

INSPIRE

K12 Education Update | Volume I

Investing Wisely: Your Road Map to a Long-Term Facility Plan

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The key to making wise facility investments is developing a cohesive long-range vision.

Despite widespread belief, not all K-12 facility projects require taxpayers to shell out more cash. Nor do facility solutions for “next-century learning” always cost more than traditional facilities. The key to keeping costs down is adequate planning.

While new construction requires careful planning, so too does long-term facility planning, which should include strategies to address deferred maintenance. The inequities in the deferred maintenance formula for school facilities have long challenged schools to adequately maintain their facilities year after year. Whether a district is on the high end of the formula or the low end, facility maintenance funding is never enough to take care of aging school buildings.

Establishing a Long-Range Vision

How can districts invest their limited funds wisely?

The key is to develop a cohesive long-range vision for the district by answering two questions:

1. What do you and your community want your school facilities to look like or be known for 10 years from now?
2. What will it take to get there?

The visioning protocol should establish a clear understanding of the district’s goals – based on the answers to those two questions – and should create a general consensus regarding the vision. The concerns of all stakeholder groups should be encouraged and considered throughout the process, and representatives should have opportunities to share their ideas with one another. Community groups should have the background information they need and adequate time to process the information so they can participate meaningfully in the discussion. Providing adequate time for the planning promotes community buy-in.

School district vision statements often express a commitment to the safety and health of staff and students. With regard to facilities, that vision translates into upgrades, such as upgraded security, more secure entrances, and updated heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems. Such facility improvements, however, are often excluded from the initial laundry list because they may appear not to be as pressing as other items in disrepair.

Districts must look closely at their facilities and identify gaps that exist between their vision and the actual state of their facilities.

Weighing Benefits and Costs

Having established a long-range vision, the district’s next step is to determine the cost of the associated projects. Those detailed lists are common in school districts, but they tend to be viewed as items to check off when completed rather than part of a thoughtful, well-planned process.

When districts shift their perspective and filter facilities through the vision, they can create a comprehensive plan that gives them confidence that their investment dollars will have the greatest long-range impact.

The following tips can help school district leaders weigh the benefits and costs of a facility solution.

Set guidelines. Every school has different needs and goals, which are determined by its students, staff, and communities. It’s beneficial for a school district, often at the board level, to outline a set of guidelines that communicate parameters for decision making.

For example, districts often include “sustainability” in their facility visions, but that term spans a wide spectrum. One district set a guideline of only implementing building strategies that would deliver a payback in 10 years or less. Consequently, that district did not initially install active solar in one of the schools until grants enabled payback within the guideline.

Evaluate flexibility. Next-century learning environments must be flexible to offer the most value to schools. Like sustainability, flexibility falls on a spectrum. District planners should consider how flexible a school facility must be to achieve the district’s long-range vision for the future.

For example, terrazzo flooring is visually appealing and has longevity, but it is expensive to install and to repair. It also quickly loses its luster when patched. Commonly used block walls may be solid and low maintenance, but they cannot be easily changed. A stud-framed wall is more flexible and easier to change, but it has higher maintenance costs and is less sustainable.

Furniture can reimagine learning environments and allow schools to maximize space. Schools can now take an underused space like a media center and transform it into multiple classrooms to accommodate current growth at a fraction of a building expansion. A school could spend \$80 per square foot for furniture compared with the average \$245 per square foot for an addition. Such solutions encourage students to think outside the box—and facility planners need to do the same.

Understanding all the ramifications will guide districts in making their decisions.

Understand paybacks. Whether it's a new high-efficiency boiler or movable walls, facility solutions often come with up-front capital costs. However, the benefits are realized month after month in educational opportunities and lower operating costs through energy or construction savings. District leaders should crunch the numbers and compare the costs with the district's desirable threshold.

Factor in lifetime maintenance. Lifetime maintenance is commonly overlooked when evaluating a new solution. It's important to take the time to understand where the maintenance costs and up-front costs cross. The district may pay more for certain finishes up front, but it gains in lower maintenance and a longer material life.

Every district must balance its priorities and determine what a choice will cost over the life of the product.

Initial costs may be hard to swallow, but so are the year-after-year costs of maintenance. Life-cycle costs are important to consider.

Finding the Funding

Recognizing facility needs and determining how to fund them are important for success. After considering the life cycle of each of the desired facility items, district leaders can place those items in one of two categories: maintenance or bond.

For example, a district that plans to remodel a space may consider including the carpet and paint refresh as a part of the maintenance funding. It's unwise to bond for items that won't last 20-25 years (the length of a typical bond).

No one formula works for every school district, but every decision should come back to the long-range facilities vision. Without a vision and an action plan, a district is simply putting out the latest fires.

