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School Construction/Modernization Design Standards

California has more than 1,000 school districts and county offices of education. Each local educational agency (LEA) has wide discretion in developing school designs that meet the needs of its educational program and community. Most school construction and modernization projects utilize state funds and therefore require approval from the following three key state agencies:

- The California Department of Education (CDE) operates under the direction of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, who is a statewide elected constitutional officer. The School Facility Planning Division reviews and approves school sites and plans for student safety and educational appropriateness based on standards contained in the *California Code of Regulations, Title 5* (Title 5). The CDE is charged with the development of the standards by the *Education Code* Section 17251.
- The Division of the State Architect (DSA) is headed by the governor-appointed State Architect. The DSA is located in the Department of General Services. The DSA reviews seismic, fire and life safety, and accessibility of projects. DSA approval is required for all school projects regardless of funding status, with the exception of some charter schools.
- The Office of Public School Construction (OPSC) is also located in the Department of General Services and is charged with the administration of state bond funds. The OPSC serves as staff to the State Allocation Board, the ten-member body that allocates funds to eligible new construction and modernization projects.

LEAs have wide latitude in the design of their schools but must ensure that the design is consistent with Title 5 standards. The CDE originally established these standards recognizing the need for flexibility and local responsibility. Drawn from years of practice, common sense, and ideas from a variety of education and facility experts, the standards have evolved from what has worked historically and could be reasonably advocated or mandated as the minimum for ensuring student safety and educational appropriateness. The Title 5 standards were first adopted by the State Board of Education in 1993 and were last amended in 2000.

The Title 5 standards may be grouped into three main categories:

- Process - such as local hearings, environmental proceedings, and LEA board actions
- Quantifiable standards - such as site acreage and minimum classroom square footage
- Performance standards - such as acoustical and lighting issues, parking, and circulation

Some school components contained in Title 5 (e.g., gym, multipurpose room) are not mandated. Title 5 is structured to allow an LEA to vary from any standard if the LEA demonstrates to the CDE that student safety and educational appropriateness are not compromised.

As a result, schools look different throughout the state, and this wide variation has given rise to the state policy discussions on both fiscal realities and equity issues. From the fiscal perspective, what should a school that receives state construction funds look like? The equity perspective questions why some communities have large schools with amenities such as swimming pools and lighted stadia, while other communities' schools consist of rows of portables with students eating at uncovered picnic tables.

Title 5 must also be viewed with an understanding of the state's capital funding model. The School Facility Program has been described as a "one-size-fits-all" model, yet in an environment in which budgetary realities often supersede educational needs, how does a flexible Title 5 coexist with a rigid funding model?

It is in this setting that the CDE is conducting a review of the Title 5 standards to determine how they can be amended to aid LEAs in developing 21st century learning environments.

The California Department of Education looks forward to your participation in the Re-Visioning School Facility Planning and Design for the 21st Century Roundtable. Your ideas and contributions that you will bring to this conversation on the design and development of facilities will reflect the 21st century needs of students in California.

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