

Strategies for Successful School Construction and Design Projects

SERVICE ASSOCIATE Q & A

Q. *School construction can be a complex process whether you're building new or renovating. What are some of the most common misconceptions board members have?*

A. One of the most common misconceptions is that a construction manager only provides value once a referendum is approved or an architect has designed a project. This could not be further from reality. Ask school board members who have been through a facility assessment, facility planning, community survey, referendum, design, and construction process and they will tell you that it is very important to have all your professional consultants working together to support the district from the start of the process. Having someone at the table who understands the local market, codes, and most cost-effective options to address facility challenges does not mean you are going to build, it simply means you are doing effective due diligence so you can make smart decisions on behalf of your taxpayers.

Q. *Are there effective ways to involve students and staff in the facility planning and construction process?*

A. Absolutely. Educators know that many people learn through hands-on experiences, and construction provides ideal opportunities for project-based learning, and youth engagement. One of the early discussions we have with either administrators, or directly with career and technical education educa-

tors, is regarding the level of engagement they desire with the facility planning process and ultimately, construction. In our opinion, the more engagement the better. Why? We are dealing with labor shortages in our industry, and the deep-seated perception that a four-year postsecondary degree is still the primary path to success for students.

Q. *School facility construction usually requires the support of the community. What are some of the critical fundamental steps in gaining community support?*

A. There really are three key fundamentals that determine success when gaining community support. The first is the community has to be aware there is a referendum on the ballot. It sounds like common sense, but if the typical voter enters the voting booth and that is the first time they are actually made aware of the referendum, they will vote no. Second, the community must have their top questions answered. By having their questions answered, it eliminates their own potential confusion or need to "fill in the blanks" with an answer, and also gives them confidence in the process. Finally, and most important, the community must have a sense of urgency that now is the time to take action, rather than wait for some arbitrary date in the future.

Q. *Are there any new tools or strategies districts are using to engage their communities?*



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A. There is a recognition that for most districts 70 percent of their residents are not parents or staff, so a large percentage of the community rarely, if ever, engages with the district. Districts are finding value in engaging with key communicator groups, that help share the district's story on an ongoing basis. Districts are working more closely with their municipalities, technical and community colleges, libraries, YMCAs, and senior centers to both share information and also potentially collaborate to offer services. The biggest challenges districts have is when communication breaks down and trust is weakened. Our most successful clients believe in active, ongoing engagement to break down perceived barriers and misconceptions, long before they begin talking about the potential for facility planning or referendum. ■

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