

From Josh Morse, Public Buildings Commissioner

At the Newton Early Childhood Program project open house, I was asked why are school building projects like this so important?

It's a simple question, but the answer is a little deeper than some may think.

A 2002 [study](#) took a look at school facility investments in the District of Columbia and Chicago to determine the correlation between new school buildings and educator retention, which one can assume carries over to attracting top talent as well. Nearly 80 percent of teachers responding to a survey in Chicago and the District of Columbia reported that school facility conditions were an important factor in teaching quality. Almost half who graded their facilities "C" or below would consider leaving. A 2017 [study](#) by the California Policy Lab found that "students who attended newly constructed schools showed significant improvements in standardized test scores, attendance rates, and teacher-reported measures of student effort." The study went on to say, "Our findings indicate that 4 years of attending a newly constructed school leads to an increase of 5% of a standard deviation in English test scores, and an increase of 10% of a standard deviation in math scores."

Every time we start a new school building project, I explain to the community that the incredible educators are providing an amazing educational experience despite the challenging facility they're in. The resolve and passion of our teachers shines through every time. However, this is not how it's supposed to be. School buildings are supposed to foster, comfort, nurture, and nurture educational, social, and emotional growth. They should complement the incredible work of the educators. They should not contain barriers, but rather embrace everyone using universally accessible and welcoming design. They should create a sense of community within them. Adjacencies of programs and spaces really matter for both student learning and professional development. The flow of a building means a great deal, and lacking spaces or the correct sizes of spaces, can mean a world of difference in the daily life of our students. Heating, cooling, operable windows, leaky roofs, and other building issues should not be something that our staff and students should have to frequently contend with. Students shouldn't have to learn in a hallway or basement area simply because the building was constructed half a century or more before things like student services and special education existed.

I often am asked; can't this all be corrected with more or better maintenance? We have certainly expanded our maintenance efforts and funding significantly over the past decade or so. However; building maintenance is something you typically do to sustain and prolong the life of the building or system within it. When the vast majority of the building systems have reached the end of their useful life, you are no longer maintaining those systems, but rather trying to squeeze just a little more life out of them. I am a huge supporter of a robust preventative maintenance program, but to do so you must start from a sustainable baseline.

If we maintained the heating systems, installed air conditioning, and replaced the other building systems, wouldn't we be all set? Maintenance cannot fix a building that was built too low on a site and is now prone to flooding. It cannot fix a building that has had several additions constructed before accessibility was considered yielding a myriad of elevation changes and physical barriers. It cannot fix a school that has no special education or student support spaces. It cannot fix rooms that are a fifth of the size that they should be based on state educational standards.

Educators make great schools. Period. However, great school buildings help attract and retain great educators. Students perform better when they are not distracted by noisy heating equipment, sporadic building temperatures, or the many other challenges of learning in a building that was designed for a totally different educational model. (In many cases our schools were designed during the great depression almost a century ago.)

School buildings should not be something that must be overcome. They should be something that welcome, embrace, and inspire our children and the future generations of this great city.