

“Federation Corner” column
The Montgomery Sentinel, 23 April 2015

Demolishing schools

By Paula Bienenfeld

Do we need to accommodate our growing student population with appropriate infrastructure and sound, true green schools? Of course we do. Does it therefore follow that we need to demolish every existing structure we see to build new? No, not at all.

While we here in Montgomery County rush to tear down every school in sight, other school systems came to a different conclusion. In 2007 the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association published a report, *Renovate or Replace? The Case for Restoring and Reusing Older Schools*. The report was produced by the Pennsylvania Historic Schools Task Force and is worth reviewing for the principles it espouses.

In the report, then-Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Dr. Gerald Zahorchak writes,

“Older school buildings are significant community assets that should not be discarded without careful evaluation. The educational, health, and community benefits of older schools may be compelling. Older schools located in established neighborhoods offer easy accessibility for students to walk or bike to school, rather than having them be driven by their parents or bused to a school far away. A school’s presence often stabilizes and sustains established neighborhoods by facilitating community involvement and providing a center for community activity.”

He also states, “Experience has shown that it’s generally less expensive to alter and rehabilitate an existing school rather than build a new one.” According to the report, it is less expensive to renovate existing than to build a new school, especially when the cost of land acquisition and development is considered. As one example the report cites the middle school in Pottstown, which cost \$108 per square foot to renovate, while the new addition cost \$136 per square foot.

Majestic historic high schools can be found all across the country in both rural and urban communities. The report points out that keeping the existing school as the center of a community gives a sense of place and stability to a neighborhood. Creative retrofitting and adaptation can provide the most modern 21st-century building required for our students, while giving them a sense of place and history, something a new school never can.

The report touts the benefits of smaller schools as well. In one of the essays in the report, Dr. Phillip Diller of Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania points out the fallacy of larger schools. The idea of economies of scale, of saving by only requiring one gymnasium, or one media center or cafeteria for thousands of children, is a false economy, he writes. Most education professionals agree that smaller schools and classroom sizes promote learning, and “students—especially those from low-income families—perform much better in small schools.” Dropout rates are lower in smaller schools, and so his conclusion is that the cost is actually more for larger schools, if measured by ‘cost per student who graduates,’ vs. ‘cost per student enrolled.’

The State of Pennsylvania requires that a school district evaluate its education facilities before submitting a request for reimbursement. That evaluation must include a description of the condition of all the schools; and estimate the cost of the upgrade. Amazingly, “The report must, of course, be available for public inspection.” The formal application process for reimbursement in Pennsylvania is known as the Planning and Construction Workbook, or PlanCon. Because Pennsylvania found that it is less expensive to renovate than to build new, the Commonwealth offers additional state funding for renovation projects, and higher reimbursements if the school meets U.S. Green Building Council or Green Building Initiative standards.

The report emphasizes that older schools can last indefinitely with systematic renovations. It cites findings of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International, that rehabilitating older schools reduces the need to manufacture new steel and other building materials, and that historic school buildings can be renovated to modern state-of-the-art educational standards for less cost than building new.

With proper regular maintenance, older buildings can last indefinitely. Yes, HVAC systems, windows, and other elements may wear out, but they can be replaced and upgraded. According to the report, “The belief that buildings “wear out” is common but wrong.”

And, as the report points out, the greenest building is the one you don’t have to build.