

School Renovations and New Construction: To Build or Not to Build is the Question

Early school closures during coronavirus outbreak present a dilemma for lab & facility managers. Read if it's OK to proceed with construction projects.

AUSTIN, TEXAS, UNITED STATES, December 2, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Construction projects at educational institutions are proceeding on a case-by-case basis during the coronavirus outbreak. We look at how [educational facility managers](#) are making the call on whether to proceed with renovations or new build projects and, if so, how they can maintain safe working conditions on the job site.

The coronavirus outbreak has wreaked havoc on the American economy in countless ways.



Restaurants and bars have shut down across the country, major sports leagues have postponed their games indefinitely, and there are critical shortages of products, ranging from toilet paper to medical devices and protective gear needed by first responders and health care providers.

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Under normal circumstances, this would be the time of year when facility managers at educational institutions would be gearing up for the [annual “construction season”](#) — in which they try to rush through all their badly needed renovations (or make as much headway as possible on new build construction projects) – while the weather is good and most of the students are away on summer

break.

But things aren't normal this year, not in the least.

Across the country, countless primary, secondary, and university level institutions have closed their doors and sent their students home.

How To Decide If It's OK To Proceed With Construction Projects (Or Not)

But these early school closures present a dilemma for many educational facility managers.

On the one hand, the fact that students are not present on many campuses opens up an opportunity to start the "construction season" earlier this year.

But on the other hand, is it entirely safe to do so?

In other words (with apologies to Shakespeare):

To build or not to build. That is the question.

To get an idea what's happening on the ground, we spoke with several of our key contacts across the nation.

Some quick disclaimers:

First, please understand that few of the people we spoke to were willing to be quoted directly, instead, they provided us with information on background.

And secondly, the coronavirus outbreak situation changes day to day. Any suggestion made today may seem hopelessly out of date in the months, weeks, or even days to come

Given these circumstances, how would you decide whether to proceed with a construction project or not?



Shown above are Formaspace desks with classic black phenolic resin tops and Y-frame spreaders. Leg mounted casters make it easy to change your classroom layout configuration on the fly.

To answer this question, we suggest following a decision-making approach proposed by a senior manager at a major REIT located in the Chicago area.

The approach they are following goes like this...

Look first to federal guidance. At the time of writing this article, the Feds are recommending against construction, but it's considered guidance only, not a mandatory requirement at this time.

Second, look to your local state and city regulations. At the time of writing, both Illinois and Chicago (for example) consider commercial construction to be an essential activity, so unless that changes, that's a green light for moving ahead from a state and local regulatory basis.

Third, look to the recommendations of relevant trade unions or trade associations. Again, at the time of writing, the major labor union in Chicago, representing most of the area's construction workers, is presently in favor of continuing work on projects, as long as suitable precautions are taken.

Of course it's a tough call. And, at the moment, unless or until specific rules prohibiting construction projects come into effect in your area, you may be able to proceed from a regulatory perspective.

However, it's crucial to protect your workers, so proceed with caution.

So Are Construction Projects Currently Underway At Educational Institutions Or Not?

The answer is it varies.

That's according to our informal survey of facility managers at educational institutions across the country.

Here are three different scenarios.



Formaspace built this custom casework for the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. It features built-in LED lighting, overhead shelving units, lab services fixtures, integrated outlets, and fume hoods.

Scenario A: Use It Or Lose It

Public school systems, in particular, are feeling a lot of pressure to avoid delays to construction projects that have precious funding sources in place.

There's an expectation that once funds are raised by a school bond issue (and construction projects contracts have been negotiated and signed), any subsequent delays could put the project at risk.

That's because, in most cases, public education project managers have less flexibility to defer projects paid for by school bonds, compared to similar real estate projects in the commercial sector.

And once a project is canceled or delayed indefinitely — even for what may be considered legitimate force majeure reasons — the institution may be legally compelled to start over with a new bid process from scratch, potentially causing years of delay and significantly increased costs.

For these reasons, many educational institutions are quietly proceeding with construction projects where it's considered safe to do so.

Scenario B: Teaching Hospitals Focus On Adding Surge Capacity For Patients

Teaching hospitals are a unique but important category among educational institutions, especially now.

We spoke with a facilities manager at a nationally recognized public teaching hospital to find out whether they are proceeding with construction projects at this time.

The answer is yes. And in many cases, they are actually accelerating existing construction projects, particularly on the hospital side, so they will have more beds available to increase surge capacity, should their patient population grow suddenly due to coronavirus infections.

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