The auditorium at Celebration high school rivals any of the major auditorium venues in Orlando.

Back to School for Contractors

Schools are places most people associate with one challenge or another as they worked their way through them, but what about the contractors who go back to school to build or remodel them? What challenges do they face? Almost half those surveyed said it was stiff competition from their peers-some things never change.

“Schools are extremely competitive in the public sector, and that is the biggest challenge,” admits Kevin Corcoran, president of The Corcoran Company of Ft. Collins, Colo.

“The competition is stiff,” agrees Larry Kinglsey, senior estimator at Baylor Plastering and Drywall Inc. in Daytona Beach, Fla., “but when you have done a couple, you’re familiarized with the routine, how things work. The bonus is that each project is a sure thing because the owner isn’t

By Steven Ferry
going to go bankrupt. It’s a bit like having a low yield government bond versus playing the riskier market. We receive a lot of repeat business from clients because we treat them well. These days, given the current economy and people’s nerves, if people know they are going to receive a quality product and don’t have to fight every day to achieve that goal, they are more likely to throw business your way, even if you are not the absolute lowest bidder. And as long as you price things correctly, you will succeed—these jobs are big: They don’t build a single building these days. The Celebration high school that we are working on right now is a campus of 12 buildings.”

Ron Jefford, project manager at Horton Drywall in North Little Rock, Ark., is one who doesn’t think the race is worth running: “We don’t do schools because the competition is ferocious and there isn’t enough money in it. Ceilings are mostly acoustical, and we can’t compete.”

Barry Gibson, president of Commercial Drywall and Plastering in Ocala, Fla., was among the 25 percent of contractors surveyed who doesn’t sit with baited breath waiting for the next school job to fall into his lap: “We do few schools these days because they are designing them with mostly masonry construction, painted block, etc., whereas there used to be a lot of plastered soffits and drywall. You see very little of this work now.”

Dan Cook, vice president of Dasco Construction and Drywall in San Jose, Calif, is looking for more school work, on the other hand. “We have been in schools as a niche since being in business (15 years now) because we know what to expect and bid accordingly. It’s a tough market now, though, with competition increasing greatly this past year from people who have never worked on schools before. California still has a lot
of bond money for schools, but I am being underbid and therefore have not had any projects recently.”

More feisty is George Kealoha, supervisor at Kealoha Construction in Wailuku, Hawaii: “Most state schools are pretty straightforward in design, fast paced, usually, and with low margins. We love competition because we see ways to increase our efficiency. It keeps us running with the pack instead of having to swim alone.”

“Go super cheap is my advice,” says Keith Hoffman, estimator for E&K of Phoenix, Ariz., “and if you are bidding in the Phoenix area, don’t ever waste your time bidding against Pete King. We figure they give their painting away free just to get the metal studs and drywall. And they piece their work out, whereas our guys are all hourly.”

**Flunking the Grade**

Ah, competition, where would we be without it? It tends to improve performance, but not always, as 38 percent of those canvassed reported when they complained that poor quality work was a major headache in the school environment.

“School projects tend to be awarded to the lowest bidder,” claims Heather Boulanger, general manager at Rolling Plains Construction in Henderson, Colo., “so they don’t necessarily have a quality GC to run them. The GCs tend to throw trades together at the same time. These projects tend to be cut rate, cut throat, cut corners—cut everything. When we do get one of these jobs, we hit the ground running to get in before the other trades and make sure we do the job right the first time, without messing around.”

Two contractors leveled their sites at architects: “Many schools go with the cheapest architect,” asserts Cook, “so
we receive incomplete drawings, which in turn means change orders—good for us but bad for the owner. I completed a project once that had all sorts of details included that turned out not to be wanted for the job, so I made a lot of money on it. That’s the result of faulty drawings and is a waste of tight tax dollars.”

“Schools are cookie cutters these days,” adds Hoffman, “no real challenge. Square boxes. They go fast and easy. Sometimes they have a large auditorium or gymnasium that may not be detailed properly up high. Typically, there is a lot of rating—usually one hour—but the hallways and corridors may show acoustical ceiling, and above that may be drywall rated that is hard to pick up.”

“The biggest challenge in California is the state inspectors,” Cook objects, “as they often do not understand the metal-framing concept or even the building code with regard to firewalls—the two-hour wall is commonly not understood. Some inspectors are expert, of course, but it drives you nuts when every single job, you have to show them the fire resistance manual and building codes.”

Rules and Regulations

No list of challenges and complaints would be complete without a wee complaint about the codes and regulations themselves. Boulanger points out “The switch from UBC to IBC has resulted in an awful lot of trade-offs with hourly ratings. The standards have dropped, in other words, and we get very little work now, as there is very little fireproofing called for in schools.” An interesting statement on the value of children’s lives perhaps.

“The only real challenge is the fire codes,” states Kingsley, “because after you’ve built what the GC, architect and school board rep think is OK, the county representative for the fire department will come in and often as not demand we take hundreds of line-feet of wall so many feet above the ceiling.

“Complying with the seismic requirements and codes for wall attachments, etc.” is something that challenges Bob Heimerl, president of Mowery-Thoma-
son Inc. in Anaheim, Calif. “Being in public works,” he adds, “you also have to deal with school boards that have jurisdiction over the school districts you are working in, so the work also becomes political at times.”

