

Learning to Share: Filling Empty School Seats by Coordinating Facilities Planning

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Introduction

What comes to mind first when you hear the word “school”? Is it the building itself, or the educational programs inside? The man, woman or child in the street tends to think of the facility, while education reformers often think of curriculum, faculty, children and learning. The physical facilities are the stage for the interactions of teachers and students. The stage should be comfortable, dry and conducive to learning; once these prerequisites are achieved, the educational program is far more important than the physical plant. Even in a school whose architecture inspires (for its beauty, for the history witnessed by its old stone walls, or for the technological savvy promised by its ultra-modern design), what matters most is the reading, writing and arithmetic, not the building itself.

Once upon a time, most children attended the closest school, their neighborhood school. Today, students and parents face a wide variety of choices—public, private,

parochial, charter, remedial, magnet or special-themed. A school building and the program it hosted used to be one unit, located in the middle of the neighborhood served, but today that restriction has been blown open. More and more students are served by alternative models. School programs are more varied, and can change relatively quickly. Yet school buildings, made of brick and mortar, cannot immediately adapt.

The Problem: Empty Seats

Any planning or policies for schools must take facilities into account. Every kind of learning takes place in a space of some kind, and those spaces must be created and cared for. Every dollar spent on facilities is a dollar that might have been spent to enhance learning. Any dollar wasted on inefficient facilities maintenance is a dollar lost for classroom materials, teacher salaries or enrichment.

There are a lot of dollars at stake. On average, each empty seat in a Philadelphia School District school costs the taxpayers over \$1,000/year (Facilities expenditures for the Philadelphia School District were \$281 million for the 2008–2009 school year, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education) So 100 empty seats in a single school (hardly a rarity) are wasting funds that could be used to hire an additional teacher. The average cost of a teacher, including salary and benefits, is between \$90,000 and \$95,000 per year (School District of Philadelphia 2010). The School District's own recent

estimate of 70,000 empty seats corresponds to over \$70 million each year (Woodall 2011).

Facilities planning is complicated by the fact that buildings last for decades, while student population changes (not to mention changes in class sizes and educational programs) cannot be reliably estimated even 10 years in advance. Part of the reason for the empty seats in the Philadelphia District schools is the decline in the school-aged population of Philadelphia. Another factor is the change in educational opportunities and preferences of Philadelphia students and their parents. Parochial and private school attendance have always changed in response to economic and political developments, as well as the perceived quality of the various school systems. The recent success of charter schools draws students away from the other kinds of schools.

The Solution: Sharing Facilities

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We have a valuable opportunity to share facilities among District, charter, private and parochial school systems. Finding or funding a facility is a sizeable barrier to creation of new charter schools, while whole wings of existing schools are vacant—heated and cared for, but vacant. We owe it to our children to find ways for different school systems to cooperate to use school space more productively.

We should develop smooth mechanisms for making space owned by one school (or school system) available to another. It should be easy for, say, a potential charter school to find out which District and parochial schools have available space. There should be standard leases, guidance on setting rent levels, and models for resolving capital issues to bring existing buildings up to the standards of the tenant school. In other words, the normally complex business of arranging to use someone else's space should be simplified. Just as the introduction of currency made it easier for traders to do business, the introduction of a simple way to lease space from one educational system to another will make it easier to make good use of our school buildings.

The various school systems should also coordinate their facilities planning. Constructing a new school building, or even purchasing and repurposing a non-school building for educational use, requires at least a few years of planning. Similarly, taking an existing school building out of service requires time for both logistics and community outreach. Currently each school system does its own long-range facilities planning, using its own data and population models.

A coordinated facilities plan would entail sharing data. Some of the relevant data is public (e.g., geographic data); some is owned by the school systems (e.g., enrollment data); and some would have to be purchased (e.g., demographic projections). If two or more school

systems were to coordinate their facilities plans, they would have to provide the data such as the following:

- Capacity and enrollment of each school building
- Operational expenses of each school building
- Capital needs of each school building

Further, it would be useful if schools shared data such as:

- Geographic enrollment patterns for each school—where do the students enrolled actually live?
- Commuting patterns and expenses—how do students get to school, how much does it cost and who pays?
- School performance, including test scores, promotion rates and violent incident rates
- The building's extracurricular roles and uses—as a community space or as a source of nutritious meals for students

These data would be useful not only for existing schools but, to the extent possible, for schools in the planning stages.

The school systems would have to share not only the data, but also the analysis. In other words, they would have to come to consensus on standards and measures. When is a new school desirable? Under what circumstances should a school building be considered for closure? What would this really mean to the local community, and how would the community be involved in

making these decisions?

Sharing data requires infrastructure and ongoing communication. The data might be collected, housed and analyzed by a third party, possibly a government agency or a private business. This third party should also foster good working relationships between the data specialists within the different school systems, perhaps by bringing them together regularly for forums or workshops on topics of mutual interest. There are potential obstacles to coordinated facilities planning. Data sharing is always challenging, as different systems collect, define and store their data differently.

More fundamentally, these school systems are competitors—they compete for students, resources and real estate. And while they have certain fundamental goals in common (education of children), they have different approaches, philosophies and target populations. There is no inherent reason for the decision-makers within the separate systems to trust one another. Fortunately, there are both carrots and sticks available: cost savings on commercial data (e.g., demographic projections) and regulation (which could be part of any voucher-related legislation).

Tying Coordinated Facilities Planning to Potential Receipt of Voucher Funds

Policymakers should start planning now to overcome

these obstacles. The current debate on school vouchers provides an opportunity to raise the issue of facilities. Whether one favors or opposes vouchers, there is a chance that vouchers will become a reality in Pennsylvania, in which case policymakers should make coordinated facilities planning a prerequisite to receipt of voucher funds. A well-written law or regulation would set deadlines for reporting data, standards for data collection and formats, and meaningful consequences for late or poor-quality data. A well-written law or regulation would encourage meaningful cooperation.

Coordinated facilities planning is worth the trouble. Empty seats in schools are expensive and, unlike other kinds of real estate, schools cannot simply rent excess space to the highest bidder. There are significant restrictions on activities inside school buildings. The most efficient and natural tenant for a school building is another school (although other related uses could be involved).

Coordinating between different types and systems of schools will save money that can be directly applied to school programs and staffing. And the more fluid the system for moving educational programs into the best available building, the more school competition will focus on quality of the education, rather than quality of the facility. We have a golden opportunity now, while the relationships between school systems are in flux, to institute coordinated facilities planning.

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