



By David Williamson

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## A History of Success: The Ohio School Facilities Commission 20th Anniversary

This spring, the Ohio School Facilities Commission (OSFC) is celebrating a major landmark—the 20th anniversary of the commission's establishment.

The 1997 landmark DeRolph decision addressed virtually every area of school funding—including that of the state's facilities construction program, then administered by the Ohio Department of Education. As part of Ohio's response, the general assembly created a new agency, the Ohio School Facilities Commission, to direct the state's school building program.

The OSFC's 20-year history in guiding the state's school rebuilding program has led to the opening of over 1,180 new or renovated buildings, reaching an estimated 650,000 students. Over \$11.5 billion in state funding alone has been spent on both classroom facilities and a series of programs directed at such issues as school security and mitigating lead in drinking fountains.

**Through its fully funded rebuilding programs or through its grant programs, the OSFC has touched nearly every district in Ohio and completely addressed all facilities needs in 259 of those districts.**

What the numbers don't tell is the story of the innovation that went into the development of both the OSFC and the programs it manages and the innovation what has continued from the beginning. Prior to the establishment of the OSFC, the state operated a school facilities program through the Ohio Department of Education. The program provided funding through competitive grants to districts that submitted applications for specific buildings. The program did not address the overall needs of the district. There was significant subjectivity in the decision-making process as to which grant was approved and what state funds would be available and what local funds would be required.

The first innovation was the decision as to how a district becomes eligible for state funding. Unlike the previous grant based application, the enabling legislation for OSFC designated that districts must be funded in order of their property wealth. Language in the Ohio Revised Code requires the commission to begin with the state's lowest wealth districts. Further, instead of funding on a school-by-school basis, the commission was required to provide funding for the entire facilities need within a district.

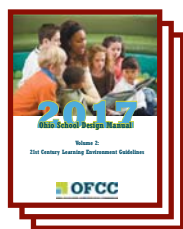
The second innovation was the commission's use of a standardized building assessment process, developed with the input of industry leaders and a national association specializing in school facilities, that gives a thorough and measurable picture of the condition of current buildings. Additionally, the incorporation of projections of future student populations allows OSFC and the district to determine actual need and, from there, a baseline to determine the actual cost of a project.

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## The use of these standardized protocols for eligibility and scope, rather than an application process (such as “first come, first served), is a major strength of the program.

These programs are only two examples of how OSFC has addressed the unique needs of school districts without straying from the principles of objectivity and fairness. Some other examples are:



To provide all districts with the opportunity for quality facilities, the commission developed the Ohio School Design Manual (OSDM). This document, updated annually to change with the times, is a comprehensive set of standards and guidelines for the construction and renovation of schools. The manual has been adopted by several other states.



The OSFC has always recommended that when the cost of renovating a building exceeds a certain percentage of the cost of new construction, that the building be taken out the district's facilities plan in favor of a new building. When local communities opposed abandoning historic buildings or facilities with a special meaning to the community, threatening the ability of district to acquire their share of the project cost, OSFC worked with districts to develop a program that allowed for waiver of the guideline with the local community accepting responsibility for excess costs.



Because of the size of their projects, some districts found it difficult to pass a bond levy that would cover the cost of their local share. OSFC worked with state legislators, and with education groups to adapt state law to the use of project segments—allowing districts to divide up their project into smaller increments that made the size of bond levies more manageable.

OSFC has also been a national leader in the use of environmentally friendly designs for educational facilities. In 2007, the commission voted to require that all OSFC-funded projects be designed using the standards of the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED® for Schools program.

The LEED for Schools® Rating System is a comprehensive tool that incorporates design and construction practices including classroom acoustics, indoor air quality, selection of building materials, and energy efficiency. Buildings are awarded points for how well they meet the required standards. Buildings are certified at various levels depending on the number of points they have achieved.

## Ohio currently has more certified K-12 educational structures than any other state—289 buildings, with over a third of them exceeding the LEED program's highest certifications.

In 2012, the state of Ohio enacted the first major changes in public construction law in over 130 years. In addition to allowing the use of additional forms of construction administration, the General Assembly established the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC), merging two key players in public school facility construction: the former Office of the State Architect and the OSFC as a commission-within-a-commission organization with single authority for public facility construction planning, funding, contracting, project management, and post-construction oversight.

The merger combined the state's construction authority and resources within a single entity that guides capital projects for state agencies, state-supported universities and community colleges, and most importantly, for Ohio's public primary and secondary schools. The Commission sets uniform rules, procedures, and standardized documents for public construction, and is responsible for construction delivery methods, construction documents, and process and procedures.

For the Ohio School Facilities Commission, the bottom line is that the history of the commission has been one of success, founded on innovation and a willingness to work with interested parties to accomplish the task. Change has never been an issue for the commission—it's adapted as necessary. The near future will bring more change—even as we write this, the General Assembly is considering language in the state's operating budget that would completely consolidate the OSFC into the OFCC. While this administrative change will mean the sunset of the Ohio School Facilities Commission, it will not lessen the state's commitment to K-12 education. We're fully aware that by no stretch of the imagination is the OFCC's job done—we still have over 300 districts to complete, not to mention the work that we'll do with our other partners. We will continue, however, to work with the passion and energy that's shown in the work of our ultimate customers—the children of Ohio. 🍷

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