



# MISSION Impossible

How community collaboration saved one district \$40 million

**M**enomonie is a community of about 16,000 residents located in western Wisconsin. Home of the University of Wisconsin-Stout, the small city is a university town and a regional manufacturing and commerce center. Like many school districts in our state, the School District of the Menomonie Area (SDMA) had aging public school facilities.

The school district was faced with a 55-year-old high school building that was in need of serious upgrades. Over the years, the massive 300,000-square-foot building had experienced eight additions and a fire. The facility consisted of outdated spaces, some disrepair, and a feel of disorder and potential safety issues. Initially, the school board was faced with the option of razing the facility and rebuilding almost in entirety.

However, when told of a nearly \$60 million construction budget to create a new school, district leaders determined that construction at this level was beyond the district's and community's means.

The community's demographics reflect the college population with a young average age (42 percent between age 18-24) and a low average household income (just over \$31,000 in 2012). Data showed

that 25.6 percent of the children in Menomonie live below the poverty level.

To move forward, the district, working with SDS Architects, realized that an alternative plan would be needed to make the project fiscally feasible for taxpayers. However, the district also wanted to make sure that the project met its three main goals.

1. Create a safe and secure school.
2. Improve general education spaces and how to navigate the facility.
3. Improve athletic facilities.

## ■ A Shared Vision

The work began by gathering feedback from a community/district ad-hoc committee and a community survey. The district also held open houses and community listening



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— SDMA Superintendent Joe Zydowsky

sessions. Based on the feedback from the community, the school board reached a decision about what option they would like to pursue in an April 2013 referendum.

“Having a shared vision was instrumental in the success of the project,” said superintendent Joe Zydowsky. “It is critically important for school district leaders to align resources with the expectations of stakeholders and the community being served. The work by the school board and the school district’s leadership team to engage community members and create a strategic plan was the most important step in getting community buy-in and support.”

The board worked to further educate the community on what work would be done, its timeline, why it was needed, and how they will be impacted (both fiscally and programatically) by the referendum. Along with attending public meetings, SDS Architects produced conceptual drawings of the projects for the board to distribute throughout the district.



### ■ Plan for the Unexpected

The referendum passed and the remodeling work to the high school along with the two elementary schools began in April 2014 when school was still in session.

The first phase at the high school was to build a new gym/technology education area and convert an old courtyard into the new library. Once school was released for the summer, construction began on the music wing, new kitchen, and other remodeling. Throughout the 2014-15 academic year, SDS Architects

worked with the district to shuffle space so the educational needs continued to be met and student/staff safety remained a top priority. Construction was completed in time for the 2015-16 academic year.

It was challenging. Staff and classrooms were shuffled around as other areas were rebuilt. Throughout the process, Zydowsky said it was important for school leaders to expect the unexpected.

“Renovating and remodeling is much different than building new,” he said. “It is important to plan for the unexpected when developing the construction schedule and budget. In either case, it is very important to get the staff involved at the front end of the planning process to avoid surprises when the project is completed.”

Mike Meyers, director of building and grounds and safety director for the school district said the end result was worth the effort.

“In my past 30-plus years’ experience with renovation projects, this is the first time the whole building has been brought together to look as one,” he said. “It’s very difficult to differentiate the new from the original 55-year-old building.”

### ■ Lessons Learned

The lessons learned in this project can be applied to any school district with similar challenges.

#### 1) Become fixed on your goals and be open minded when developing the process to achieve the goals.

When the district began examining options, it seemed as though the only solution was to tear down and start from scratch. As they reviewed their goals for improving safety, the educational and athletic facilities, and the navigation through their facilities, they found alternate solutions that fit into their budget.

**2) Careful planning is a key to achieving results.** When looking at an overview of the project, the stages and scheduling might seem complicated. In fact, the careful and in-depth planning process took into account all aspects of the project and



## MENOMONIE QUICK FACTS

**301,790 sq ft**

*Total Area of School  
(prior to construction)*

**227,975 sq ft**

*Total Area of Remodeled space*

**25,210 sq ft**

*Total Area of New Construction*

**327,000 sq ft**

*Total Area of School  
(after construction)*

**\$20,191,300**

*Construction Budget*

**\$14,052,700**

*Remodeling Budget*

**\$7,400,000**

*New Construction*

led to a very smooth design, construction, and utilization schedule that helped keep all parties safe and comfortable while completing an aggressive completion timeline. Careful and thorough planning made the process easier on all involved.

**3) Collaboration can create opportunities.** The school district spent time listening to its constituents and was very communicative about needs, options, and opportunities. This search for solutions, openness to ideas, and commitment to good stewardship rightly won community support for the referendum and overall community pride upon completion of the project. ■