



## THE PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR K-12 FACILITIES

by Alan Dessoiff

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With their budgets already tight because of shifting spending priorities, and facing severe increases in energy costs, facilities administrators at K-12 schools and districts are girding for a tough winter. In public school districts and on private school campuses, facilities managers and business officers agree that they will have to do more with less, and it will be difficult.

"Money is always an issue here," says Edward Collins, facilities director for the Middletown (RI) Public Schools. "Do we have the money to do everything? Absolutely not. Nobody does," asserts Douglas Eaton, director of facilities management and construction in the Little Rock (AR) School District.

"There's never been enough money to take care of all our needs," agrees Roger Young, assistant superintendent for finance and facilities in the Manchester Essex (MA) Regional School District. He also chairs the School Facilities Management Committee of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO International) in Reston, Virginia.

Bob Carlson, director of management services for the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of 65 of the largest urban U.S. public school systems, suggests that the underfunding for facilities management for public schools stems from pressures on states and municipalities created by the federal No Child Left Behind law.

The law's requirements for stepped-up achievement by students in the classroom have caused state education agencies, local school boards, and administrators to put more money into the instructional side of their budgets, Carlson says. "No one is faulting that, but it's the core business of the schools where the pressure is," he declares.

But without matching revenue increases, the additional funding for instruction comes from cuts in support services, including facilities management, Carlson says. "All the operations sides of school systems are being required to suck it up and do more with less," he states.

Young, citing documentation by the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education, says there has been "a general deterioration" of school facilities. When budgets are tight, he says, "school districts want to preserve what is happening in the classroom, and the maintenance budget suffers. People say, 'Well, we can delay putting on a roof or replacing those windows or ceiling tiles, or we'll cut back the custodial staff and only clean every other day.' School districts generally look at maintenance as a place to cut and help balance the budget."

Dean Henrick's experience as supervisor of buildings and grounds in the Ketchikan Gateway Borough (AK) School District is typical of what facilities officers report. He received no extra funding to maintain two additional schools that opened in his district this year.



**Little Rock Central Hill School, site of the historic 1957 integration effort**

“The way I look at it, that’s a cut,” he says. “So I’ll be cutting back on normal maintenance, preventive and reactive, throughout the rest of the district so those two schools can operate. We won’t have custodial staff in one of the schools and there’s work we just won’t undertake.”

Young argues that maintaining facilities in proper order is as important to students’ academic achievement as what happens in their classrooms. “If you have a poor facility that isn’t well heated, or is leaking, it is going to detract from the educational process, and students will not achieve as well,” Young declares.

According to ASBO International, school facility maintenance also is the area that school districts are most commonly cutting first to meet rising healthcare costs. While school district revenues increased 2 percent this year, their health insurance premiums grew 10 percent, ASBO International reports from a survey of its members.

Meanwhile, facilities officers are trying to address other rising costs in their areas, principally for fuel. “Oil drives everything. When oil goes up, gas and electricity go up and everything spikes after that,” says Collins. “It’s not like buying basketballs, when you need ten but can do with five. We need fuel for buildings to function.”

### **Rising Fuel Costs Affect Education**

Ordinarily, fuel is “a secondary issue; it’s part of your budget and it’s no big deal,” says Ian Smith, director of facilities at the Emma Willard School, a private college preparatory boarding and day school in Troy, New York.

But now it is quite a big deal. “We’ve just had a huge price shock on natural gas, and a lot of people in the markets on both the purchasing and supply sides have no idea where it is going to go. We’re going to run over on our heating bill, but

**“If you have a poor facility that isn’t well heated, or is leaking, it is going to detract from the educational process, and students will not achieve as well”**

we operate on a fixed budget and at this institution we don’t run over budget. So what do we do?”

What he will have to do, Smith says, is cut back on reducing deferred maintenance while focusing on “keeping the lights on and the buildings warm enough in the winter as efficiently as possible without impacting program.”

Money for capital renewal and deferred maintenance is an issue also facing Don Kingman, director of operations at Concord Academy, an independent college prep school in Concord, Massachusetts. It takes on a unique twist in his case, he says, because his 24-acre campus is in the middle

of an historic town where most buildings, including the schools, are of wood frame construction.

“So my repair costs might be higher because I don’t have good durable finishes,” Kingman explains. “It’s not the way you would build a new school today, out of bricks and mortar.”

Young says that if schools fail to properly maintain their facilities, they run into environmental issues, like air quality, mold, and mildew, that can cause other problems. He recalls that during the major energy crisis of the 1970s, many school districts plugged out the unit ventilators outside their buildings to reduce the amount of fresh air entering the structures.

