

# No child's school building left behind

by Don Shell

As our counties and our state consider how to work with and within the No Child Left Behind Act, there is a second question that cannot be escaped, evaded, avoided or neglected. Along with what and how we teach our children, what do we do about where we teach them?

We've seen the pictures. Children sitting in school hallways with lunch trays on their laps because there's no room at the lunchroom tables. Too many children crammed into too-small rooms. Aging buildings with water, sewer, electrical and air conditioning problems that get worse with time.

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The problem is national in scope and specific to our neighborhoods here in Tennessee. Here are just a few examples:

In Washington, D.C., city and federal officials are grappling with each other trying to figure out how to deal with the city's public school system. Infrastructure needs are estimated at \$2 billion over 20 years in a city where the average school building is more than 65 years old.

In Lee County, Florida, overcrowding is forcing the system to convert vacant K-Marts into schools.

According to the National Education Association, the average public school in America is 42 years old. Twenty-eight percent of the public schools in America are over 50 years old. Forty-six percent of the public schools in America lack the electrical and communication wiring to support today's computer systems.

A January, 2003 report titled, "Do K-12 School Facilities Affect Educational Outcomes," by the Tennessee Advisory Commission on

Intergovernmental Relations included this statement: “(Tennessee) School systems have reported a need for projects totaling more than \$3.5 billion to build, upgrade or otherwise better equip their school buildings over the next five years – nearly \$1.5 billion is needed specifically for upgrades of existing facilities.”

If we’re going to teach our children well, we can’t leave their school buildings behind. Working with school systems across the state has shown us that there are two inevitable realities:

There is never enough money.  
There are always more children.

Put these two together and you’ve mixed the recipe for frustration for parents, school teachers and officials. The question is, how do you decrease the tension levels? Here are some suggestions to everyone concerned with the facilities and surroundings in which we expect our children to receive an education.

## Plan today for tomorrow.

Start now. Don’t plan to plan. Don’t wait for the moment when the school’s sides are bulging due to overcrowding or the walls are cracking with age. It doesn’t work to simply say, “We need a new school.” While the school is being built to meet a perceived need, any number of other bad things could be happening that will go unrecognized until everyone stops and says, “Hey, maybe we didn’t need this new school, maybe we needed something else.” It’s how a school fits the needs of its system, of the students, and of the future, that will make for satisfied school systems and parents. That takes work, it takes commitment and it takes planning. If you don’t know where you’re going, you may not like it when you get there.

## Be proactive.

School decisions are almost never easy. They are expensive. There are political and operational considerations and consequences. However, the consequences of waiting too late means that corrective action will almost certainly cost more,

take longer and be less effective. The more teamwork and community involvement there is, the greater everyone’s sense of accomplishment when the job is done. The process by which the new Walker Valley High School in Bradley County was built might be a model for systems throughout Tennessee. Bradley County’s director of schools appointed a site selection team comprised of various community leaders. This team identified and selected a list of sites for evaluation. Each potential site was thoroughly examined to determine its suitability in terms of the educational plan, vehicle accessibility, cost, size and numerous other criteria. Team members researched the existing characteristics of each site. This included examining the potential of the site and surrounding property for the school and for future use. The final selection was made based on a numerical evaluation format. Through this process the present site was recommended to the Bradley County School Board as the most desirable location for the new high school.

In today’s environment of aging schools and growing student populations, school systems can bludgeon themselves into immediate action that will ultimately cost them more, not less. When schools systems think, plan and act with calm and purposeful deliberation, and the benefits of improved schools are well understood by the taxpaying public, the outcome has a much better chance of being well done and making people happy. We don’t want to leave children behind in their learning. That also means being careful not to leave behind the places in which they learn.

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