



Say Farewell or Renovate?

You've likely attended a basketball game where the student section of the home team started rattling their keys. Facetiously, they're telling the bus driver of the opposing team to start the bus because the visiting team is down and the game is essentially over. For many educational leaders, people have been figuratively rattling their keys for years, signaling that one of the school buildings is ready to lose its place as a contender in the facilities arena. Whether the building is inefficient, ineffective, poorly lit, too small, too large, or too low-tech, it might be time to admit defeat.

But, how do you know what the right decision is? As you consider if it's time to metaphorically "start the

bus," there are four critical areas to explore: physical condition, site considerations, educational adequacy, and probable disruption. As you work through this investigation, reflect on engaging with outside consultants—architects and engineers—who can share their expertise and provide a third-party evaluation. Closely examining these areas will help you determine if it's time to say farewell to your building, or if renovation is feasible.

■ A Prime Example

The Berlin Area School District's scrutiny of their existing middle school provides an exceptional example of determining when it's time to say goodbye to your school. Their three-story middle school,

designed as a high school, was built in 1918. It was expanded in 1954 and again in 1985. The 1954 addition included classrooms, lower-level locker rooms, a two-station gymnasium with stage, and tech education and maintenance spaces. The addition in 1985 provided two stories of classrooms.

In 2011, the middle school welcomed a wheelchair-bound student and a spotlight was focused upon the deficiencies of the building for those with disabilities. But, that wasn't the only issue with the physical condition of the school. Plumbing was severely corroded below the floor slab. Boilers were archaic and located far from the end of the 1985 classroom addition. This created such discomfort for those



How to handle aging school buildings in your district



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teachers that they took alternative measures to keep warm in the winter. Cracks in the walls were significant enough that daylight could be seen through the walls, especially in the gym where a portion of one wall was also bowing in.

The physical condition wasn't the only concern. As the educational adequacy was studied, the seventh grade classrooms were on different floors and wings, making team teaching a challenge. The eighth grade classrooms were larger than needed — an inefficient use of space.

As well, the site conditions of Berlin Middle School had issues that needed remedying. The limited size of the property created several problems, including vehicle congestion for parents and buses at pick-up and

drop-off times and no green space for recess, or playing fields other than one baseball diamond.

After careful deliberation, it was determined that the best decision was to build an addition for 375 middle school students onto the existing high school. This allowed for the sharing of the auditorium and cafeteria/kitchen as well as Technical Education and Family & Consumer Education spaces. Connecting the new middle school with the high school would eliminate duplicating underutilized spaces, remove travel time for teachers who taught at both campuses, and offer improved spaces for students in all middle and high school grades.

The creativity of this solution was considered cost-effective by area taxpayers, and was enhanced even more for the community by the selling of the old school which was remodeled into apartments. The team at the Berlin Area School District had thoroughly examined critical areas and made wise decisions.

Physical Conditions

As you judge a building's condition, it's vital to scrutinize the structural elements and the mechanical, electrical and plumbing infrastructure to evaluate their remaining life span and ability to be expanded or reconfigured. As well, you should consider the technology infrastructure and



equipment, disability-access issues (particularly bathrooms and accessible routes), and required code updates such as fire separations.

Maintenance and ongoing operational costs should also be considered, along with evaluating more efficient HVAC systems and lighting. Replacing windows would take advantage of the numerous technical advances that have been made in the design of windows to prevent heat/energy loss and provide natural light, without glare.

Examining which solutions are available to fix existing problems and if there are significant costs inherent to address building deficiencies are critical contemplations.

■ Educational Conditions

Additionally, school districts should determine the educational conditions that are influenced by the structure. As you seek to deliver 21st century learning, what facility challenges are present? Once identified, can remodeling, building additions, or new construction address those issues? The grouping of classrooms within

each grade and/or departments and related subjects, class size and number of classrooms, and options for flexible teaching spaces are all important factors to evaluate.

