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Education design Showcase

OUTSTANDING DESIGN +
ARCHITECTURE IN EDUCATION

NEW PRODUCT AWARDS 2022

THE TOP 10 THINGS
I LEARNED FROM BUILDING
A \$51M PREK-12 CAMPUS

A FLEXIBLE FUTURE
REQUIRES FLEXIBLE
FURNITURE

PROJECT OF DISTINCTION

INVENTIONLAND EDUCATION INNOVATION LABS

BERKSHIRE LOCAL SCHOOLS AND INVENTIONLAND EDUCATION
BURTON, OHIO



INVENTIONLAND Education worked with the \$51 million Berkshire Local Schools' new PreK-12 campus project to create 13 immersive, age-appropriate maker spaces and Innovation Labs as an integral part of their larger overall construction project. This includes Creativity Cabin locker cubbies for PreK and kindergarten students; Inventalot Castles, with its own slide for first and second-grade students; and Chipper's Treehouse for third- and fourth-graders. In addition, the team developed Discover Pirate Ships for fifth- and sixth-grade maker spaces, Inventron Robot spaces for seventh- and eighth-graders, and high school Innovation Labs utilizing a sci-fi/space fantasy theme, with modern wall art and dry-erase light panels.

According to Berkshire Local Schools Superintendent John Stoddard, "The concept behind the maker spaces and Innovation Labs tied in perfectly with our project-based learning approach. We want our learners to understand how the ideas we teach work instead of just memorizing and repeating facts. And we want to inspire innovation, new thinking, and creativity through a combination of spaces and concepts." Stoddard and Inventionland Education also believe the spaces will help to develop the skills that today's employers want, such as problem-solving, collaboration, presentation skills, and creative solutions to problems.

ARCHITECT

**Inventionland
Education**
PITTSBURGH, PENN.

PROJECT INFORMATION

COMPLETION DATE

7/29/2022

DESIGN CAPACITY

1,600 students

CURRENT ENROLLMENT

1,360 students

GROSS AREA OF BUILDING

204,000 sq. ft.

SPACE PER PUPIL

150 sq. ft.

SITE SIZE

33 acres

COST PER STUDENT

\$37,500

COST PER SQ. FT.

\$250

TOTAL CONSTRUCTION COST

\$51,000,000

MAKER SPACES & INNOVATION LABS

Inventionland Education



THE TOP 10 THINGS I LEARNED FROM BUILDING A \$51M PREK-12 CAMPUS

By John Stoddard (with John Peretz)

The Backstory

On a beautiful August evening in Burton, Ohio, Berkshire Local Schools Superintendent John Stoddard collected his thoughts before the community ribbon-cutting ceremony for their new PreK-12 school. Not knowing what to expect in terms of attendance, Stoddard watched as more and more people gathered to check out the beautiful facility, built on the Kent State University-Geauga campus. There was unmistakable energy from the estimated crowd of over 2,000 people, more than the entire population of the Village of Burton. As Stoddard and his school board members cut the ribbon and opened the school for the general public to see, Stoddard had a moment to pause and reflect. This was one long journey.

Over ten years in the making, the new school was finally ready to open. School board president John Manfredi made some impactful opening comments about the school and what it meant for the community. But, as with any enormous endeavor, the public saw only the finished campus- not all the hard work, funding hurdles and decisions that were made along the way. But those in the school-building process know better. John Stoddard recently sat down with education writer John Peretz to give the inside scoop on what he learned and the advice he'd give others just starting the process. Here are his top 10 tips.

1. Build Consensus Early

As educators, we often hear the words "soft skills," and you will use many of them during a new school build. Communication, flexibility, teamwork, problem-solving, empathy, adaptability,

and (perhaps most importantly) stress management will all be essential.

With your initial team in place, aligning the overall vision with your most important stakeholders is essential. Sharing thoughts and ideas and forming a common vision will be crucial to your success.

2. Be Ready for the Levy

One of the most important steps you can take is to get ready for the levy. Unfortunately, most first-time referendums fail- not because of a lack of vision, but from a reluctance of voters to pass additional tax hikes. Even more strikingly, voters may not trust the school board or administration.

We were fortunate because voters passed our bond measure by almost a 2-1 margin. But we did a lot of preparation. For example, we made sure we had yard signs in support of the measure, about 750-1,000 in all. In preliminary meetings, we had people we knew ask the first 5-10 questions, since this can often lead to the direction a meeting will go.

We also brainstormed many potential objections (such as an increase in taxes) and focused on the value that good schools bring to property values.

We also stressed the value of having a more prepared workforce and the importance of having more options for our students to achieve the American dream.

