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Restoration vs. New Construction: How to Make the Right Decision

Restoration or new construction? That is a dilemma that educational leaders, particularly superintendents and school business officials, have had to wrestle with for years. In the past, state regulations often dictated whether school buildings should be renovated or torn down to make way for new construction. State reimbursement guidelines favored new construction over restoration for public school development by either withholding funds or denying the full state support for restoration projects. In fact, some states established complex formulas that mandated new construction if the cost of restoration exceeded approximately two-thirds of the new construction costs.

Reversing the mindset among many educators and legislators that new construction is always the best option for districts has not been an easy sell for designers, preservationists, and school architects. However, restoration of school properties has been on the rise in recent years, fueled by citizens' interest in maintaining community landmarks, by districts' recognition of the importance of preserving existing schools as important community institutions, and by demonstrating that the restoration of aging buildings can be a cost-effective way to preserve history and create safe and exciting educational facilities.

At the same time, many education leaders recognize that for each community, different factors enter into the final



By Timothy J. Ilg, Ph.D., and David A. Dolph, Ph.D.

decision-making process. An assistant superintendent for business affairs summarized the process in this way: “There are no specific rules and regulations that you follow in making these decisions. You need to use a lot of common sense and you need to involve as many community groups and individuals as possible. Open communication, positive responsiveness to community wishes, and the creation of a sense of community ownership of the process will almost guarantee a successful completion of the construction projects.”

A superintendent who successfully restored a high school building said, “Our decision to renovate the high school building included a physical assessment of the present building conditions, an education program analysis and forecast of student growth, and cost estimates for renovating the existing high school or for building a new high school. It took months of planning and community input. We think we made the best decision for this community.”

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Although specific guidelines for making this important decision of renovation vis-à-vis new construction might not be appropriate in all situations, we discovered important lessons from a review of the literature and interviews with superintendents, school business managers, and other central office personnel.

We hope the six lessons we learned from colleagues in school systems throughout the country will help superintendents and school business officials bring their communities to consensus about what to do with their buildings.

Points to Ponder

1. Restoration or renovation? School leaders need to understand the difference between these two terms before discussing facility improvement. When renovating existing buildings, districts are not necessarily committed to preserving the architectural integrity of the buildings. Renovation projects can address basic safety issues or can be comprehensive overhauls of entire buildings. Projects can also address the interior finishes of buildings, such as lighting, ceilings, and electrical systems.

Restoration involves addressing physical facility needs and the educational adequacy of buildings, not the restoration of structures. Restoring buildings means

attempting to preserve their unique architecture during renovations and can cost districts more money than new construction.

Educational leaders must consider whether their communities are willing and able to pay the additional costs to maintain the “unique” look of schools or whether to seek substitutes that look like the originals but are more reasonable in terms of cost. For financially struggling districts, basic renovation might be the only feasible approach. Ultimately, if boards cannot restore buildings, educators must consider whether new construction is a better option.

2. Asking the right questions. Asking the right questions helps educators and their communities in the initial planning process. These questions not only focus conversations, but also temper the emotional exchanges that are certainly a part of the process. As such, it is important to consider these questions when beginning the process:

- Is the building in good enough physical condition to warrant restoration?
- Does the building have historical significance for the community?
- Is it to be considered an architectural landmark?
- Beyond the physical condition of the facility, can it be renovated to support technology and modern instructional programs?
- Is there local expertise, that is, architects, construction companies, and school personnel, to support an extensive renovation project?
- Does the community have a special connection to a historic school building to justify the additional costs for a complete restoration?
- What additional challenges will the district face in restoring buildings as opposed to new construction?
- What are the state and federal building codes and standards for restoring buildings?
- Are there any environmental concerns?
- If the building is no longer suitable for a school, does it still have value for the community at large?

