



# Small Schools “Best Practices” for Sharing Facilities

Small schools are sprouting throughout the country and are located in a variety of different environments. The majority of small schools must share a physical building with other schools and thus must negotiate the use of that shared space. Outlined below are some “tips” to creating more successful shared facility situations for small schools:

**1. Ensure autonomy between schools.**

Autonomy is an essential component to the success of small schools. Autonomy supports the intimate, caring and safe learning environment that small schools strive to create. Even in a shared building situation, small schools should be as separate as possible.

- **Physical separation**

Schools should have physically separated areas of the building that belong to their own school. Each school should have its own entrance and gathering areas. This physical separation creates a sense of ownership and identity within in the school.

- **Staggered Schedules**

If it is not possible to have physical separation of the schools, schools should at least stagger schedules so the schools change classes at different times and do not share the gym, cafeteria, etc. By not commingling, schools have a better chance of creating the small school environment.

**2. Develop strong, working relationships between school leadership.**

Good working relationships between the principals, as well as the LSC’s, of the schools sharing the facilities are a crucial component to the success of a small school endeavor. There are several key characteristics to these strong relationships:

- **Genuine Relationships**

The relationship between the principals, as well as the LSC’s, of the schools sharing the facility, must be a genuine relationship of commitment. The principals and the LSC’s of the schools must have a philosophical commitment and investment in the concept of more than one school sharing the same physical building. This commitment lays the groundwork for the critical communication that must occur between principals.

- **Equal Standing Between Principals**

In order to ensure that the decisions regarding shared facilities between the

principals are egalitarian and provide equal access to the facilities for all students in the building, the principals should negotiate from equal positions. If one principal comes into discussions with more decision making power than another over the use of physical school facilities, the relationship between the schools may become distorted.

- **Preliminary Discussions**

Before schools start sharing a building facility, the principals of the schools should engage in preliminary discussions about their assumptions, goals and concerns about sharing physical space. These discussions can help preempt areas of disagreement in the future.

3. **Communicate a Commitment from the Higher Administration**

For any shared facilities situation to work, schools need to hear from the highest levels of the school's district administration that the school district expects cooperation between the schools in shared facilities. The message from the higher administration that the school district owns the school building, not the principals, creates the foundation for an equal relationship between the principals. The school district communicates to the principals that they are all tenants who answer to the same landlord.

4. **Ensure Regular, Ongoing Communication Between Principals**

Advocates and administrators nationwide agree that the most important element to the success of any small school shared environment is the commitment to regular, ongoing communication between the various principals.

Through regular meetings and communication, the principals can anticipate possible issues and resolve them before they lead to conflicts. By meeting on a regular basis to work through these issues, a team environment is created within the school building and between the various schools. Also, by meeting on a regular basis, when conflicts do arise, the conversations are less threatening, for a foundational relationship has already been developed.

In these weekly meetings, various issues can be covered, such as: scheduling use of space, security issues, janitorial and maintenance issues, arrival and departure times of students, shared staff, and equipment use. Weekly meetings allow for flexibility and the ability to change with the changing needs of the students and the schools.

5. **Define a Conflict Resolution Process**

A formal conflict resolution system with a neutral third party arbitrator allows the schools to negotiate disagreements from equal positions. By resolving disagreements with the help of an arbitrator with no particular affiliation with either school, the resolution has more legitimacy with each of the schools.

**6. Establish a Neutral Facilities Coordinator**

A shared facilities situation is most effective in a context where each school within a building has their own leadership, yet a separate person who is not affiliated with any particular school is a neutral Facilities Coordinator in charge of the physical building. This Facilities Coordinator acts as a neutral scheduler of space, mediates disagreements between schools, and allows for an equal power dynamic between the principals. By having a separate Facilities Coordinator, the principals can then focus on their own schools – its curriculum, instruction, teacher development, student achievement, etc. – and not be distracted by negotiating facilities issues. When the Facilities Coordinator is not affiliated with any particular school, problems of unequal power dynamics and inequitable sharing agreements can be avoided.

The neutral Facilities Coordinator could take various forms under the different models of small schools. For example, in a multiplex situation, a neutral Facilities Coordinator could be in charge of the physical building. Each small school within the multiplex would have its own principal to focus on the specific administrative and curriculum issues of each school. Therefore, each school would be on equal footing when the principals come together to negotiate a shared facilities Memorandum of Understanding. In a freestanding situation with two small schools in one building, it may not make economic sense to have a neutral Facilities Coordinator within the building. Instead, the neutral Facilities Coordinator may be at the central office level and may have jurisdiction over several shared facilities situations.

**7. Create a Shared Facilities Memorandum of Understanding**

For small schools in the same building facility, a shared facilities memorandum of understanding (MOU) is helpful, for it gives essential structure and guidance. By being prescriptive with small schools through a detailed shared facilities MOU, school districts allow the small schools to focus on issues of curriculum and instruction and not be overwhelmed with issues such as who is in charge of the gym. Especially under a transformation model of small school development, significant change is already occurring within the school. The structure of a shared space agreement can be a relief and a guide in such situations.

An initial template of a shared facilities MOU can be provided by the school district or an outside entity to participating principals and LSC's for their input. This input will allow all principals and LSC's to give their opinions as to their specific situation and also to gain ownership of the MOU, yet it will not be as overwhelming as attempting to draft such an MOU themselves.

During these initial discussions over the MOU, several parties can be involved in order to support the principals and the LSC's in their decision-making. For example, an architect or building engineer can participate in the discussion to help the principals and the LSC's determine the best method for allocating physical space, based up on the limitations of the physical building. The school district can

provide these additional parties to lend their expertise and to help the principals and the LSC's create the most successful document.

An initial shared facilities MOU should include the following elements:

- **Mutually agreed upon principals**  
The MOU should include mutually agreed upon principals between the two schools. For example, the schools should agree that all students in the building should have equal access to the school facilities, regardless of which school in the building they attend. The schools should also agree to an equitable division of resources within the school building. For example, this division can be calculated based upon the number of students within each small school, or based upon the various missions of the schools.
- **Governance of the facility**  
The initial shared facilities MOU should outline how the building will be governed. For example, the agreement could include who is in charge of the janitors, who schedules the use of common space, etc. For efficient communication with the central office of the school district, one person should be designated as the point person for administrative communication.
- **Ongoing communication and conflict resolution process**  
As discussed earlier, the commitment to ongoing communication as well as a process to address disagreements between principals should be outlined in the MOU. The scheduling of a weekly meeting and the topics to be covered in those meetings can also be included in the MOU.

Each of these “Best Practices” emphasizes the necessity for small schools to be on equal footing, regardless of the environment they inhabit. Supports that allow each small school to have a voice in the use of their physical space will create the most successful learning environments.

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