

# School Security, Construction Trends and More

## SERVICE ASSOCIATE Q & A



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**Q.** *What advice would you give to a school board that is about to begin the process of building or renovating a school facility?*

**A.** Partner with a construction manager or design-build firm as early as possible. There are so many things we can do to mitigate risk to the district, identify cost-saving measures, and shorten the schedule, but the later in the process a firm is brought on board, the more those opportunities are lost. Additionally, if you're planning to potentially pursue a referendum, a construction manager with that experience who can act as a guide and help carry the load is invaluable. There are a lot of potential pitfalls along the way, many exclusive to K-12 projects, that can easily trip up an inexperienced contractor. Unfortunately, in those cases, it's the district that suffers for it.

**Q.** *What are some important factors for school board members when selecting a construction firm?*

**A.** It almost goes without saying but you need a partner you can trust. The taxpayers in the district are going to expect transparency for the board. How can you give that to them if your contractor isn't transparent and open with you? If you have questions about the budget or how money is being spent, will your contractor be able to quickly furnish that information in a way that's easy to understand and relay?

Along those same lines, is your

construction partner going to go the extra mile to keep local tradespeople and subcontractors involved in the project? We've always been a firm believer that school projects are an investment in the community through better educational opportunities for the students, but also for the local workforce. We always recommend that districts talk to their construction manager about how certain portions of the work might be broken down into smaller chunks so local subcontractors who otherwise wouldn't have the resources to participate, can be included in the work.

**Q.** *Are you seeing any trends in new school facilities projects?*

**A.** The big hot-button issue is security. A lot of our schools were not built at a time when people were thinking about the possibility of an armed intruder. We've been getting so many requests for small security upgrades — bullet-proof glass, new locks on the doors — that we formed a small projects group to handle them. With the state announcing \$100 million in grants earmarked for school security improvements, I'm sure we'll continue to be very busy on that front. Even for larger-scale projects — new construction, significant remodels — security is always a big consideration for the design. Lots of schools are reconfiguring their arrangements to make sure no one can walk into the school without going past the administrative office.

**Q.** *Is there anything new or exciting in school construction/design?*

**A.** One thing we've been seeing a lot of, especially in rural districts, is a heavy investment in tech ed, agricultural ed and STEM spaces. Many schools are beginning to question the current line of thinking that sees college readiness as the endgame to primary education. A glutted post-college market, skyrocketing student loan debt, and a dearth of well-trained tradespeople have created some significant hurdles for our state's economic future. Having true tech ed, agricultural ed and STEM spaces versus the old-school shop class is one way that schools are moving to address the changing labor needs in our communities. ■

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