

ON TARGET — THE BENEFITS OF HIRING A PROJECT MANAGEMENT FIRM

BY KENNETH LEVIEN, AIA

For some schools and universities — particularly private institutions — a major construction project doesn't come along frequently. But when it does, administrators can find themselves facing a complex and costly enterprise, fraught with pitfalls, for which they have neither the expertise nor the time required to handle it effectively.

This was the case when Packer Collegiate Institute, a private school in the Brooklyn Heights section of New York City, recently underwent a significant renovation. Yet, the school completed the project close to budget and on schedule.

The key for such projects — whether new buildings, reconfigured spaces, expansions or major renovations — is having a strong, experienced hand at the forefront to avoid the pitfalls that commonly occur during school construction. And it makes good sense to bring that leadership on board early to get off on the right foot.

A project manager is able to coordinate the complexities involved in a typical school project. A project management firm can coordinate professional activities to keep the various experts on budget, to see that they don't trip over each other, and to make sure the school is getting the improvements it is seeking.

A focal point

Public school systems usually recognize the need by assigning a staff project manager. But private schools often do not have the necessary in-house expertise. More than many other building projects, school construction involves multiple constituencies — administration, staff, faculty, students, parents, boards, government officials and neighborhood residents. As a single focal point, a project manager makes sure that all parties are informed of plans and progress, and that the lines of communication are open.

Packer Collegiate had decided to “fit a building within a building” by creating a new five-floor, 16-classroom middle school in the nave of the former 125-year-old St. Ann's Episcopal Church. In addition, the parish house was converted into a dining hall and kitchen, and a three-story “link” structure was created to connect the church to existing school buildings.

To bring natural light into the new classrooms, the church balconies were removed. And with the approval of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, the stained-glass windows in the side aisles were replaced with clear glass (stained glass was kept on the primary facades).

The Packer project also faced many problems that typically occur in school construction: bad weather, zoning requirements, legal issues, landmark strictures and insurance complications. A school may have a pool of knowledge about such matters among its board members and parent volunteers, but there must be someone available to deal with the big picture seven days a week — a person with an overall view of the interlocking complexities of the project. One of the benefits of hiring a project management firm before work begins on a project is the ability to tap the knowledge of architects and contractors in assembling the team. Perhaps even more important, a project manager can help draw up the budget and advise school officials on how to structure the job — a series of assignments bid out separately under a construction manager, or a project with a general contractor hired at a fixed fee with the responsibility for employing necessary subcontractors.

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Helping hand

In renovating the Marymount School, a private K-12 girls school in Manhattan, officials faced several difficulties. The upgrades included modernizing and partially expanding the school's 15,000-square-foot, six-story townhouse for use by about 130 students in grades 4 to 7.

As the plans progressed, Marymount officials also learned that more than just construction was involved. Because it was a landmark building, the school was unable to alter street-front elevation and had to keep all expansion in the rear. With so much to think about, and a school to run, administrators needed to hire a project manager to oversee the renovations.

The renovated building houses a science lab, art room, technology room, library, dining facility, seminar rooms, six classrooms and support spaces.

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Keeping a firm hand on the budget is critical. Private schools are unlikely to have reserve funds to cover waste, and administrators must answer to the people from whom they raise money. As part of the oversight function, a project manager makes sure the architect, contractors and other professionals are paid the proper amounts in a timely manner. He or she monitors cost overruns, and makes sure any change orders are justified and executed properly. This lifts a heavy burden off the shoulders of the school's chief financial officer.

While the project manager deals with myriad obstacles, teachers and students can concentrate on more critical issues such as teaching and learning.

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