

Service Associate Q&A

Matt Wolfert of Bray Architects talks about flexibility and the school board member's role in school design

Editor's note: Each issue, we pose questions to a WASB Service Associate to share the good work that these businesses do with Wisconsin public schools.



Matt Wolfert, AIA, LEED AP, is president and principal of Bray Architects



Q. *What is a recent project Bray Architects has completed? What are some of the parts of this project that you are proud of?*

A. There are so many great schools we have completed recently including the LEED Gold Certified Oaklawn Elementary School in Oshkosh, the new Northside Elementary in La Crosse and numerous additions, renovations and new buildings for the Beloit School District. The project that is probably the most innovative and exciting is the Kromrey Middle School Addition & Renovation in Middleton. The new Kromrey will have collaborative learning environments at every grade level, a modern library with fewer books and more flexible learning space, the latest in educational furniture, and a geothermal HVAC system, just to name some of the features we are very excited about.

Q. *How do you strike a balance between designing a school building that is practical and cost-effective but also attractive and comfortable?*

A. This is one of the greatest challenges we face in designing K-12 schools throughout Wisconsin. The main reason is because design is subjective and emotional. What one person or group may love, another may have a strong emotional dislike for. The best way to balance the two is to engage the broader community numerous times throughout the

planning and design phase. The goal is not to ask the community to design the building, but to provide feedback on what “attractive and comfortable” means to the users and their community.

Q. *What are some strategies to design a school building that is flexible enough to accommodate future innovations in education?*

A. Flexibility is one of the most important discussions we have with every client. A number of strategies we have successfully implemented include the use of operable glass walls (the brand NanaWall, for example) to connect collaboration and classroom spaces. Other less visible approaches include the use of drywall instead of concrete block walls between classrooms allowing for doors or openings to be installed over a weekend or summer and the coiling of extra data cabling above the ceiling to allow for an existing data location to be moved to another wall in the room without having to pull a new wire.

Q. *What can school board members do to create a good working relationship with an architect and communicate their vision for their school building?*

A. Beyond putting us first on the agenda at each meeting? Seriously, we see the most success when a school board member listens closely to their administrators, their educators, their architect and sometimes their stu-

dents before deciding on the best direction for a building project. Cost is very important but it shouldn't be the only factor considered when making a building-related decision.

Q. *How can the design of a school building positively affect student learning?*

A. The availability of natural light, the acoustical separation of spaces, the ability to control the climate of a space, and the flexibility of space size and type to support all learning and teaching styles are just a few ways a building can positively affect learning. Our job as educational design architects is to transfer the needs of a client into sites, buildings, and spaces that enhance the way students learn and teachers teach. ■

The WASB Service Associates Program includes more than 20 businesses and organizations that have been recognized by the WASB Board of Directors as reputable businesses and partners of public education in Wisconsin. For more information, visit wasb.org and select "Service Associates."

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