3. Communication and involvement. District personnel stressed the importance of active community and staff involvement in the decision-making process. One superintendent laughed when he said, “We created a district-level facilities committee, an ad hoc yearly review committee, building committees, and probably some committees we didn’t know about. We updated the school board members on a monthly basis. We asked for the public’s opinion in the local papers on everything from the color of the exterior of the high school to the color of the stadium bleachers. The community felt as though it was part of the entire planning process.”

During the actual construction phase, district leadership should continue to keep the community and staff actively engaged in the process. As an assistant superintendent warned, “We did not see the importance of involving the principals, staff, and community during

the construction phase. That was a mistake. Once involved, they became our watchdogs. They observed and identified problems that were overlooked by the architects and contractors.”

- 4. Selecting the architect and contractor.** School administrators must be actively involved in all phases of construction projects, but they must also have the assistance of competent and committed architects and knowledgeable contractors. This is particularly true if schools boards choose to renovate school buildings.

Asking the right questions helps educators and their communities in the initial planning process.

The following summary for selecting an architectural firm might serve as a good model: “We invited eight firms to make one-hour presentations to a 10-member buildings and grounds committee. From these presentations and an extensive background check of each firm, the board of education selected a local firm with extensive experience in the restoration of older facilities. We asked the firm to identify a lead architect for all the restoration projects. These two decisions—selecting a firm with experience in restoring school buildings and working primarily with one architect—served the district well.”

School administrators would be wise to consider the restoration and construction of buildings as two very different processes. Thus, local architectural firms or contractors with no experience in extensive school building renovations might not be the right fit for districts.

- 5. Importance of school district visitations and research studies.** Whether a school board is committed to new construction, renovation, or a mixture of the two, we highly recommend that its facilities committee visit districts that have recently completed the process. Committee members can learn much from the “mistakes” and lessons of these other systems.

During their visits, school business officials and the facilities managers should ask about the effect of construction projects on the daily operations of districts. In addition, committee members should review Web links, books, and journal articles that can provide an extensive overview of schoolwide renovation and construction planning, financing, and project management.

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities provides educators with an excellent list of resources at <http://www.edfacilities.org/rl/renovation.cfm>. The following three documents should be particularly helpful for districts that have committed to renovating their build-

ings: “Renovating Older Schools: Reusing Older Schools Workshop” (ED442259); *Renovating Early and Middle 20th Century Schools* (ED437810); and “Preserving Heritage While Restoring and Improving Facilities: A Rural Community’s Experience” (ED445858). All three can be found at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>.

The National Park Service has an excellent article, “Identify, Retain, and Preserve,” outlining the standards for rehabilitating historic buildings at http://www.cr.nps.gov/HPS/tps/standguide/rehab/rehab_spacefeatfinish.htm.

Although this preplanning process will take some time, the community will be well served by an informed and knowledgeable facilities committee that will be prepared for all the unforeseen but expected problems in any construction project.

- 6. Expect the best.** Architects and contractors should be expected to meet all reasonable deadlines, and subpar work should give rise to delayed payments or substantial fines. Most of the district personnel interviewed for this article expressed some regret that they were not more forceful in dealing with contractors. In addition to pre-bid and preconstruction meetings, they all recommended weekly meetings at the beginning of the construction projects so problems and issues could be addressed immediately. Those involved in restoration projects learned the hard way that some contractors bid on such projects with no concept of the complexity of restoration work. Particularly with restoration projects, districts can expect the unexpected throughout the construction phase. It would be wise to have one “point person,” such as a school official, during the construction phase.

Key Factors

Deciding whether to restore older school facilities or abandon them for new ones is never an easy task for superintendents, school business officials, and communities. While the cost of restoration vis-à-vis new facilities is an important element, it should not be the only factor.

“Renovating Older Schools,” referenced earlier in this article, suggested three other important factors in making this crucial decision: the location, a building’s history, and a school’s relationship to the community. Education leaders must consider these, and many other factors thoughtfully and thoroughly before making final decisions. If education leaders are not careful, their mistakes at the decision-making level could create problems for the district that will last well into the future. ■

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