Costs are rarely cut-and-dried. Developing a long-term facility plan can help the district determine where to budget its money to get the most bang for the buck. Maybe the plan is focused on deferred maintenance, maybe it includes purchasing new furniture that can revamp an existing space, or maybe it's a major remodel or a new building. Developing a plan provides a road map for how and where to spend. The best time to start a long-term facility plan for your district is today.

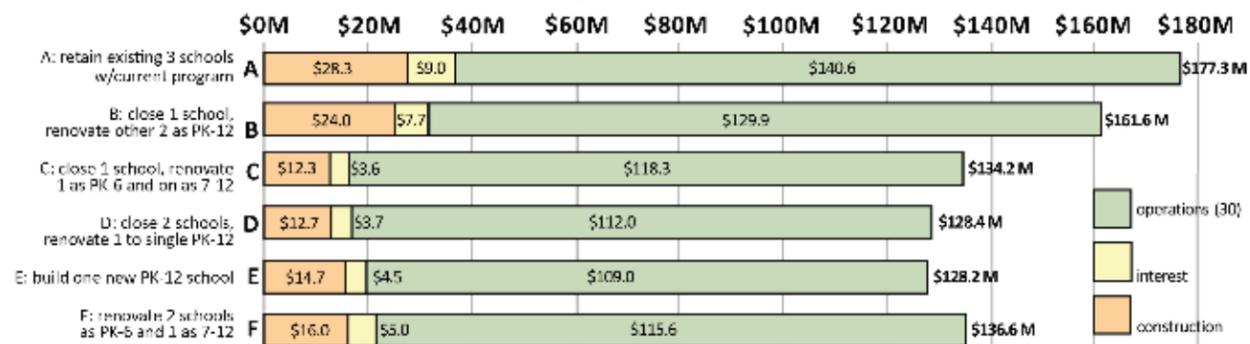
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Collaborative Communities:

A Case Study on Community-Inspired Learning Environments



Harrisburg Adventure Elementary | Harrisburg, SD

With strategic guidance from JLG's K12 practice studio team, Harrisburg School District's new K-5th grade Adventure Elementary School started from scratch, enabling the school to create a more collaborative, community-inspired building. The new home to the Tigers accommodates the growth occurring within the district and a future-driven floorplan designed to create four self-contained communities, with pathways leading to a larger, shared community of amenities. Each "community" is comprised of kindergarten through 5th grade classes — giving students a chance to intermingle with and learn from peers of all ages in a more comfortable setting. The district has found cross-age learning to be beneficial for development and equality, especially within the lower grades where mentorship and behavioral modeling is more impactful.

Each of Adventure Elementary's smaller "communities" are designed to meet the needs of 150 students with its own set of restrooms, collaborative areas, support space, and student support spaces. Two of the "communities" were designed to accommodate the needs of the district's Tiger Reserve program, bringing together all the staff and students within the program for more efficient use of space and resources, rather than dispersed throughout the district. Special consideration was given to how students enter and exit their "communities" at the beginning and end of their day. With students coming from the playground, locker areas were positioned to be the first point of arrival, creating a seamless flow from outside to inside. Overall, the configuration of the elementary implements key planning strategies and maximizes flexibility in a way that allows for future realignment of cross-age learning.

Expanding Possibilities:

A Case Study on Re-working Traditional Learning Layouts into Next Century Models

Milona Science Magnet School | Alexandria, MN

While Milona Science Magnet Elementary places a strong emphasis on engaging students with the environment, it hasn't always been able to support the higher level of learning that it does today. When JLG first began working with Alexandria Public Schools to renovate the existing 1950s building, it was a traditional, double-loaded corridor with classrooms on each side. Teachers at Milona work hard to integrate science into the curriculum and engage students with the environment, but the older building was limiting the possibilities of their Next Century educational learning model. With enrollment on the rise, at a minimum, their primary goal was to build on three additional classrooms. While most schools would have taken the route of just adding the classrooms onto the end of the existing corridor, this type of design would not have benefited the overall, outdated floorplan and learning model. Instead, JLG identified available space towards the middle of the structure for the addition, then reconfigured the interior to create a centralized learning commons that can be utilized by the entire school.

By reimagining existing space, JLG was able to complete the renovation and design on a dime, and the new, shared commons is now a collaborative, hands-on extension of the classrooms. Not only has the commons become the heart of the school, it's also the supportive foundation for their Next Century learning environment. To optimize the flow of the school further, JLG incorporated handwashing stations on the path leading to the cafeteria, so students no longer need to backtrack within the hallways. The result of Milona's small renovation, created big results — three new classrooms, more efficient hall flow, and a modernized learning environment that shifts the energy from overcrowded hallways to a centralized learning commons that supports their students' appreciation for the environment.

once a classroom, now an open, shared learning commons



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