



VIEWS & VISIONS

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A Balancing Act: Maximizing the State's Return on Investment in School Design and Construction

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Ben Ashley serves as the Director of Architectural Services for the School Building Authority of West Virginia (SBA). As the liaison between the SBA and the design and construction industries, he works with leading architects and contractors to develop policies and standards that are vital to the success of the state's capital school improvement program.

A native of Spencer, West Virginia and a graduate of Roane County High School, Ashley earned a bachelor's degree in architecture from The University of Tennessee and a master's in business administration (MBA) from West Virginia University. Prior to his service at the SBA, Ben worked as an associate at Bastian & Harris Architects.

Ashley is an Eagle Scout and a graduate of Leadership West Virginia from the classes of 2012 and 2013. He is an associate member of the West Virginia chapter of the American Institute of Architects and holds a Construction Documents Technologist certification from the Construction Specifications Institute.

I like to think of school design and construction in West Virginia as a balancing act. In many different circumstances, we walk a tightrope – maintaining a steady balance as forces pull our mission in certain directions. There is no question that an investment in education is one of the easiest decisions to make as the future of our state depends upon the success of our youth. It is always the follow-up questions that create the most controversy. These are the questions we strive to answer innovatively, but also with prudence.

How do we find balance as we desire architecturally inspiring classroom spaces while remembering that our hard-earned tax dollars are footing the bill? How can we advocate for small community schools while pushing for efficiencies in capital planning? Are the benefits of sustainable design, a.k.a. “going green,” a worthwhile investment when the upfront cost is high? How can we create a competitive bidding environment while continuing to maintain quality construction standards? Every project has inherent questions that we must ask as the fiduciary, and it is our mission to find the right balance that maximizes the state's return on investment.

Tough Decisions

Each year, the School Building Authority of West Virginia (SBA) awards a series of grants for school construction and renovation projects. While it is rewarding to help a county school district improve the learning environment for their students, we regularly receive project requests from nearly 30 counties that total roughly \$150 million in need. Through legislative allocation and investment earnings,



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we have “only” around \$50 million each year to address these needs. The 2010 Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan (CEFP) identified over \$2.5 billion statewide in capital improvement need in our county school systems. To say we have a funding gap in education is an understatement.

To the benefit of taxpayers, one positive element that has come from this annual grant process is competition. County school systems develop project proposals that compete against each other for funding consideration. The staff of the SBA makes recommendations to the Authority based upon each project's ability to address characteristics such as health and safety, innovations in education, economies of scale, student travel time, impact on maintenance, etc. While the funding discrepancy is discouraging, this inherent competition has helped bring balance to Authority members as they choose to fund projects that are solutions, not future problems.

Good Projects, Great Results

We learn from every project we undertake. The SBA staff works closely with educational leaders at the local and state levels and with our talented architects to create plans for innovative classroom environments. The challenging task is to translate curriculum delivery ideas into a versatile floor plan that allows students and teachers to thrive, meets the required educational standards and falls within the SBA's budgeted funding formula. Balance is achieved through a collaborative planning process that begins at

project conception and is overseen long after construction is completed.

School design has changed tremendously in the past decade. Market conditions have forced some of these changes, but we have found that many traditional design elements have gone by the wayside in favor of smarter, safer and more budget-conscious spaces. Some examples of projects we are proud of are:

- In the newly renovated Shady Spring High School in Raleigh County, instead of a library space, the county has designed a S.T.E.A.M. lab where students will learn Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math with touch-screens, robotics, laser cutters and a “maker” space.
- The new Edgewood Elementary School in Kanawha County uses a “Project-Based Learning” curriculum model where students are given a problem that requires multiple academic disciplines, collaborative teamwork and ingenuity to solve. This translated into a floor plan with Exploratorium “pods” where the building is also used as a teaching tool. Within the first few years of opening, proficiency levels in reading and math greatly increased.
- We have become a national leader in safe school design standards for all new construction. Some of the mandatory features include bullet-resistant glass, separate visitor entrances, administration areas with lines of sight to the parking lot, smart security systems and mandatory coordination with first-responders.

Since the agency’s inception, the SBA has partnered with local boards of education to provide over \$3.2 billion in funding for construction projects across all 55 counties. While this total is impressive, there is still plenty of work to be done. However, through careful planning, smart design and a desire to help improve the lives of students from every corner of the state, we continue to seek balance in meeting the educational needs of our students and the economic needs of our taxpayers. ▽



*Eastwood Elementary, Morgantown, West Virginia
Credit: Williamson Shriver Architects*



*Rendering of FEMA-funded school in Clendenin, West Virginia
Credit: ZMM Architects and Engineers*



Edgewood Elementary Entrance • Credit: ZMM Architects and Engineers



Edgewood Elementary Exploratorium • Credit: ZMM Architects and Engineers