

Superintendents Should Consider a Feasibility Study, Especially Those Who Are New to The District

By: Dr. Del Jarman, Educational Specialist and Business Development Executive

Traditionally, school boards and superintendents have considered a feasibility study only when the district was planning a substantial building or renovation project. But, with financial challenges now weighing heavily on public school budgets, what was once known as, “The Golden Age of School Construction,” has become a thing of the past. Facility concerns still exist, however, and schools are meeting those challenges in new and creative ways. Today, schools are breaking large projects into several smaller ones – usually in the neighborhood of \$2 million or less, and stretching the timeline for these projects over multiple years. While this game plan allows a district to address its needs in a manner which is less threatening to its community, changing to this mode has the potential to produce a more narrow scope of the district’s vision. Long-range planning now takes a back seat to, “What’s the next fire we have to put out?” As one who has taught educational facilities classes in multiple universities, I have often been asked, “What good is a feasibility study if one doesn’t have the means to do a meaningful construction project?”

The answer to that depends upon what types of questions a school district wants to have answered. Feasibility studies can either be narrowly focused or “full blown.” I consider a full blown study to consist of five distinct areas: (1) demographics, (2) educational programming, (3) school and community, (4) review of current facilities including potential safety concerns, and (5) review of current financial obligations coupled with long-term financial planning.

Demographics aren’t always about classrooms and classroom space. A study can often point out potential enrollment bubbles and gaps and with more than 80% of a school district’s general budget devoted to salaries and benefits, developing a long range staffing plan can pay huge dividends.

Educational programming looks at what a district’s current curriculum is, but it also helps a district identify future programming goals. A feasibility study helps a district answer the question, “Here’s what we look like now, but what do we want to look like in the future?”

It’s easy to see that community involvement and support for education is now at the critical stage. Dwindling state resources are pushing more Indiana schools to consider referendums for operational budgets not just referendums for facility upgrades and knowing the pulse of the community is critical to successful planning for these types of campaigns.

When it comes to the area of school facilities, a superintendent and school board are constantly looking to ensure that their buildings provide a safe and secure environment. But the question is not only whether the district can meet the needs of its current students but, when modifications are necessary, will the district be able to meet the needs of its future students?

Finally, recently enacted legislation has once again changed the face of school finance. Local cities and towns have now been given the option to decide whether business equipment is subject to taxation.

This tax revenue (estimated to be just over one billion per year) has long been a source of revenue that school districts have counted on to support their operational budgets. This new wrinkle has the potential to pit cities and towns against each other. No city wants to lose a potential business partner to its neighbor because it didn't offer enough incentives. Will a school district be able to meet its current financial obligations if local government makes the decision to grant tax relief to businesses? And, how will this affect a district's long range planning for both operational budgets and facility budgets?

For superintendents who have not recently conducted or at least considered a feasibility study, now may be the time to discuss this option with the school board. And, for a superintendent who is relatively new to the district, a feasibility study can yield a wealth of helpful information towards development of a strategic long-range plan.

Depending upon the scope of the study, feasibilities can be as inexpensive as a few thousand dollars. However, even full blown studies, utilized by some of the larger districts are relatively less expensive than one might imagine. These studies usually run less than \$20K. OMS has years of experience in developing studies to help its clients plan for the future. If you would like to discuss the possibility of how a study can help your school district, please give us a call.

Dr. Del Jarman is a former school superintendent in Indiana, Kentucky and Nevada. After retiring from the superintendency, he became a professor at Ball State, The Citadel and the University of Nevada/Reno. As a superintendent, he oversaw construction projects totaling \$100,000,000. His university teaching focus was school facilities. Dr. Jarman retired from Ball State and recently joined the OMS team. Contact him at 317-503-5458 or email him at djarman@omscorp.net.