3. Create Powerful Partnerships

Creating meaningful partnerships was critical to our new school campus. We secured a 99-year land lease on the Kent State University-Geauga campus for \$1. This should be a win-win situation, since we'll be providing new students to Kent State, and our families will have the opportunity to jump-start their children's college careers while still in high school. This is a huge financial win for our rural community.

We were also able to add trade tracks for diesel mechanics and other options through a unique partnership with the Auburn Career Center.

Our partnership also extends into healthcare. Our students will be able to participate in a new healthcare track with Kent State University and University Hospitals. The ever-increasing demand for skilled healthcare workers allows students to take classes and become employed in entry-level healthcare jobs right out of high school.

Finally, don't forget about corporate sponsors and nonprofits. We were able to receive \$2 million from the generosity of Great Lakes Cheese Company for a beautiful outdoor stadium. We also received funding from the KeyBank Foundation for makerspace equipment and training.

4. Tour Other New Schools and Facilities

Take the time to see what other new schools are doing. There's a lot of new technology and design out there, with different price points. We took tours and talked with the administrators and teachers of several schools to see what they liked and learned during the process.

With our school being built in Ohio, some of the more open and outdoor designs wouldn't have worked for our more extreme climate. We also asked for specific construction considerations, such as a sloped roof instead of a flat roof, because of the snow weight and freeze issues for our campus.



We also looked at other business and office designs for inspiration. We took the team out to Inventionland headquarters in Pittsburgh, Pa. They're one of the largest invention factories in the world and have sixteen unique work areas, such as a pirate ship, tree house, creation cavern, and race track, where their people work. On our way back, we said, "Why can't we do something like that?", and eventually did precisely that in our new campus.

5. Align to Your Instructional Approach

Our school district is committed to project-based learning (PBL) as a foundational element of our teaching method. We want our students not just to be able to memorize and repeat facts but learn through a multi-disciplinary approach through projects that incorporate what they've learned.

This impacted our building design. We have an "x-pattern," with four distinct wings that house PreK through kindergarten, elementary-, middle-, and high-school classrooms, respectively. At the end of each wing, we created project-based learning spaces that are really fun, including a cabin, pirate ship, tree house, robot room, sci-fi area and more. We think it's hard to be creative when working out of a beige box classroom all day long. But we did this because it aligned perfectly with our project-based learning approach, not simply for the sake of being different.

6. Hire an Owner Representative

One thing I wish I had done is to hire an owner representative. But, of course, that's hindsight. Not having an owner representative made it harder on everyone since we were not construction experts. Our finance team and school board members helped through the process, but I believe it would have been better with an owner representative.

7. Be Prepared for Value Engineering

You will most likely face the reality of cost issues versus your

original wish list. So, my suggestion would be to be prepared for these, as they will more than likely come up.

8. Choose your Partners Wisely

In pre-planning and touring different schools, ask the administrative staff and teachers what they liked and didn't like in the new school build. Many vendors have glowing testimonials from past clients. Always try and dig a little deeper. Ask what issues arose during the building process and how they were handled. Getting the right people to work with you is essential, as a certain amount of conflict resolution will likely be necessary.

9. Add Time to your Schedule

In starting a new business, an old saying says, "It usually takes twice as long and twice weight and freeze issues for our campus as much as you think it's going to." In our case, our costs were fixed and set, but that's not to say we didn't have to do some value engineering and find other sources of revenue through donors and corporate sponsors.

And our school took longer than we initially thought it would, primarily due to the pandemic, supply-chain issues, and staffing issues. So, while we thought we were conservative with our timing, my takeaway is we probably should have built even more of a time buffer.

10. Have Thick Skin and Expect the Unexpected

Building a new school or campus is a privilege and probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As educators, we already know we have a target on our backs. Building a new school has its challenges, especially with unanticipated situations that are bound to come up.

Put the extra layer of skin on, and be ready for the unexpected. You'll almost certainly have people without full knowledge of the situation question your motives, decisions and approach. It simply goes with the territory.

**THE PUBLIC SAW
ONLY THE FINISHED
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Final Thoughts

Building a new school will turn your life upside down for several years, even in the best-case scenario. But you can make an enormous difference with the right team on your side. Be prepared for the ups and downs, unexpected circumstances, and potential naysayers you'll meet along the way. But keeping your eye on the bigger picture of what this will mean for your community will make it all worthwhile.

John Stoddard has been the superintendent of Berkshire Local Schools since 2017. Before Berkshire, Stoddard spent 17 years at Oak Hills Schools, a suburban Cincinnati school district where he held the role of Principal for J.F. Dulles Elementary School, Rapid Run Middle School, and Oak Hills High School.