

# Building Community While Building Your Schools

By Greg Stack, AIA, LEED® AP

How do you get everybody on the same page? How do you get your school board behind a vision? How do you get your community to focus on the needs of your school district?

If you have ever asked yourself these questions, you know there is no single answer. Achieving support is an iterative process that builds on many small steps. Building trust and allowing constituents to feel ownership of an idea is the process of building community.

A very powerful tool in any effort to build community is giving people a common cause and a stake in the outcome of their own decisions. A concrete way to do this is by involving your citizens in the facilities planning of their schools. Planning in this sense means everything from rethinking curriculum to deciding on facilities needs. Facilities planning is powerful because it is tangible. People feel they have a better grasp of items like building condition, schedules and costs than they do of more esoteric issues such as learning theory or pedagogy, but as it turns out facilities planning is a great opportunity to explore these issues as well. How children learn and what teachers teach have a bearing on the buildings we create. Exploring the issues that inform facilities decisions is an ideal way to bring your community to a broader understanding of the issues your district faces as it tries to do its job of education.

A good example of a facilities planning effort that built community is the effort in one small suburban/rural district. This relatively small but growing district of 8500 students had one high school, an alternative school, a freshman campus, two middle schools, and nine elementaries and was in need of better facilities. Existing facilities were inadequate in terms of both condition and

**Building Schools can leave you with more than just buildings; it can leave you with stronger community support for your district.**

configuration. Libraries were often too small, science labs inadequate, and arts spaces of substandard size, inefficient configuration, or both. In addition, the district had lost its way. It had passed only eight bonds in the last 20 years for a total of \$46M while failing four other bond measures. In 2003, consultants accessed the need for school facilities at over \$450M not including inflation.

The citizens had lost faith in the district in part because in 1994, the district completed a new district office when people still saw a great need for school facilities. The level of trust had been very low since that time. In 2003, under new leadership, the district embarked on a process to address its facilities needs, but with the realization that building community was essential to the success of any facilities program.


The process started with the superintendent establishing a culture of openness in the district. He reached out to citizens through small gatherings over coffee and by speaking to community organizations. With the board, he formed a 35-member Citizens Facilities Advisory Committee or CFAC to study facility needs and make a recommendation for action.

The CFAC, who were also “key communicators” in the district, were a vital component in building community. It was comprised of supporters and skeptics, liberals and conservatives, and representatives from growing and static areas of the district. Rather than lead the CFAC to a conclusion, the committee was given free rein to investigate any and all issues they thought might be rel-

evant to its recommendation. To assist them, a facilitator was hired, and district staff assisted in the leg work of finding the information the CFAC requested.

Given the size of the need, \$450M, a long-term approach was needed to address facility problems over time. The committee struggled with this, but out of this struggle came community and momentum for action. The committee met weekly for nine months and over this time came to know and trust each other. More importantly, it came to know and trust the school district when they saw that there was no hidden agenda to its work. It saw that the district was truly being open with facts about costs, curriculum, operation, and all the other issues they were considering.

Committee members told their peers about this “new openness” and in so doing enlarged the community of trust to a broader group of citizens. The CFAC considered 13 long-term development options and unanimously selected a single option to recommend to the board and ultimately to voters. In 2004, the voters approved a bond measure for \$140M to build a new high school and elementary school and to rebuild their existing high school. Now, five years later, with the trust of their citizenry, the school district is working on projects from their second bond for \$240M.

The success of this process has created a stronger community, one that supports its schools not only for capital projects, but also in the broader context of its educational mission. 

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