

Redesigning a School District

How the largest urban school district in Minnesota reinvented its facilities plan and embraced its diverse populace.

By STEVE CIMINO FOR AIA ARCHITECT



Illustration: U+B Architecture & Design Inc. A depiction of the upper campus at Linwood Monroe Arts Plus, a school in St. Paul.

Saint Paul Public Schools is the State of Minnesota's largest urban school district, made up of 68 schools and serving just under 38,000 students. Thanks to an award-winning Facilities Master Plan that tapped into the needs of the St. Paul community, it's also among the most diverse and inclusive in the country.

Previous long-term plans for Saint Paul Public Schools were largely technical in nature, put into place by administrators and not accounting for the district's growing diversity: 78 percent students of color, 72 percent in poverty, and more than 100 languages and dialects spoken. Those demographics, and an urgent need to address a critical opportunity gap for students of color, reinforced a need for new thinking.

Once that need was established, Saint Paul Public Schools reinforced a mandate for equity that facilities director Tom Parent, AIA, was tasked with implementing. Over the last several years, St. Paul has embraced the idea that the places where we teach and learn actively contribute to the learning process and should be designed for everyone involved.

"As we started working on this five years ago," Parent says, "it was important to identify that if we have different aims than our previous plans, we needed to have a very different process."

The goal was to not just increase the number of seats at the design table, but to be intentional about who was present. Thoughts on appropriate spaces for education, and the best way for children of all upbringings to learn, were requested from a wide set of participants: students, parents, faculty, principals, and architects from seven firms in St. Paul.

"This is the design process taken to a district level, as opposed to a school level," Parent says. "It's making sure we have the opportunity for an empathy-based process. It was important not to have disparate voices speaking in a vacuum."

These voices came together in a series of charrettes focused on broad strategies for improvement, not specific changes to certain buildings. The idea was to create a 10-year planning process that would bring the district's facilities into the 21st century, with emphasis on the curricular arc of each grade and how students could feel consistent benefits year after year.

"We design with, not for," says Margaret Parsons, AIA, a principal at Cunningham Group Architecture and a participant in the master planning process. "Students, parents, administrators, community members: They were all part of our design team."

But what does it mean when members of the team aren't certain of their role? For design professionals, it's commonplace to participate in a charrette and share their expertise; for ordinary citizens of St. Paul, this was unfamiliar terrain.

"My initial thoughts were, 'Throw the doors open, anyone can come in,'" Parent says. "It didn't occur to me that people would not understand why this was important, how they could contribute, or that not being intentional about who was at the table might inadvertently dissuade people from participating."

For some, the request seemed like a waste of their Saturday morning, or an attempt to check off “community engagement” on a to-do list. Parent and his team realized that they had to educate and persuade as best they could, reinforcing the equal value of hearing from both educators with dozens of years’ experience and parents with vested interests.

“We didn’t just want PTA parents or honor roll students,” Parent says. “We wanted a little of everybody, because we wanted to hear something different.”

And despite the involvement of so many firms with potentially differing perspectives, the community in St. Paul proved to be as collaborative as Parsons hoped.

“In St. Paul, we just have a way of working together,” she says. “And for us at Cuningham, this offered a real chance to be proactive with educators, helping them determine the best course for their facilities and ensuring that resources are spent in an efficient manner.”

It also spoke volumes that, before the planning process even started, Parent strongly encouraged all district employees and external architects involved in the master plan to undergo a 16-hour training course on racial equity. “It provided a powerful perspective,” he says, “and helped connect folks with the mission and the way we were approaching it.”

With the plan approved in December 2015, improvement projects are underway with Cuningham Group and other firms that represent almost \$500 million in investments.

“What we had in St. Paul schools was an intersection of belief and values and a district-level commitment to equity,” says Anne Carroll, a former member of St. Paul’s Board of Education. In fact, Saint Paul Public Schools recently received the 2016 Core Values Award for Respect for Diversity, Inclusion & Culture from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) for its master plan, reinforcing its status as a model for other districts.

“You can’t do work in a district like St. Paul without addressing equity,” says Carroll, who recently completed her term of service on the IAP2 board. “Tom and his team created opportunities for lots of voices to be heard.”

Those opportunities would not have been possible, however, without Parent’s unique brand of design thinking.

“The work we’ve done here,” Parent says, “is grounded in architecture and design, and in the ways we’ve been trained to understand situations like these and involve people in a process that respects them individually.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

[Steve Cimino for AIA Architect](#)