

Why Every School District Needs a Program Manager

By JP Grom



Bond programs play a critical role in K-12 education. Our children not only need strong instructional programs, but also excellent school buildings so they can prepare for their future. Often, a bond program is the only way to finance the construction of new school facilities or renovation of existing infrastructure.

Big bond programs, which can sometimes cost hundreds of millions of dollars, require careful management of resources and teams. School administrators typically don't have the necessary experience to handle these bond programs. They are not familiar with the rules and regulations, contracts, and processes that architects and contractors follow. And they don't have the specialized knowledge needed to implement these large bond programs. On top of that, they have a full-time day job. Expecting a chief financial officer, chief academic officer, or senior facilities officer to pick up the additional workload and understand the ins and outs of planning and implementing a bond program is unrealistic.

So, what should school districts do? The solution lies in hiring a competent program manager who can serve as a one-stop resource to develop, pass, and

implement a bond program. A competent program manager should have a combination of planning, design, engineering, construction, and project management expertise to manage the bond program from conception to completion. By selecting the right program manager, the school district can provide the best value for a taxpayer's hard-earned money. Below are five specific ways a program manager can play a vital role in a school district's bond program.

UNDERSTAND FACILITY NEEDS

Developing a good bond program requires understanding the needs of the school district in the first place. What are the deficiencies in the existing school facilities? Are they overcrowded? Are they deteriorated? Or are they functionally inadequate for the type of instruction that's being delivered?

Program managers can help school districts understand facility needs in a logical, fiscally sound manner using a condition assessment process. This process will enable the school district not only to assess the physical condition of its existing buildings but also to look at the educational adequacy and technologies in those spaces.

Once the information is collected from the condition assessment process, program managers can help school districts prioritize their facility needs. Do they need to fix the roof before they expand the classrooms? Do they need to improve the campus technology, or do they need to upgrade the lighting first? Working with a citizens advisory group, the program manager then develops a list of deficiencies and the ways and means to fix these issues. Collaborating with the community, the program manager then creates a master plan to address the future needs of the school district.

ACT AS AN INDEPENDENT THIRD PARTY

Program managers can serve as an independent third-party resource who can provide the information needed for the development of the bond. By do-

ing so, they can eliminate the potential perception in the community that the district's needs were identified exclusively by the administration. If a sentiment begins to emerge that the facility needs are being driven by the administration, it can be detrimental to community buy-in. As soon as that happens, it's generally a bad sign for a bond program.

Additionally, program managers bring a level of expertise that the community can see clearly. The community begins to understand that the bond program is being developed by a group of industry professionals who understand the different inputs, cost considerations, and means necessary to correct deficiencies. The community's expectation that the bond program is handled in a professional manner is satisfied.

SAVE MONEY

Program managers can also help school districts save money during the design and construction process. During design, program managers can help attain savings by eliminating additional project scope through rigorous value engineering. For instance, is the high-cost finish selection necessary? Are the corridors too wide? Are the floor plans inefficient? By finding and cutting down inefficiencies, unnecessary costs are trimmed without sacrificing the quality of the building.

A good program manager will also be able to reduce costs through creative construction phasing. By grouping similar projects together, compressing project schedules by ramping up construction during summer sessions or seasonal breaks, and minimizing disruptions that slow down the construction process, program managers can help school districts attain significant cost savings.

BUILD PUBLIC TRUST

Program managers can also help build public trust by providing financial accountability for every aspect of the bond program. It begins with developing a realistic budget. This includes identifying the different costs the school district will incur throughout a project, including land acquisition, surveying, material testing, hard costs, soft costs, permitting, moving, relocating, and connecting utilities, with a reasonable level of certainty. By taking these considerations into account early, program managers can help school districts avoid unknown future costs, which can be a barrier for project success.

As work progresses, a program manager's job is to monitor the budget and ensure that savings are generated. If costs are higher than anticipated in certain projects, are there other projects where these



costs can be offset? By continuously applying sound fiscal management throughout a project, program managers can help school districts make decisions that allow for the betterment of the entire program. Additionally, program managers can provide proper oversight of all financial transactions on the job and ensure that every dollar of the bond program is spent properly, without errors.

EXCEED QUALITY STANDARDS

Finally, program managers can ensure that all projects of a bond program meet/exceed the expected quality standards. During the design phase, the architects and engineers in the program management team can implement quality assurance/quality control checks, where design glitches and unforeseen problems are corrected, long before a project reaches the construction stage. This significantly minimizes the number of change orders during construction.

As a project moves into the construction phase, program managers employ inspectors to walk the site, report inefficiencies, and work with material testing labs and government entities to ensure that the construction conforms with the standards that are in place. Without a program manager, who will be responsible for reporting any mistakes on the part of the architect and contractor? By serving as the school district's eyes and ears, program managers can ensure that the project is delivered by the architect and contractor in a manner that meets or exceeds the community's expectations. §

JP Grom is a vice president at Lockwood, Andrews & Newnam, Inc., based in Houston, TX, and can be reached at jpgrom@lan-inc.com. This is his first article for *Facilities Manager*.