

# Service Associate Q&A

## Kevin Hickman of JP Cullen tackles school district facility issues

*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.*



**Kevin Hickman** is director of business development with JP Cullen.



**Q.** *When assessing facilities, how should school districts determine whether to build new or to renovate/retrofit a building?*

**A.** Any decision regarding building new or renovating must be done by evaluating your district's priorities and then effectively planning through the lens of those priorities. The trend in K-12 is certainly to do the best with what you already have, so many of the districts I work with are evaluating remodeling or additions to their current facilities prior to looking at building new schools. If you will need to go to referendum to fund your construction, it will be critically important to have the right long-range facilities plan, as well as a community and staff engagement plan in place, which will necessarily include a thorough evaluation of facility options.

**Q.** *What are some of the biggest school facility challenges you see in Wisconsin public schools?*

**A.** As I travel around the state meeting with different districts, I have heard three consistent challenges that ultimately relate to facilities. The first involves how folks can do more (or enough) with less financial resources. Second, how do districts upgrade their facilities to address the competitive reality they face? Finally, how do districts communicate their facility

challenges in a way that centers on effectively educating students in a 21st century learning environment? Your district may face other challenges, but these three seem to be almost universal for public schools in Wisconsin.

**Q.** *What are some solutions to these challenges?*

**A.** I would argue your solution lies in having the right communications strategy in place. A communications strategy is driven by data specific to your district regarding how people prefer to receive information, what information sources they trust, and how the district is currently perceived by the community. Being able to utilize key communicator groups, faculty, and other thought leaders in your community should be an advantage to districts facing these challenging issues.

**Q.** *How have school facilities changed in the past 20 years?*

**A.** Most districts I work with have really shifted their focus to addressing functionality; cost drives decision making more than ever. Passing referenda is still the preferred route to fund upgrading facilities. Although having the right plan is more of a determining factor of referenda success than cost, districts pay particular attention to squeezing as much value as possible out of their facilities budgets. The desire for flexible learning environ-

ments and the use of technology have really driven design and construction efforts over the past five years; facilities are built around technology today.

**Q.** *What would your dream school look like?*

**A.** Of course my dream school would have students and educators working within an environment that encourages high performance. Even more importantly, and inclusive of the security concerns districts must face, the school would serve as a central gathering place for the community, encouraging dialogue about best practices, performance standards, school finance, and community engagement. This openness to those in the community would foster a sense of ownership by everyone in the district, not just those with school-aged children. ■

*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](http://wasb.org) and select "Service Associates."*

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