California has its own set of issues, as Cook explains: “Meeting state requirements is really strict. You have to understand how the system works, how the inspections go. You have to follow the drawings to the letter, unless you can get a change. Certified payroll—meaning you have to swear on your life that you are paying all the benefits, union wages, etc.—means a lot of extra paperwork, too.”

And Heimerl had one for the books when he reported that “Schools are very sensitive to which personnel are working on a job—that they do not have any record of perversion. We don’t screen for that when we hire people, of course, but I know of two schools we are working on right now where we have to get security clearance on them, or the school runs background checks on those who will be on the job. These men are then issued a pass or card that they must wear all the time they are on the job, which says, ‘I am a white (hard) hat,’ so to speak.

“They will sometimes partition areas where those who do not have background checks can work on their own. Or a worker without a background check can go into a restricted area as long as another worker who has been cleared always has him within his line of sight. There have been cases of molestation of students, not so much by construction workers but by people within the school themselves, such as janitorial and maintenance people.”

**You Want It When?**

Like competition, rules aren’t about to go away, but one element that can and should be brought into being is adequate levels of coordination and proper scheduling. Four contractors felt these were the main challenges in school construction/renovation. “Most schools want you to start the day they close in
spring,” says Corcoran, “and to be done when they commence in the fall. So the challenge is fitting construction into those windows.”

Ron Molleur, vice president of EL Crane and Sons in Hutto, Texas, is of the same mind: “The main problem is schedule constraints—they release the money too late and yet we have to have the work done before the students return to school. There are a lot of liquidated damages and pressure to get the job done on time, so sometimes certain contractors do shoddy work.”

“A peculiar problem with regard to coordination is bringing in the deliveries on time. Continues Burgess, “It seems door frames are always an issue in schools, always arriving late—even though they usually arrive on time on other commercial projects. I don’t know whether it is the complexity of the frames or the fact that they are ordered late, or documents are not ready when the hammer is dropped to go.”

“El-hi public schools are typically block wall and wood truss situations,” states Tim Cadenhead, commercial manager at Sides Drywall in Auburn, Ala., “with drywall in the administration area. Some schools we have done were pre-engineered, metal-building design projects with exterior wall framing. The biggest problem with these is coordinating the mechanical. We always try to start with

“Schools have to be ready by a drop-dead date,” echoes Bob Burgess, president of Cascade Acoustics in Tualatin, Ore., “so you have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to get the project done. Typically, it is a mad scramble during July and August to get them done in time for school opening. The fact that we are in the process of completing a $35-million high school four months ahead of schedule shows that coordination is the key. This project has a very sharp superintendent who coordinates everything very well, so all the subs climbed on the bandwagon.”
the kitchen structure, because it will take the longest to install the stainless steel fixtures and the hood assemblies that ventilate the area. There are always problems there, while the classrooms themselves are a breeze.”

Private and public schools have their own sets of challenges. Corcoran has noticed “a shift to charter schools in Colorado, so the majority of our school work is now universities and private schools. The private sector is different because you are dealing with a group of very interested and active members wanting to be part of the whole process. Communication has to be very open to satisfy this larger group. They like to tour the facility while it is being built, so it is important to shut down and clean up while they come through, so they can visualize what they are getting. And to allow them to change their mind, as few people can visualize a real building from two-dimensional drawings.”

“In the public sector,” he continues, “you have the certainty of public funds and a superintendent for schools, so you only deal with one person. It is less personalized and fun than the private sector, but more structured.”

**An A+ for School**

Having focused on areas of challenge or problem, it might be sensible to let Kinglsey bring this article to a close by highlighting the reasons his company likes school work: “By and large, the budget has already been prepared, the tax levies passed and the funding in place. The kind of economic hurdles one has to clear in the private sector do not exist—such as owners might decide after 9-11 not to spend $850,000 for 2,000 square feet in a beach-front condominium high rise. If you get a school project, it is a sure thing.

“We start with GMP (gross maximum pricing) so the owner has a general idea
of how much the project will cost. As the project develops and everybody compiles their particulars, they will bid it at 30 percent, then 80 percent and then 100 percent. They provide architectural, mechanical and structural blueprints that are not very detailed—about a 30 percent level. A wall in a hallway would be the spec but you don’t know if it goes to the structure above or to 6 inches above the ceiling, or what the finish will be, whether it will have fancy reveals in it, etc. The GC goes to the school board with this low figure, and so the project progresses in a predictable fashion.

“Often with hotels, however, they’ll throw out 100 percent plans right at the end and the cartel of owners will throw up their hands and say, ‘We can’t afford that.’“

“Secondly, in a similar vein, the architectural prints and specs on what products to use and how to install them, generally have been reviewed by the architect, the GC and the school board rep, who is also an inspector. So all the question marks that appear in other types of projects are ironed out before we start.

“We have been helping a GC with the concept drawings for one particular school that is going to bid right now with 100 percent drawings, and I am looking at specification books that are 1.5 feet tall. That’s what I mean. It’s not, “What am I going to do here?” No, the drawings refer to a detail that will refer to a spec book, and it is all very clear: ‘We want this type of reveal from this manufacturer, painted, etc.’ All these questions are handled ahead of time, which makes it very easy, like painting by numbers.”

Which kind of figures: School is where things are kept simple—if high pressured.

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a freelance writer based in Clearwater, Fla.