

Addressing District's Top Concerns through Thoughtful Planning and Design

On nearly every front school districts throughout California are facing unprecedented challenges.

The last thing on most educational leader's minds is facilities or master planning issues. Ironically, a strategic comprehensive master plan and well designed facilities can directly and positively impact each of these critical challenges!

In recent client surveys, these challenges were recurring themes mentioned by superintendents, business managers and facility directors State wide.

- 1. Operational Budget Crisis** - Reducing Costs, Insuring Solvency and Retaining Staff/Programs
- 2. Academic Crisis** - Increasing Attendance and Improving Performance
- 3. Leadership Crisis** - Enhancing Leadership and Weathering Political Turmoil
- 4. Enrollment Decline Crisis** - Independent Charter Schools are Drawing Top Students Away
- 5. Facilities Funding Crisis** - Leveraging Other People's Money

Traditionally, master planning has been largely comprised of new schools or additions based on demographic growth and/or a listing of facilities needs in terms of typical repair and replacement issues. For the most part, the evaluation, budgeting, prioritization, and design of this type of work has not consistently engaged broader staff and community members in a dialog about rethinking the prevailing wisdom surrounding public education. The investment in real planning is often seen as a burden from both a time and expense standpoint, and therefore gets short changed from a budget, schedule, and staff commitment perspective. The perfect storm of crisis existing today creates an environment that not only encourages this broader dialog and investment but; the future survival of public education mandates that it occur!

An inclusive strategic and comprehensive master plan will bring focus to meaningful changes addressing the budget crisis by identifying the most efficient means to carry out the operations of the district with the physical resources available. This includes energy saving infrastructure improvements, facilities utilization adjustments, and other asset management approaches that will lower operating costs and free up cash flow. The result will be more financial resources available to address staffing needs and general financial stability.

The key to sustaining reform initiatives is widespread buy-in and ownership throughout the planning and design process by stakeholders.



Comprehensive planning, including teacher driven educational specifications, will identify research-based alternative instructional delivery methods and career pathways that will respond to student needs. Whether the outcome is small learning communities, career and technical education academies, thematic span schools including early child development programs, or other configurations, the result will be more students graduating and increased performance. The key to sustaining reform initiatives is widespread buy-in and ownership throughout the planning and design process by stakeholders. An added benefit to responsive program reforms may include enhanced program funding from State and Federal sources.

A broad-based master plan centered on data driven guiding principles and inclusive of sound financial planning will provide a stable foundation that will better withstand special interest criticism and short-sighted thinking. The process of engaging in a strategic planning effort is also a significant opportunity to identify and develop site and district leadership skills. Alternatively, the process spotlights staff that are hanging on to the status quo and are holding back the process of improvement.

A community-based master plan that engages parents and students in the process of determining what choices and alternatives are desirable is critical to attracting and retaining top students. Grade spans, school size, academic and career themes, district charters, and business and higher education partnerships can all be explored through a diligent planning process as a viable means to create desirable choices for parents and students. More attractive programs and choices help keep students in school and stabilize ADA funding. As meaningful changes begin to take shape in the district, there may be cause to rebrand the district's image to the community and internally to the staff and students.

Lastly, a thorough master plan identifies realistic sources of funding and cash flow to implement the facilities improvements in a diligent and responsible manner. Other public and/or private partners who share similar facilities and compatible use schedules are engaged. Alternative project delivery methods, including developer built/financing are evaluated from a cost/benefit/risk standpoint against traditional approaches. All other sources of local, state, and federal funding/financing are thoroughly evaluated and pursued where reasonable. Often times, financial strategies that were impractical even a year or two ago make very strong sense now, given the favorable bidding environment.

Stew Friedman of the *Harvard Business Review* recently stated, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” There are plenty of leaders who are satisfied with waiting for someone else to make the first move, or for something to occur that will change the current circumstance. A true leader sees the opportunity when faced with challenges and their responsibility to act on that opportunity on behalf of those for whom they lead.

For more details about how planning and design can help address school district’s top challenges, please contact HMC Architect’s Pre-K-12 Practice Leader, John Nichols.

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