisting of a cross-section of administrators, teachers, and staff should be formed and convened on a consistent basis. The purpose of the meetings should be to create a forum for gathering input from the educational community and keeping them informed on the progress of the plan.

Y Community/Parent Committee

Parents as well as the community as a whole can be a school district's greatest advocate or worst critic. Engaging interested parties and sharing information can eliminate criticism. Involving parent/ teacher associations and other parent and community organizations is an excellent way of providing information and contacting stakeholders. In urban districts less than 25% of the voters have children in schools. The non-parent needs to be an active player as well.

Z Oversight Committee

Accountability and trust is a major issue confronting urban school districts. To help establish an accountability procedure, an oversight committee should be formed. The committee should consist of a wide range of community representatives and should include persons with skills and training in construction, finance, and law, among other areas. The committee should operate independently of existing political and educational structures. Enlisting professionals and leaders in the community will ensure long-term continuity and credibility of the overall effort.

In Summary...

Addressing the condition of urban school facilities is of great urgency. We, as facility planners, are committed to working with urban school districts to develop and implement a systematic approach for modernizing aging urban school facilities. The next generation of school children is far too important and valuable to be forced into learning environments that are neither conducive nor appropriate for teaching. Urban children of the 21st Century should have schools that meet current educational needs, yet be flexible enough to accommodate programmatic and pedagogical changes of the future.

The Council of Educational Facility Planners International prepares *ISSUETRAK* as a service to its membership. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of CEFPI, its officers or members.

CEFPI wishes to thank Dr. William DeJong for his valuable time and expertise in preparing this brief.

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With over 30 years of experience in education and facility planning, Dr. DeJong is recognized nationally for his facilitation skills and ability to work with community groups in developing consensus. As an educational planner, Dr. DeJong has a commitment to quality education. Through his work, he hopes to provide school districts and other organizations with the tools necessary for exceptional educational programs and facilities now and in the future.

During the past 12 years, Dr. DeJong has been involved in over 200 facility planning and educational specification projects. Dr. DeJong has also spearheaded an international effort to improve the school environments in Honduras <http://www.hondurasplanmaestro.com> A member of the Council of Educational Facility Planners, International for over 20 years, Dr. DeJong was named "Planner of the Year" in 1991. In addition, Dr. DeJong served as the 1993-94 President of CEFPI. He can be reached through <http://www.dejonginc.com>.

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