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## The shows must go on

Schools should carefully plan their performing arts facilities to make sure they provide appropriate spaces for students to excel.

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In the midst of a pandemic that has shut down most large gatherings, it may be wishful thinking to imagine performing arts in schools and new performing arts buildings. But before too long, classrooms will again be filled with students, and live performing arts will return to school campuses.

In anticipation of that day, here are some ideas for better pre-planning for performing arts spaces.

## ***Plan thoroughly***

For most public high schools, a new performing arts facility emerges as part of a district's capital plan and the resulting bond proposal. From that moment on, the process is fraught with peril.

A performing arts space is a specialized and complex building filled with expensive performance technology and with exacting code requirements for access, exiting, fire and life safety. But, too often, it is carelessly described in public documents and bond language.

This language may irrevocably define a project before any detailed analysis of what this theater should be for this school. Very specific cost estimates are sometimes created that may have the power of statute, and teachers, students, and the public may be given little opportunity to contribute to the conversation, nor has expert advice been obtained.

In their haste to determine what a high school performance space should be, school planners may not put sufficient focus on what the process should be at the start. There are ways to avoid the many pitfalls along the way from capital plan to architectural request for qualifications.

First and most important: Solicit expertise. In addition to consulting teachers, students, and community, bring in a theater consultant to establish basic parameters around the concept. If construction is likely to be some years off, don't define it too tightly—the longtime inspirational band director with the 140-piece concert band is likely to retire, or the new dance teacher may develop a wildly successful program. Those changes could necessitate a revision of the original concept. Start with a few basic decisions.

## ***How big?***

The space is unlikely to be big enough to accommodate large graduation ceremonies, so having 1,000 or more seats is seldom a good choice—most young performers and

groups will be dwarfed by an auditorium of that size—to their detriment and that of the audience.

Should it seat one full grade and teachers? That can be a good decision for a high school, but if that's 700 or more students, the space should really have a balcony for good sightlines and some level of intimacy. That means a two-story space—and in a stand-alone building, that requires an elevator to serve the upper level, along with the cost increase that comes with structure and circulation on two levels.

It also will require additional supervision to oversee two separate groups of students. If the theater is a part of a larger two-story structure, several of those building concerns are mitigated, but the supervision issue remains.

The space also may be too large for many of the intended performances. A balcony could remain dark when not needed, though its acoustical volume remains and complicates use for smaller audiences.

Another sizing pitfall is embedded in some district requirements for parity among school campuses. For performing arts, this seems to be wedded to seat count. If School A has 800 seats, so must School B. But if the budgets are different or costs have increased in the interval between construction of the two, School A may have a sophisticated stage and equipment that School B cannot afford if it is required to provide 800 seats.

If School B were allowed to have only 500 seats, the actual technology and functions of the buildings could be equivalent. Many would consider that true parity. School theaters are sometimes forced to accommodate 800 seats they did not want or need and must settle for stages and equipment that are clearly not equal to the neighboring school.

### ***Fixed or flexible?***

Flexible spaces seem to offer many spaces in one, but it is critical that schools clearly understand the capabilities and requirements of a large-scale flexible performance

space, or even a small-scale one. A successful flexible space must be easy to change over, or it's not flexible at all. Will the flexibility be achieved through expensive machinery that may require repair and maintenance dollars that will not be available in subsequent years?

Or will changes be carried out by school maintenance staff—or worse, students conscripted to do heavy lifting instead of learning? To be a supportive environment for multiple event types, a flexible facility requires advanced acoustic and technology to accommodate the various audience and performance configurations, along with circulation and exiting that must meet code and function in each arrangement.

Spaces with carefully chosen movable elements can be successful if they are consciously designed for specific needs, but poorly planned ones end up as bad spaces that never move.

### ***Considering technology***

Is performance technology an important element of a district's commitment to arts education? Fine careers are available in such technology inside and outside performing arts industries. Many decision-makers may say, "Oh they just do it all digitally now," without thinking that performers can't climb up a digital staircase or sit on a digital sofa; digital technology requires many hours of training and practice to be successful.

Building elements such as fly towers, orchestra pits, and catwalks have square footage costs and operational consequences. If a district refuses to include catwalks for lighting and forbids students and even teachers to use ladders or lifts (more and more likely in a safety-conscious era), school facilities personnel will be required to work on performance lighting. Those workers are unlikely to have knowledge of or experience with those tasks; the setup has to change for every event—or should. For this pre-design concept, some broad outlines of a high, medium, or low level of key building elements and related technology can be outlined with details developed later.

### ***Support space***

What classrooms are needed for music, dance, theater, and performance technology? Where will scenery, costumes and props be built and stored? What makeup and dressing rooms, offices, backstage restrooms are needed? If the facility also will be available to the community, what audience amenities may be required that school-only buildings might not need, such as security, ticketing, art display, food service, or larger dedicated restrooms? A high level of detail may not be required in the pre-design phase, but knowledgeable allocations of square footage should be included.

This is only the tip of the iceberg—a few items that illustrate the need for informed decision-making. School administrators are not experts in specialized building design and require assistance to understand the implications of the options before them.

Two examples of theater design that could have benefited from greater expertise: An 800-seat theater all on one main level with seating slope at 1:12 (the slope limit for wheelchairs) is touted as having universal access. In actuality, what it provides are universally terrible sightlines. There are ways to provide integrated and gracious accessible seating while providing good sightlines for all.

Second example: A theater where the only performer support space backstage is across an open courtyard. It quickly sprouted an ad hoc blue-tarp and PVC walkway to protect performers from the rain. There's no vestibule to stop light, noise, or rain from entering the stage area, either.

A theater consultant may expand school administrators' knowledge of the spaces and systems needed for performing arts instruction and performance events, provide examples, and offer an understanding of the consequences of design decisions, as well as the opportunities available.

A consultant's job is to provide schools with the information needed to make informed choices. The American Society of Theater Consultants provides information regarding what theater consultants do.

Many of the people who take part in theater, dance, and music performances—or merely appreciate them as an audience member—learned to love the arts in middle

and high school. Students are just beginning their education into these arts, and they deserve the very best performance spaces that can be provided for them. They are not yet skilled enough to overcome poor lighting, inadequate sound systems, or gigantic barns with bad acoustics and worse sightlines. Please, don't hobble a new building before it even lands on a bond ballot.

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