

Students Deserve Better

The current economic crisis is affecting school districts across our state. A letter by State Rep. Don Bowen, R-Anderson, touts the benefits of using “stock school plans” as a way of saving taxpayers and strapped school districts thousands of dollars in design fees. In return, he argues that having nine standard architectural plans would generate savings that can be redirected to classrooms, increase teacher salaries and eliminate the need for portable classrooms.

While reducing costs and increasing salaries are great ideas, using stock plans is the wrong approach. Experience shows the best way to reduce costs is to design a facility specific to a district's needs and individual goals.

Bowen's proposal isn't a new idea. More than 25 states, including neighboring Georgia and North Carolina have attempted to use standardized plans. All have abandoned the idea finding little to no savings. Moreover, the states that tried standardized plans discovered they ended up with inferior, inefficient and inflexible schools. Stock school plans would not create cutting-edge schools, but would result in "minimally adequate" schools designed to a standardized program with little flexibility.

The reasons stock plans don't work are simple. Each site has unique soil and environmental conditions which have a dramatic effect on a building's design, structural safety and energy efficiency. Using a stock school plan would require modifications to the existing plans. Altering those plans is going to cost money. No matter how similar two projects may seem architects and engineers would still need to be involved to make these modifications including surveying the property, designing drainage systems, laying out roads, designing foundations properly designed for a particular site's soil conditions and modifying the design to work for a given site.

By using stock school plans issues of professional liability becomes extremely complex. An architect could easily be held liable for failures or design flaws from stock plans they did not design. Studies have shown that professional liability insurers agree that using stock school plans could result in poorly-adapted designs, increased litigation and higher insurance premiums. These increased costs would add to the total project costs. Competition among building material suppliers would be limited, likely resulting in increased costs. Standardized plans also have been shown to become outdated and are not flexible, thus obsolescence would be a problem. In a culture of rapidly changing technologies and methods, the last thing we want to do is limit ourselves to nine plans that would be quickly outdated and unchangeable.

Bowen also suggests a contest among architecture students to develop the nine designs. But there's an inherent problem: Do we really want unlicensed designers, who have limited knowledge of building and life-safety codes, designing facilities for our children to spend most of their time in? Thinking back to the time when I was an architecture student, I probably then would have thought that I could have designed a good school building. Looking back now after having designed schools, I know I wouldn't have been prepared to design such a critically important building such as a school. The reason the profession of architecture requires a license is to protect the health, safety and welfare of the general public. Allowing schools to be designed by students is a bad idea.

If every district has the same design, scholastic and civic pride would be lost, reducing one of the most important institutions in our society to a mere shell which houses students. If more than 25 states have abandoned the idea of stock school plans because they found costs were not reduced, shouldn't South Carolina take notice of this fact? Eliminating the services of licensed architects will not save money and will keep South Carolina's schools being described as “the corridor of shame” for years to come.

Steven H. Coe, AIA, LEED AP is an architect practicing in Charleston and the current President of the SC Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.