

Service Associate Q&A

Working Successfully with Your School Building Contractor and Other Considerations



Ben Templin is vice president of pre-construction services at Scherrer Construction Company.



Q. *What are some keys to planning and executing a successful school building project?*

A. The project must have a clearly defined plan, solid communication channels and a clear system of checks and balances along the way. Make certain your contractor will provide detailed estimates and effective solutions that guarantee your school district will receive what is promised on time and within budget. A building project is essentially about relationships — relationships with school administrators, students, contractors and subcontractors. Know who you're working with, ensure they have the experience and knowledge to complete the project at hand as well as a commitment to the community as a whole.

Q. *What are some important factors for school board members to keep in mind when considering a construction firm?*

A. The selected construction company should work in tandem with school administrators, staff and communities to manage this delicate balance and provide guidance to make the best decisions. First and foremost, schools should never compromise on safety. With many of our K-12 projects taking place on active campuses, student safety and the safety of workers is of utmost importance. Hire a contractor that has a superior safety record, customized safety program and an on-site OSHA certified safety director to ensure that students, faculty, and everyone else on site are always protected.

Secondly, opt for experience. The landscape of school construction

has changed dramatically. Choose a construction firm that has the experience to understand the unique challenges of K-12 construction and utilizes best practices to create customized, student-centered learning spaces. Their experience also ensures that their projects will be done right and with the upmost professionalism. Lastly, schools are a source of community pride and your contractor should work in tandem with the district to provide referendum support. A referendum team can assist in identifying your needs, educate the public with an effective communications plan, and, ultimately, achieve community support.

Q. *With school districts facing financial challenges, are there new building materials or strategies that are helping schools build facilities more efficiently or less expensively without compromising the finished product?*

A. Choosing a contractor that designs and builds to LEED standards will not only result in a building that is good for the environment, but also provides immediate and long-term economic benefits. There is a misconception that it is the initial upfront costs of the building that is the most expensive, when in reality it is the costs associated with the building over its lifespan. Contractors well versed in LEED practices will also be knowledgeable about state funding programs such as ACT 32, which allows school districts to undergo facility improvements such as MEP (mechanical, electrical, plumbing), safety, and technology upgrades to help reduce or avoid long-term energy or operational costs. Schools are also a community project, so

work with contractors that strive to build a team of local employees, subcontractors, and suppliers dedicated to serving the taxpayers and stimulating the local economy.

Q. *What advice would you give to school leaders to help ensure that they have a positive experience with their builder?*

A. Whether large project or small, selecting the right construction management team for your project can make the difference between a great experience and one that will bring headaches and unforeseen costs. Make sure you're working with a contractor that has longevity, experience, and integrity and is a solid communicator. But you also must have a clear understanding of your project goals and expectations. Make sure you have a clear definition of the project scope, budget and timeline and communicate those objectives clearly to your contractor. Stay involved and keep communication channels open throughout the process. ■

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