

Summary of Peer Review Transportation, Capital Projects, Maintenance and Operations

September, 2008

*Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

The recommendations from each peer review informed the district's strategic planning process and will guide the implementation of the strategic plan, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for the future.

The Subject

Transportation, Capital Projects, Maintenance and Operations

The SPS **department of transportation** is responsible for arranging transportation to and from school for Seattle's 45,000 public school students. The department has a \$29.4 million budget for fiscal year 2008, of which \$22.2 million was allocated for contracted school buses, \$1.1 million for taxis and \$0.9 million for transit passes.

Capital projects at SPS are largely funded through property tax votes. During the last decade, Seattle voters have passed four capital levies totaling more than \$1.2 billion to construct or renovate 24 schools and complete more than 1,000 facility and technology projects. Voter-approved capital projects are organized into two programs: BEX (Building Excellence) and BTA (Buildings, Technology and Academics).

Maintenance and operations (M&O) tasks are managed by the facilities services branch of the SPS facilities department. M&O tasks have an annual budget of \$40.4 million and more than 400 staff people, who manage janitorial services, grounds and building upkeep.

The Reviewers

The study on transportation, capital projects and M&O was conducted by a team from the **Council of the Great City Schools**. The Council, which was founded in 1956, is a coalition of 66 of the nation's largest urban public school systems. The Council supports member districts with research, communications, curriculum and management assistance and has conducted nearly 150 instructional, management and operational reviews over the last several years. For this review, the Council assembled a team of senior managers from other major urban school systems with experience in the areas of transportation, capital projects and M&O. The review was conducted during 2008 and published in August 2008.

Summary

The review team analyzed each of three areas: transportation, capital projects and maintenance and operations. The team made recommendations in each area:

- **Transportation:** The reviewers recommended that SPS set clear standards for transporting students and develop procedures to field-manage contractors (who provide yellow bus service for Seattle students). They also recommended that transportation staff be involved as partners in instructional decisions, since many decisions—such as student assignment and bell times for programs—are currently made without considering transportation costs or logistics.
- **Capital projects:** The reviewers recommended that SPS develop a facilities utilization plan that would include closing unneeded facilities. They recommended that the district take steps to reduce the nearly \$500 million major maintenance backlog. And they recommended that different types of capital projects be coordinated within the system and that community members be surveyed about project success.
- **Maintenance and operations (M&O):** The reviewers recommended that SPS develop standards for custodial and maintenance tasks and that facilities services managers work to improve staff morale and work quality. They also recommended that the major maintenance backlog (described above) be recomputed, as it may have been underestimated. They also recommended that SPS develop a more strategic approach to preventive maintenance and care for its facilities.

Study Methods

The review team visited Seattle three times during early 2008, once for each of the areas studied. They **interviewed** staff members in each of the three areas, **reviewed** documents and materials, and **visited** schools and facilities.

Findings and Recommendations

The review team analyzed each of the three areas under study: transportation, capital projects, and maintenance and operations (M&O).

Transportation: The reviewers praised SPS for hiring a new transportation manager and for high levels of customer satisfaction despite difficulties at the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year. They also noted that SPS is increasing secondary students' use of public transportation (Metro) and expanding the use of GPS technology in school buses.

The reviewers expressed concern, however, that the district cannot easily produce information about ridership, transportation costs or contractor performance (SPS contracts out yellow bus service), and that the district does not have clear performance standards for contractors. Reviewers also noted that the district's student assignment and student information databases are not coordinated with the VersaTrans bus routing program, resulting in duplication of effort.

The reviewers expressed particular concern about the fact that instructional decisions are made separately from transportation decisions: Students often travel long distances to school, at high cost; and different bell times for general and special education programs and changes to program start and stop times mean that duplicate bus routes must be established to serve students at the same school.

The reviewers recommended that SPS set standards for service and then reorganize transportation staff to meet these standards and better manage contractor performance in the field. They recommended that SPS review and possibly redesign bus routes for increased efficiency and safety. Finally, they suggested involving the transportation department as a partner in instructional decisions.

Capital projects: The reviewers praised SPS for its ability to win voter support for capital programs and noted that the district has developed "excellent" BEX reporting systems and documents.

The reviewers expressed concern, however, that Seattle has not been able to develop a viable approach to close or consolidate schools due to declining enrollment and that there is no long-term plan for facilities utilization. They also noted that both capital projects and M&O have been affected by a major maintenance backlog of at least \$486 million, which the district has not been able to address. The reviewers noted that different types of capital projects are not coordinated and that the district's financial management systems do not support BTA and BEX business operations. Finally, the reviewers noted that the district does not always reach out to the community to gauge the success of its projects.

The reviewers recommended that SPS develop a capacity management study to evaluate excess building capacity and develop a plan to close unneeded facilities and address the major maintenance backlog. They suggested creating a capital manager position to coordinate different types of capital projects and taking steps to better coordinate and manage finances for capital projects. And they suggested surveying community members about the success of capital projects.

Maintenance and operations (M&O): The reviewers commended SPS for working to better coordinate capital projects with M&O. They also praised the district's energy conservation program and its new, web-based building climate control system, which allows quick response to system failures.

However, the reviewers expressed concern that budgeting and planning for M&O have become disconnected from overall academic and support operations. They noted that many school principals expressed dissatisfaction with the condition of

their buildings but could not identify any resources to address the problem. They also pointed to an “acceptance of mediocrity” on the part of principals and school staff and noted that there are “no performance incentives and few consequences” for poor performance in building maintenance.

The reviewers noted that the number of custodians appears to be low compared with other districts. They also noted that supervision of custodians does not appear to be adequate.

The reviewers paid particular attention to the major maintenance backlog they identified as part of their review of capital projects. They expressed concern that the backlog identified in the district’s March 2008 facilities master plan may have been underestimated. They also noted that the district must move toward more preventive work so that it can avoid having to respond to breakdowns.

The reviewers recommended that the district address the necessary interdependence of academics and operations. They also recommended that facilities services managers address staff morale and work quality and develop standards for work. They also suggested that the major maintenance backlog be recomputed and that the district develop a facilities management information system to track and respond to facilities needs.

Next Steps

The review of transportation, capital projects and M&O was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools’ strategic planning process**. The strategic plan, “Excellence for All,” was developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan was adopted by the School Board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years. Multiple actions have been taken to address recommendations and findings in this report and a summary will be posted on the district’s Web site.