ESSENTIALS IN SCHOOL FACILITIES PLANNING

Educational Specifications

The California Department of Education (CDE) believes that quality educational specifications are key to designing school facilities that successfully support the delivery of educational and community programs and foster effective, safe, and sustainable learning environments.

What Are Educational Specifications?

Educational specifications are used by school districts as the link between the design of school facilities and the educational programs they are intended to support. Educational specifications are for individual projects or for districtwide use and usually contain two components: the educational program and the architectural design program. Educational specifications describe the physical requirements necessary to deliver the educational program, which enables the architect to visualize the educational and extracurricular activities so that the design concepts and solutions support the educational program. Educational specifications also serve as a platform for an inclusive and transparent stakeholder planning process and as a method of developing and communicating the district governing board's facility vision, policies, and standards.

Importance of Educational Specifications

New and modernized schools are an enduring community asset, and spending the time and effort to ensure the success of these facilities is essential. Good planning practices suggest that the design of a new school and the modernization, expansion, or reconfiguration of an existing school should be guided by a comprehensive agreement of affected stakeholders as to how the facilities will be used. Well-developed educational specifications provide

clarity for guiding the facility design process and help to create and maintain optimal learning environments.

Another reason why educational specifications are important is because California Title 5 regulations[1] require that the design of a new school will be guided by the educational specifications adopted by the district's governing board.

Transparent and collaboratively developed educational specifications,[2] together with a districtwide facilities master plan, are key tools in building community support for creating high-performing new schools. The facilities master plan includes comprehensive data and board-adopted policies on long-term districtwide facilities needs and plans.[3]

Educational specifications are an important guide for major modernization or renovation projects of existing schools. The capacity and layout of the existing buildings, site constraints, and many other factors may limit the ability to meet growing enrollment or to deliver all of the educational and community programs effectively. Creative solutions based on priorities established in educational specifications are helpful in updating existing facilities to meet current and future needs.

For more information, contact the California Department of Education, School Facilities and Transportation Services Division, at 916-322-2470.

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Educational Specifications Content

CDE recommends that educational specifications address the following areas:

1. Project description
2. Project design factors
3. Activity area requirements
4. Summary of area relationships
5. Summary of space requirements

The CDE publication *Educational Specifications, Linking Design of School Facilities to Educational Program*[4] provides greater detail on each of the five major areas. Each district can modify and expand these outlines to suit their unique needs and goals.

The building or design component of educational specifications can also include details on special characteristics: integration of technology; sustainable and green features; safety, security, and crime prevention; flexible and outdoor learning areas; career–technical education; special education; and other educational priorities.

Development of Educational Specifications

Effective educational specifications are the result of a collaborative planning process reflecting the consensus of a committee of stakeholders, including educators, students, administrators, board members, classified staff, parents, and the general public. Field trips to exemplary projects may also be beneficial to expose committee members to new educational concepts and to stimulate innovative design ideas. The development process may take six months or more depending on the size and complexities of the project.

Some districts include consultants and an architect in the development of educational specifications, while other districts do not assign an architect until after the educational specifications are complete. The district should ensure that the project is driven by the educators and the community and not by predetermined architectural solutions.

In districts with consistent curriculum and program delivery models, the development of districtwide educational specifications may be appropriate. The districtwide document can provide a broader policy and vision framework for project- or site-specific educational specifications.

Desired standards may need to be approached with compromise that recognizes fiscal and physical realities. Knowing the limitations of a project's budget and having a facility condition assessment for existing facilities may also assist in understanding the relative needs of the whole campus and efficiently prioritizing the project's objectives.

Educational specifications should ultimately be adopted by a school district's governing board through the public hearing process. The final document should be officially published and made available to the architect and to the public to communicate the board's policies and requirements for proposed educational facilities and to support specific educational programs and 21st century learning.

Educating a diverse student population presents challenges that require careful definition of community and instructional needs. Educational specifications are the vehicle to translate the instructional program into a beautiful, economical, functional, and sustainable learning environment.

1. *California Code of Regulations,* Title 5, sections 14030 and 14031a.
2. Natomas Unified School District and DLR Group, *Elementary School TK-5/K-8 Educational Specifications,* Sacramento, DLR Group, 2015.
3. 21st Century School Fund, 2011, *PK-12 Public Educational Facilities Master Plan Evaluation Guide.*
4. California Department of Education, *Educational Specifications: Linking Design of School Facilities to Educational Program,* Sacramento, California Department of Education, 1997.

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