



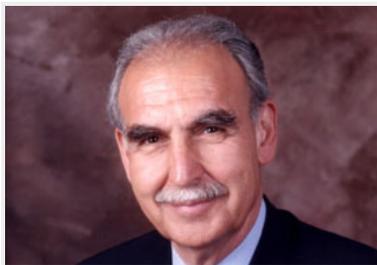
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A Hard Lesson: Education Construction Outlook 2011

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-By Armando L. Gonzalez, FAIA, Gonzalez Goodale Architects



The past three years have asked a lot of the industry and in 2011 will continue to ask even more as the country moves toward economic recovery. Despite some positive economic signs—as of this writing, bank forecasts for national GDP in 2011 increased to 3.3 percent from 3 percent—2011 will require continued grit, creativity and forward thinking from everyone in the architecture and design industry.

Construction Prospects

Looking ahead to the rest of 2011, McGraw-Hill Construction Outlook Report forecasts an 8 percent increase in the construction market, mostly fueled by growth in single-family housing, multifamily housing and commercial buildings. Educational building starts, however, are projected to drop 6 percent to 133 million sq. ft.—the third year in a row of decline—burdened by budget crises in state and local governments around the country.

The 16th Annual School Construction report released by School Planning & Management (SP&M) confirms that trend. Only an estimated \$13.35 billion in construction will be completed for 2011. It is the fourth year the value has declined since a high of \$20.75 billion completed construction in 2007.

SP&M industry analyst Paul Abramson adds, "More dollars are going into additions and retrofits in general, which you can see especially in Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin."

Almost \$13 billion in construction is also expected to begin in 2011. Of that, 43 percent is in additions and retrofits. "These tend to be smaller projects," said Abramson. "A lot of renovation may actually be done out of operating funds, so you don't have to go to the public for that."

Despite these figures, large states like California and Texas continue to provide many opportunities for work. Still in the throes of rebuilding after hurricane Katrina, Louisiana is also a great area to look for opportunities. Improving sales tax revenues and healthy city reserve funds in Oklahoma also bode well for industry prospects.

Continued voter support of school construction bond measures especially in California and Texas also tell us that education remains a priority. In November, Alaska passed \$397.2 million in bonds for library, educational and research facilities; Arizona localities issued over \$441.95 million in bonds; California passed about \$2 billion in California school district bonds; and Texas approved more than \$1.5 billion in bonds for school districts and infrastructure.

On the other hand, the reality of state budgets has also resulted in cuts in K-12 education in 34 states and the District of Columbia. In California, newly installed Gov. Jerry Brown has already proposed \$1.5 billion in cuts to public education. Thankfully, his plan also outlines maintaining the current state funding for K-12 education in the next fiscal year. "Try to look beyond the education market because it's still going to take a little more time to develop," said Abramson. Early education is a growing market and professionals should be looking into pre-K construction as a possible additional revenue stream.

K-12 construction is far from out of the woods yet nationally. Rather than be discouraged by this, the best strategy is to keep an eye on the future. Education is a necessity for every child in the country and our role is to design and build ideal environments for learning and inspiration.

Design Trends

Three major trends have been continually gaining steam in K-12 design: sustainability, community building, and technology. Growing awareness of our place in the eco-system has heightened the need to design



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educational facilities that are healthier and less damaging to the environment. This means keeping updated on the latest green building methods and materials.

In the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus in Los Angeles, Gonzalez Goodale Architects (GGA) designed a high-performance building that exceeds the strict environmental standards set by the Collaborative for High Performance Schools, a green building rating program designed specially for K-12 schools. It scored 36 points versus the minimum 28 required for recognition.

It was also the first school in California to use thermal displacement ventilation (TDV) technology in which air is delivered from the lower portion of the walls, rather than from the ceiling, resulting in a more efficient form of air-cooling that improves air quality. The full glass curtain wall on the north face of the high school building also introduces a generous amount of natural light into the classrooms, which reduces energy costs and also has been shown to improve academic performance.

The days of the school as ivory tower are also over. More and more, schools are becoming community resources, offering facilities that enhance urban living outside school hours. This translates to spaces that can be flexible enough to cater to local residents. At the RFK Community Schools, separate entrances for the public were planned for the historic Cocoanut Grove, the upper and lower school libraries, as well as the soccer fields. The 19,000-sq.-ft. public park adjoining the campus will also bring much-needed green space to this dense and long underserved Los Angeles neighborhood.

Classroom design today is also at the nexus of a number of forces. More and more, traditional lecture and Socratic dialogues that anchor teaching and learning since ancient times are evolving. New classroom communication technologies—like the evolution from slide projector to powerpoint to LED flat screen—pass into obsolescence within 5 to 10 years. The learning space itself has changed to accommodate more physical interaction modalities with the increased inclusion of lounges and breakout spaces in school design.

Technologies like social networking, global data mash-ups, and 3-D virtual reality have also changed the way students learn and absorb information. These all suggest that learning solutions lie not only in the classroom, but also in re-thinking the entire campus as a network of existing latent spaces that can be transformed to support new learning environments.

New technology approaches include: more social buildings that foster team-based spaces with an increased physical openness and flexibility to change; flexible support and engineering systems; and advanced efforts to enhance sustainability.

By reflecting on the interplay of these forces, firms can continue to innovate and build better futures for our school-aged children. The economy might have taken extensive hits in the last few years, but no doubt the darkest period has already passed. It is now time to focus on opportunities and re-connect with the industry's greater purpose—to create learning environments that will foster the ideas and innovators of tomorrow.

>> [School Construction, 1995-2011, PDF](#)

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(Charts by courtesy of School Planning & Management Magazine, 2011 Annual School Construction Report, webSPM.com)

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