Research shows that school facilities impact student achievement in numerous ways. Yet many school districts struggle to make sure that their students attend school in buildings that will maximize their performance. By developing sound policies related to school facilities, districts can make sure that they are getting the most out of every dollar they spend.

Facilities Recommendations for Local School Districts

Prioritize maintenance and renovation

- Dedicate a percentage of revenue to maintenance
  - School districts often struggle to meet their instructional and operational needs with existing revenue, leaving very little funds for maintenance. However, as many school districts in Louisiana know first-hand, ignoring maintenance needs leads to greater facilities costs in the long run. Adopting a policy of dedicating a set percentage of revenue to maintenance is one step school districts can take to make sure that their buildings provide good learning environments for years to come. Experts recommend that public entities dedicate 2-4% of the total replacement cost of a building to maintenance and repairs every year.
- Undertake life cycle cost analysis for renovation and construction projects – Over the typical lifespan of a building, operation and maintenance normally cost more than initial construction. Anytime a new renovation or construction project is planned, school districts should undertake life cycle cost analysis to consider what the building will cost once it is built. This way school districts can make decisions during the construction phase that will minimize costs throughout the life of the building.

- Emphasize renovation in district policy – Some school districts have policies that require a comparison of the cost of renovating an existing building and the cost of constructing a new facility. If the cost of renovation exceeds a certain percentage of the cost of new construction, district policy prohibits the choice of renovation. Districts with such policies should replace them with those that allow for more renovation so that schools can be maintained.

Use equitable formulas to allocate facilities dollars

- Allocation can be per student or per square foot – Formulas that allocate maintenance and repair dollars based on enrollment or square footage provide a way to distribute funds in an equitable manner.

- Allocation can also be based on need as determined by an independent assessment – Some school districts have undertaken facility assessments that identify specific deficiencies and needs at every building. In these cases, it is possible to equitably distribute facilities funds based on the need of individual buildings, even if some buildings receive significantly more funds than others.

- Allocation should not be based on school board districts – In any case, maintenance and repair funding for buildings should not merely be distributed equally among the districts of school board members but rather based on need.

Develop community partnerships to make schools available for joint use

Joint use refers to using school buildings for purposes other than those directly related to the school. One of the easiest ways to implement joint use is to make the school building available to community groups and other organizations. Doing so can provide a valuable resource for the local community and build community support for school facilities, making it easier for schools to raise facilities funds in the future. School boards should develop policies that outline which school facilities are available for joint use and when. Districts should also develop estimates of the cost of joint use and an accompanying fee schedule; they may also want to consider a policy that outlines possible fee discounts for civic groups.

Adopt building standards and assess buildings regularly

- Develop basic standards – Given the severe funding constraints that many school districts face today, it may be difficult to undertake a detailed assessment. However, local districts can develop a priority list of a limited number of standards around key building elements. An assessment of these elements can be done by faculty and staff on an on-going basis.

- Develop standards related to health and safety – School boards can adopt standards to protect the health and safety of students, teachers, and staff. For example, a board could require regular inspections for trip and fall hazards. Repairs related to possible hazards can be prioritized as a matter of standing policy.

- Develop standards related to educational adequacy – School boards can adopt standards that relate to curriculum and pedagogy. Educational adequacy standards often address everything from the layout of the building to the technological capabilities of individual rooms. However, school boards can develop standards that can be met even with existing facilities, such as creating spaces for outdoor learning for elementary schools and maintaining working science labs in high schools.
WHY SCHOOL SITING MATTERS

Decisions about where our schools are located impact not only students, parents, and teachers but also the broader community. Because school buildings are such large investments of public dollars, it is important that local school districts site their schools in a way that not only achieves educational objectives but also anchors local neighborhoods; supports better public health; respects history; ensures safe routes to school; and considers the wishes of students, parents, and communities. School siting decisions are made by every school district, whether they realize it or not. By deciding to adequately maintain an existing facility, a school district is deciding to keep a school at a site that is working for the school community and the community around it.

STATEWIDE SCHOOL SITING SUMMIT

In July 2010, the Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University and the Center for Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans hosted a statewide summit on school siting issues.

This summit was part of a grant under the “Helping Johnny Walk to School: Sustaining Communities through Smart School Policy” program, funded through a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The purpose of the grant was to help localities in Louisiana site their schools in a way that not only achieves educational objectives, but also anchors local neighborhoods, supports better public health, and creates a cleaner environment.

The summit brought together people from a variety of fields – historic preservation, public health, education, local government, and nonprofits, among others – to begin to think more holistically about school siting because many interests can be served at once by good siting decisions.

The recommendations presented here are a result of the statewide summit.

Resources

Building Educational Success Together – Innovative Practice Areas
www.bestfacilities.org/best-home/InnovativePractice.asp
Center for Cities & Schools – Joint Use Schools Initiative
citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/joint-use.html
Colorado Historical Society – Universal Conservation Maintenance Plan
coloradohistory-oahp.org/programareas/shf/plan.htm
Helping Johnny Walk to School Program
http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/historic-schools/additional-resources/community_centered_schools.html
Safe Routes to School National Partnership
www.saferoutespartnership.org
Did You Know?

Louisiana is one of only 9 states with no state-level support for facilities.

Most states provide funding to help local school districts meet their facilities needs; Louisiana does not. The state could provide assistance to struggling local districts in a number of ways:

- Cost-sharing programs for construction and renovation projects for schools;
- Revolving loan funds; and
- Technical assistance programs

The federal Safe Routes to School program makes funds available to local school districts and other organizations to enable and encourage students to walk and bike to school.

Making it safer and more appealing for students to walk and bike to school is an excellent way for school districts to improve their facilities. Schools that are sited in neighborhoods help build communities.

- The federal Safe Routes to School program provides funding for infrastructure projects and for programming activities.
- In 2010, $2.6 million was available to schools and other organizations in Louisiana for Safe Routes to School projects.

http://education.tulane.edu