

# Charter School Construction Educates Consultants

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By Wendy Burke

**Educational projects can exceed the client's highest expectations of quality, schedule and budget, writes Burke, this month's guest columnist.**

## Charter schools are the fastest growing

segment of the K-12 educational marketplace in Texas. The intent of charter schools is to create an environment in which educational excellence is offered to students in historically under-served communities. Linbeck has the privilege of working with two multi-location charter schools in Houston: KIPP - The Knowledge is Power Program and YES Prep Public Schools. Both open-enrollment public school systems are adding campuses and expanding their reach into larger at-risk student populations.

Through the opportunity of working with these modestly funded entities, we have learned some cost-control and management approaches that have reduced the cost of educational construction. In fact, we have demonstrated it is possible to reduce the sq ft cost of educational facilities to just 60% to 70% of a typical public school without compromising safety or functionality. We are sharing this knowledge with the hope of encouraging other construction, design and development firms to be equally cost conscious for their non-profit clients.

Here are examples of processes and methods that help keep costs low:

Administrators, teachers and students all

participate in project programming. We don't tell them what to do; instead, we help them define their needs and refine their vision. As a result, the initial teams create a standard "kit of parts," which is cobbled together by new teams for future schools on other campuses.

The prototype development approach reduces changes and streamlines document delivery, helping manage design costs.

Unique programming options also pave the way for cost enhancements. Most of the classrooms and other spaces are flexible, allowing them to be adapted just by moving walls or furniture. Users can generally make changes themselves without having to call Linbeck or school maintenance staff.

A design-build approach with key subcontractors helps control costs and allows us to implement our TeamBuild process and lean principles from day one. In our experience, this fuller collaboration generates 20% in additional value and gives the client better return on investment - each dollar spent goes further.

**High Value, Low Budget** Charter School clients' cultures give us unusual flexibility



Wendy Burke is the manager of client development for Houston-based general contractor Linbeck.

when selecting construction materials. For new KIPP facilities, this involves a variety of decisions based on the particular campus and the parameters of the design by Gensler, the architect. For example, students are expected to conduct themselves with minimal horseplay in gathering spaces and hallways. This behavioral expectation, together with a smaller student population that averages just 600 per school, significantly influences design elements and material choices. It allows smaller gathering spaces and narrower hallways, and application of durable materials not typically found in public schools (i.e. walls are drywall rather than cinderblock). Interior walls do >>



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**Ray Pitts**  
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 Dallas, Texas 75251

**Dal Watson**  
**Boyd Cowan**  
 110 W. Louisiana  
 Suite 150  
 Midland, TX 79701

Phone: 432-688-9802  
 Fax: 432-685-3654  
 e-mail: [dwatson@alliedna.com](mailto:dwatson@alliedna.com)

## Design Matters

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not extend above the ceiling deck because noise control is not a significant concern. And floors are covered with durable vinyl rather than the more expensive terrazzo tile typically found in public schools.

In other instances, adaptive reuse is a cost-saving option. YES's North Central campus, for example, was originally a church. Working with Spencer Partnership Architects we converted the existing sanctuary into an auditorium, added classrooms and labs and remodeled offices into district administrative space. The similar functions that occur in educational and religious facilities (classrooms, auditoriums, staff offices, gyms, etc.) make them logical candidates for interchangeable use.

Another cost saving feature commonly

employed for both YES and KIPP is the use of metal building systems. KIPP's award-winning new middle school has metal exterior walls, some sculpted to create interesting angles. Exposed structural members and a playful arrangement of square, octagonal and rectangular windows add to the metal system design and show that low cost does not have to compromise interesting and engaging visual appeal. An energy-saving metal roof also offers durability and a three-to-five decade lifespan.

**Putting Kids First** Another lesson charter school construction projects have taught us is the importance of making students part of the process. We involve students in the practical layout of the schools, soliciting their ideas on many issues, from traffic patterns to play areas to gathering spaces. As part of KIPP's career education efforts, we spend

time each year in the classroom teaching the children about career opportunities available in the design and construction industries. Jobsite and office staff participate along with representatives from the design team. We also celebrate milestones with the students when we break ground, top-out or complete a new building. We try to give the kids the same sense of pride and ownership that we have for the projects.

Our charter school clients have taught us many lessons. At the forefront are these: By establishing clear goals and objectives, and by developing and implementing a plan to satisfy those objectives, the projects can exceed the owner's highest expectations of quality, schedule and budget. <<