

Improved School Facilities Improves Student Learning

During discussions on the March 13th referendum, community members have asked if there is a relationship between school facilities and student learning. Their question is simple: “Will new classrooms and renovated facilities improve student learning?” And the answer is not as far-reaching as one might think.

School facilities have a impact on improving student learning and the facts are clear. The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis out of Penn State contends, “a growing body of research has found that school facilities can have a profound impact on both teacher and student outcomes. For example, with respect to teachers, school facilities affect teacher recruitment, retention, commitment, and effort. With respect to students, school facilities affect health, behavior, engagement, learning, and growth in achievement.” At NB, the high school facilities are in need of renovations and this has a negative impact on both student and teacher outcomes.

It’s a fact that today’s learning environment is far different than the traditional classrooms of the 20th century classroom. Gone are the days of teachers standing at the front of the class writing on a blackboard. Teaching our children 21st Century Skills demands not only solid recall and fact understanding but also a high level of emotional intelligence and working well with others in teams. These skills are developed well beyond the classroom walls.

Our high school was built in the 1960’s and it has substandard plumbing, roofing, and electrical systems. Students and faculty are forced to endure unsatisfactory environmental conditions that result from a lack of air conditioning, inadequate ventilation, poor acoustics, overcrowded hallways, and overcrowded cafeterias. In addition, it is important to remember that the high school campus is comprised of separate east and a west buildings. The high school east building was originally constructed as the district’s junior high school. Today, the east building houses high school students, but these classrooms are smaller than the classrooms in the west building which poses challenges for maximizing the master schedule and class sizes. Moreover, this campus requires faculty and students to pass outdoors between buildings at the change of classes. This not only presents a significant challenge to our students and our faculty during rain, sleet, snow, and ice but also compromises the safety of our faculty and students and the security of our campus. These conditions have a negative impact on student learning and achievement, health, and behavior. Moreover, it is important to note these poor conditions also have a negative effect on our teachers.

NB high school has not only lost potential teaching candidates to area school districts that boast new and innovative school facilities and classroom design but we

have also had teachers leave NB for more favorable working conditions. One simply cannot deny that NB's lack of air conditioning, crowded hallways and cafeterias, and poor acoustics have a negative effect on teacher retention. Potential teaching candidates will opt not to come to NB in favor of high school facilities that are air conditioned and secure.

Next, let's understand how the generation of students now entering the high school have always lived with climate control. All of the elementary schools in the region as well as our middle school are 100% air conditioned. However, the high school is only partially air conditioned. Classrooms, science labs, the gymnasiums, the cafeterias, and the 500 building are examples of areas in the high school that are not air conditioned. Clearly, this compromises the health of the students and teachers. But the challenges are not limited to health and safety.

Finally, it is important to note that the workforce demands of the Baby Boomers have seen significant changes in the last 20 years. Today's learning involves an interplay of relationships in 'how people use [space], relate to others, and voices, in an ever changing world.' (Ackermann) New designed instructional spaces better support these desired outcomes.

So let's be clear. The general attitudes, behavior, and relationships among pupils and staff are more conducive to learning in those schools which have had significant capital investments. While many studies link the effects of building quality to academic achievement, other studies tie building quality to student behavior. Vandalism, leaving early, absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions, disciplinary incidents, violence, disruption in class, tardiness, racial incidents, and smoking all have been used as variables in these studies. All impact student behaviour and learning.

The research concludes:

School facilities can have a profound impact on both teacher and student outcomes;

- Good teaching takes place in schools with a good physical environment;
- Good school leadership can also be found in schools with a high-quality capital stock;
- The general attitudes, behaviors, and relationships amongst pupils and staff are more conducive to learning in those schools which have had significant capital investments.

The quality of the school facilities has a dramatic impact on the quality of student learning. Our students deserve facilities that support their health and well-being, improve security, and inspire the desire for continued growth. The better choice is for better schools.