

DETERMINING OPERATIONAL AND CAPITAL EFFICIENCY IN AN “OVER-SCHOOLED” DISTRICT

School districts face a myriad of challenges with limited resources. Consider this case study as an example of how Strategic Resources West (SRW) can help:

Background

A school district was concerned with the integrity of its three oldest elementary schools that ranged in age from 77 to 86 years. The buildings had not received any significant improvements and substantial infrastructure issues compromised both safety and a healthy learning environment. In addition, the district was operating six schools with capacities ranging from 120 to 400 students with a total elementary school enrollment of about 1,750 students. Enrollment had been static at roughly this level for years with no substantial deviation anticipated.

Problem

Operating small schools, especially the smallest at 120 students, is extremely inefficient and academic offerings can be severely limited due to budget constraints. Further, small student populations make it very difficult to adequately allocate staff, particularly for special programs. Based upon enrollment, geography and several other factors, the most efficient model for this district, both operationally and economically, would be three schools of about 600-capacity each. However, polling indicated the community would not accept a three-school model and would result in worsening the already considerable socioeconomic imbalance.

Another key consideration was the timing of existing debt retirement and looming future costs with a high school (currently over 50 years old) replacement or major rehabilitation and major improvements to at least two elementary schools within 30-40 years. The community would not be able to financially support addressing all three old elementary schools and the other schools' needs at the same time.

Approach

First, the district had to establish a framework for changing its operating model. To do this, the district reconvened a Facility Advisory Committee with long-standing success and strong credibility in the community. The district retained SRW to facilitate the committee and provide planning expertise and objectivity.

SRW prepared essential information for the committee summarizing relevant issues, such as:

- Historical, current and projected enrollment by attendance area
- Successful operating models by varying student capacities
- Configuration options that could ameliorate most of the equity issues

Then scenarios were presented, showing the implications of different operating models, beginning with a one-school model, all the way through the current six-school scenario.

(Continued on page 2)



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SRW facilitated discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of each scenario and helped the committee compare staffing costs and efficiencies among them. This included assessing the district's ability to effectively assign support staff (special education, ELL, social workers, etc.) at different student population levels. Finally, educational specification shortcomings were presented after examining neighborhood school implications and the physical condition of the three oldest elementary schools.

After reviewing the information presented, the committee deliberated about the three-through-six-school model options and their operating/potential capital cost implications related to remodeling or new construction options, as well as other issues that were important to the community.

Solution

Honoring the community's core values was critical to the decision making process. Community polls revealed that the three strongest core values were:

- Improving student classroom performance;
- Providing healthy and safe schools; and
- Being cost-effective (wise use of taxpayer money)

The committee developed guidelines for making decisions based on these core values and adopted questions designed to "filter" them to ensure good decisions, such as:

1. Does this option enable the district to improve health & safety conditions of students?
2. Does this option enable improved academic program delivery?
3. Does this option promote efficient staff allocation?
4. Does this option improve cost-effective delivery of services? (including ELL, Sp. Ed., etc.)
5. Does this option optimize fiscal and physical resources allocation?
6. What are the long-term implications of this option?
7. Is it the most optimal alternative available in terms of a long-term solution?
8. If not, is it a step in the right direction to achieve the ultimate goal?

Conclusion

As a result of completing this process, the district established the structure necessary to implement beneficial change. In addition, the district is developing and will implement a plan with a combination of both short-and-long-term solutions that reduces capital costs, improves operating efficiency and is set up to phase in as the community can afford it with the intent to win community support. The district is currently gathering the necessary information to make their final decision on the model that will work best for their community.

So what does this mean, grasshopper?

All communities could benefit from taking a comprehensive, long-term look at their entire educational program and facility needs, including fiscal implications over time. Without balancing all these aspects a school district can easily risk losing community support, which will ultimately adversely affect students and compromise future efforts to rectify these issues. Strategic Resources West works with school districts to address difficult situations as an independent, objective third party. SRW can help you identify and prioritize your needs. Let us help you find the solutions that align with your district's goals and objectives AND save you money.

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