

Portable Classrooms: Immediate Solutions to a “Growing” Problem

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In 1999, 36% of schools reported that they used portable classrooms and 20% reported that they created temporary instructional spaces, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Lewis and others 2000). Those percentages translated into about 28,600 schools that used temporary classrooms and 15,700 schools that created temporary instructional spaces.

State capital outlay funding for new facility construction is always behind the stated need and is not available for immediate expenditure. School districts often fall two to three years behind schedule in their building programs because of this funding delay (Odden and Picus 2008). Class-size reduction can also affect overcrowding,

even in schools that are initially undercrowded (Ready and Welner 2004).

Portable classrooms will most certainly continue to be used temporarily to bridge the gap between immediate need and availability of construction funding. Projecting the need for portable classrooms is straightforward when it is based on student enrollment forecasts. When you know the capacity of a school building and the student enrollment projections, calculating the number of portable classrooms needed in each school by year is relatively easy: subtract the school capacity from the projected student enrollment and divide the remainder by the class size. This simple mathematical approach gives a dependable guide to the number of portable classrooms needed.

Financing Portable Classrooms

Most states do not allocate state capital outlay funds for the purchase of temporary facilities, so local school districts end up assuming the costs of providing portable classrooms by using school district reserve funds and the special-purpose local-options sales tax (Harben 1997).

Growing school districts must consider a number of factors when making decisions about the use of portable classrooms. First and foremost, they need a detailed plan that justifies the district's investment in portables—whether new or pre-owned. The longer a school district makes efficient use of the portables, the more money the district can save. Keep in mind, however, that like automobiles, these temporary facilities devalue over time.

Purchasing portable classrooms can become a point of contention among taxpayers, board of education members, and school district financial and facility planners if all stakeholders are not fully informed about the need for those temporary classrooms. One effective way to plan for and manage the purchase of portable classrooms at the school district level is to organize a district portable classroom committee (DPCC). DPCC members might include school administrators, district planning directors, finance officers, and maintenance directors, along with teacher representatives and community representatives.

Before meeting with community members, school administrators must be prepared to address public concerns for portable classrooms.

The work of the DPCC would include but not be limited to assessing portable classroom needs, keeping inventory, identifying funding, determining placement, and ensuring maintenance. The DPCC should develop and share a time line to display the phasing in and eventual phasing out of portable classrooms when they are no longer necessary.

As it considers placement of portable classrooms on the school campus, the DPCC should ensure that the staff and students have easy access to the main building. The DPCC should plan for all the support facilities associated with portable classrooms, including furniture, equipment, technology access, intercom connection, and handicapped accessibility.

Other considerations include expenses associated with providing sufficient electrical power to support lighting and heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning units; tech-

nology; traffic safety; and both internal and external safety and security.

An inventory process should systematically code the portables by type, size, age, condition, and location. Accompanying this information should be inspection reports, licenses, insurance contracts, and pest treatment certifications for each portable classroom. That information is essential when portable classrooms must be moved to another campus or considered surplus by the district.

Working with the Community

Before meeting with community members, school administrators must be prepared to address public concerns for portable classrooms, such as aesthetics, safety, security, health, maintenance, and equity issues.

Aesthetics: Many complaints about portable classrooms are centered on their unattractive appearance (Taylor, Vasu, and Vasu 1999). School administrators should request that the exterior of the portable classrooms be attractively yet conservatively landscaped. Although portable classrooms require more maintenance than permanent classrooms (Fickes 1998), timely repairs and maintenance are critical to positive community perceptions.

Safety and security: School administrators must assure interested parties that the portable classrooms will meet all building codes. Safety concerns also dictate that emergency procedures (fire, tornado, intruder, etc.) be clearly defined, understood, and practiced by teachers and students.

Because portable classrooms are often placed behind school buildings, they are vulnerable to vandalism. School administrators should work with the community and residents in nearby neighborhoods, as well as with local police and fire departments, to organize community watch programs and establish an emergency communications procedure.

Health conditions: Administrators should consider that students or faculty with respiratory, allergy, or other health conditions may find their conditions exacerbated if heating, cooling, and ventilation are inadequate. Locations of portable classrooms must be free of toxic contamination. Air quality and water quality for portable classrooms must be tested regularly to ensure that they meet the acceptable standards approved by the local health department (Stewart 2002).

Effect on students: The greatest concern that parents have about the use of portable classrooms is their potential negative effect on student achievement. Parents often harbor perceptions that portable classrooms are inferior and assume that instruction will be as well. School administrators must be prepared to respond to parental concerns by carefully citing current related research about portable classrooms. Studies by Chan (2005, 2006), Chan and others (2003), and Krawitz

(1987) indicate no significant effect of portable classrooms on student achievement.

Negative to Positive

School districts that can turn negative associations of portable classrooms into positive images of effective planning and management will garner community support, parental acceptance, and continued student achievement.

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