“They thought they were saving money, and they were, but they created an indoor air quality problem. We’re in the middle of an energy crisis now, and there is a tendency in some districts to do that again. But staff and parents are more aware now of the importance of indoor air quality, so it’s going to put more of a strain on everybody’s budget,” Young says.

Meanwhile, Young’s own district has implemented a cost-effective strategic plan for maintaining its three schools and dealing with environmental and other issues. In one move to save money, five people from the business office staff painted the schools and performed miscellaneous repairs over the summer. “When everyone came back in September, they saw what had been done and it created a good feeling for the district,” Young reports.

While using internal staff for the painting paid off, Young outsources for grounds maintenance, because he says that is less expensive than buying and maintaining the equipment the district would need.

### **The Impact of Technology**

Other facilities officers report additional issues. Collins cites computers. “If you go back about 15 years, the idea was to have computers in the school library, but now they are



***Middletown (RI) High School***

needed in every classroom, and you need servers and switchboards to handle all that stuff. Maintenance is a big thing,” he says.

But in other ways, technology can help cut costs, he continues, as in sensors that automatically turn off lights in rooms when nobody is there and monitors that similarly regulate heating and cooling systems when buildings are occupied and when they are not.

Young agrees that technology can help school districts manage many aspects of their facilities, from work orders to utilities. He cites private companies that provide online tools for management of educational facilities.

But computerized management systems are expensive and have to be maintained themselves. “If they are not, we know what the consequences are. They become dated, or can crash,” says Carlson of the CGCS. “I don’t think enough resources have been allocated to technology to help move schools into the 21st century.”

### **Setting the Priorities**

In Little Rock, with 50 schools, Eaton says, “We are on a path to use what resources we do have and use our abilities to reorganize to meet our remaining needs.” Through “prudent planning” by the local school board and superintendent, Little Rock is closing some schools, “redistributing assets,” and using temporary portable classrooms to meet population shifts, Eaton explains.

“By consolidating schools and closing some schools, they were able to achieve some better efficiencies and also increase salaries and benefits for teachers. So there have been some positives,” he says.



***J.F. Kennedy Elementary School,  
Middletown Rhode Island***

But maintenance needs remain. In addition to normal daily maintenance, the district has needs for roof repairs, electrical upgrades, parking lot repavements, painting and replastering, as well as additions to some schools, Eaton says.

Little Rock has applied for a special bond issue to fund replacement of aging air conditioning units in schools. Also, “We had to relamp our schools, because we had antiquated fixtures for which parts were no longer available, and they



***Forest Avenue Elementary School,  
Middletown, Rhode Island***

were not providing the best environment in the classrooms,” Eaton says.

Little Rock’s funding for facilities management is complicated by a case underway in state courts that has to do with how state funds are allocated for school facilities and other functions. At present, Little Rock is the only district among



***Concord Academy***

the 300 in Arkansas that must raise its own money from local property taxes and bond issues to apply to facilities needs.

### **The Human Resource**

Some facilities administrators say that retraining and retaining qualified workers is another issue they face. “We pay on a par with public schools in our area, although not necessarily with some private colleges, and we have pretty decent benefits,” says Smith at Emma Willard. “But with a small budget and small staff, how do you send somebody away for training?”



Smith has a staff of five for buildings and three for grounds on the 137-acre campus. "If a grounds person is out for training for a week and while he's out one of the others gets sick, that means we have a one-person grounds department," Smith says. Nevertheless, he adds, "you have to be willing to make the investment in training and development."

Young suggests that facilities officers read "Planning Guide for Maintaining School Facilities," developed by ASBO In-

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ternational and the National Forum on Education Statistics. It was widely distributed in 2003 to school business officials and organizations of superintendents and other administrative leaders. Among other things, it offers tips and techniques to help facilities officers make the case for the budgets they need. Read the guide at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003347>.

"It has been tough for a lot of facilities people and business officers to articulate at the school board level the importance of facilities management and how they go about it. They have to be able to advocate and show the bigger picture," Young says.

The guide became the foundation for a facilities maintenance award program that ASBO International announced at its annual meeting in October. The program is

designed to award school districts that have demonstrated exemplary facilities maintenance practices in several areas.

Thinking about awards might be a stretch for some facilities officers who are scrambling just to find the funds to help them do their jobs and avoid the consequences of cutting back. "It's the economic principle of scarcity. We have unlimited demands but limited resources, so we have to allocate the best we can," says Young.

Concludes Henrick in Alaska: "It all boils down to money. You can't do things if you don't have the money." 🏰

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