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■ Site Considerations

Similar attention should be given to the overall site. Is the circulation of buses, parents, pedestrians and cyclists at drop-off and pick-up times safe? Are the egress and ingress patterns between school property and public streets safe? If an expansion is considered, you should examine if there is room for supplemental parking, facilities, playing fields, storm water management, and more.

Contingent upon the assessment of the existing property, it may be best to look at other suitable – and available — building sites within the district. If none are acceptable, alternative options may need to be formulated, such as a grade reconfiguration or redrawing attendance boundaries to reduce the number of students at an overcrowded location or locating playing fields offsite to create room for a building expansion.

■ Probable Disruption

Another major component to deliberate, especially if looking at a reno-

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The facilities assessment includes evaluation of both internal and external conditions, existing intergovernmental coordination, and the history of capital improvements.

The first part of the assessment ascertains the extent of deferred maintenance, remaining facility life, and renovations needed. The second part of the facility assessment categorizes and defines the use of the facilities within the existing academic program. This includes evaluating the effectiveness of how programs and departments use the current facilities.

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vation or addition that will take more time to complete than one summer, is how to handle the potential disruption. Phasing construction work can sometimes allow classes to continue with minimal disruption. Portable classrooms can be used if the site provides ample room for them. Construction trailers will be needed; so be sure to include those in your space planning. In some instances, an alternative location for classes might be available. It is easy to overlook the amount of space that is needed for construction and safe site circulation. Be sure to look at all alternatives.

■ Game Over or Makeover?

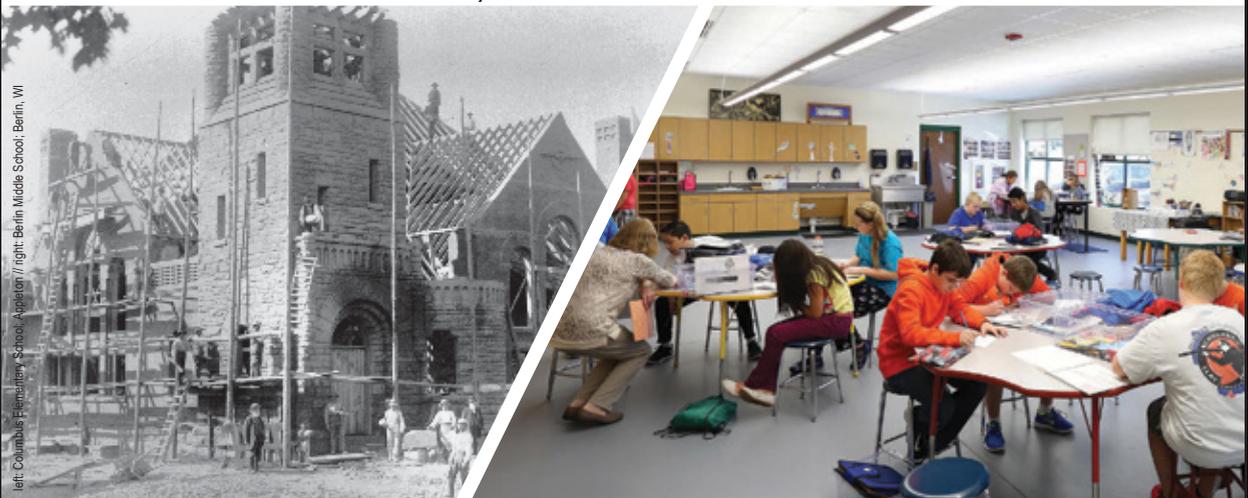
As you consider the next 20 years, ask yourself, “Would it be better to build a new structure than to continue to maintain the existing one?” Depending upon the answer to that question, you can decide if the “game is over” or if renovation is the right solution. Be certain to examine the

physical and educational conditions while also considering the site and the likelihood of disruption. With this framework, you’ll be well prepared to make decisions that will provide an environment to lead students to educational victory! ■

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left: Columbus Flemish School, Appleton / right: Berlin Middle School, Berlin, WI

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