

'No Cost' School Renovation

Taking advantage of an energy performance contract let this small district make extensive improvements without asking the taxpayers for money

It sounds almost too good to be true. About eight months ago, Ohio's Poland Local School District completed \$5.5 million in additions and upgrades at no cost to the taxpayers.

But it is a reality for our 2,400-student school system, located just outside Youngstown. Students, parents, faculty, and staff are enjoying improvements at three elementary schools that were built

during the 1950s and had been considered obsolete.

How did we do it? The district entered into a multiyear energy performance contract that allows us to pay off our loan through the savings realized by the renovation itself.

The result is newly refurbished buildings, a better atmosphere for learning, and energy savings at a time when many

districts are reeling from high—and unpredictable—energy costs.

Renovate and renew

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, school districts spend more than \$6 billion annually on energy, but the department estimates that a quarter of this money—\$1.5 billion each year—could be saved by greater efficiency. Schools often just need an innovative way to finance the improvements.

“Several factors contribute to school energy inefficiency,” according to *Energy-Efficient Schools*, a publication of the National Conference of State Legislatures. “School budgets usually are divided between capital and operating expenses. To keep capital costs low,



Photo courtesy of Jessica Ehrenberg, Boardman and Poland Town Crier Newspapers, Boardman, Ohio



Energy efficiency pays off. An addition that connects two schools in Poland, Ohio (opposite page), is one of the construction projects funded by savings realized from energy improvements. Another project is a new entrance to the two schools (left).

many states encourage or require districts to build schools as inexpensively as possible. Unfortunately, energy-efficient technologies (heating, air-conditioning, lighting, and so forth) often fall by the wayside in such an environment.”

In Poland, our board was faced with a dilemma: Either we had to renovate our schools or build new ones at a cost of more than \$18 million—something we could not afford. We decided to renovate the schools and take advantage of a 20-year-old Ohio law that allows schools to borrow funds to pay for energy improvements, such as new boilers, insulation, windows, and heating and cooling equipment. With the savings realized through reduced energy costs, we found we could pay for other school improvements.

The improvements were both functional and aesthetic. The monotonous school rooflines in vogue during the 1950s—what I call “the flat-roofed plaza look”—were changed. Colored panels on one school, also a remnant of that era, were removed, and all three schools

were given a “colonial” upgrade that helped them fit in with the prevailing architecture of the town.

In addition, a connector was built between two schools, one serving grades five and six and the other serving grades seven and eight. The two buildings are now linked into a single campus with separate classrooms but shared common facilities.

The exterior changes have totally altered the appearance of our buildings. The remodeling included rewiring; retiling of halls; the installation of air-conditioning and better lighting; new windows; updated libraries, cafeterias, offices, computer labs, faculty dining rooms, and classrooms; furniture upgrades; and new cost-efficient heating systems.

A win-win situation

Under the Ohio law, schools can borrow money for the renovations without having to pass a bond referendum. Using one provision, boards can elect to work with a building contractor for a “shared savings contract” that guarantees a cer-

tain level of energy savings, which is used to make payments on the debt. Any additional savings can go into the district’s general fund.

By law, the improvements must be paid for within 30 years. Since Ohio’s law was passed in 1985, more than 500 of the state’s school districts have taken advantage of the program.

Here at the Poland schools, we negotiated with our vender a guaranteed annual energy savings of \$390,000. The actual savings were almost \$500,000 annually, providing the district with more than \$100,000 each year that could be used for other upgrades.

The program also ensures that our district is doing its share to be environmentally friendly by significantly reducing emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants. It’s a win-win situation for everyone: faculty, students, staff, parents, and our community.

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