

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Tech leaders want to be involved in facilities projects from the first stages of planning, and including their perspective can help avoid costs due to incompatibility, ongoing maintenance and other considerations.
- As technology becomes intertwined with every aspect of facilities, from security to dining to classrooms, tech leaders can play a significant role in project management and budgeting.

Involving tech leaders early in capital construction projects could save schools 10% on lost costs.

By Christina Lewellen,
Association of
Technology Leaders in
Independent Schools

DOWN TO THE WIRE

Any business officer would want to avoid the following scenarios:

- Near complete redo of a gate access system due to system incompatibilities.
- Incompatibilities between the new conference room phone and AV with the existing phone system, requiring the purchase of replacement hardware at the school’s expense.
- Discovery, one week before scheduled opening, that a newly renovated building’s main trunk line, which connected it to the campus network, had been removed and not replaced.
- New classrooms ready for use excepting a lack of AV, phones and wireless connections, which were not considered until the last minute.

Capital projects can be a crown jewel for independent schools, but they also come with sleepless nights for business officers when timelines run late, details are overlooked and unexpected speed bumps arise. Relief for these types of headaches may come from an unlikely resource within the school community — the technology team.

Recent research from the Association of Technology Leaders in Independent Schools (ATLIS) shows the value of technology leaders’ early involvement. Responses from 50 independent school employees were collected in fall 2019. Of the technology leaders surveyed, nearly 60% said scope changes to a capital improvement project at their school could have been avoided with earlier involvement of the tech team. Some of these changes were relatively minimal, but nearly 40% indicated that 6-10% of total project value was lost due to avoidable technology problems. (See graph at right.)

“Technology requires many behind-the-scenes components that need to be considered when planning major capital improvements,” said Sarah Rolle, director of technology at The Elisabeth Morrow School in Englewood, New Jersey. “Once plans have been made, it can often be very hard to make changes that technology may require.”

UNEXPECTED SUPPORT

“Sometimes the idea of ‘technology’ in capital improvement projects is narrowly defined as simply running some network

cables,” said Tye Campbell, director of technology at Gilman School in Baltimore. “However, with the increasing growth of technology in areas like physical access control, high-speed wireless internet access, teaching and learning, and campus security, coordination with the technology office is more important than ever.”

Sean Furlong, director of finance at Gilman and a 2019 Will Hancock Unsung Hero Award recipient, would concur. “Five or ten years ago I would have brought in our technology director later in the planning process, to ask more simply what systems we needed,” he said. Now Campbell participates from the get-go when he can and provides needed expertise and forethought.

Furlong recounted the fruits of involving Campbell in a recent renovation to the school’s café. The five-member team driving the project discussed all aspects of the project together, from marketing the food to designing the cashier systems to coordinating with accounting. Campbell suggested developing a survey to determine what items would be popular, for example, to help reduce inventory and better meet the market. “We all felt ownership in the ultimate success of the café,” Furlong reported.

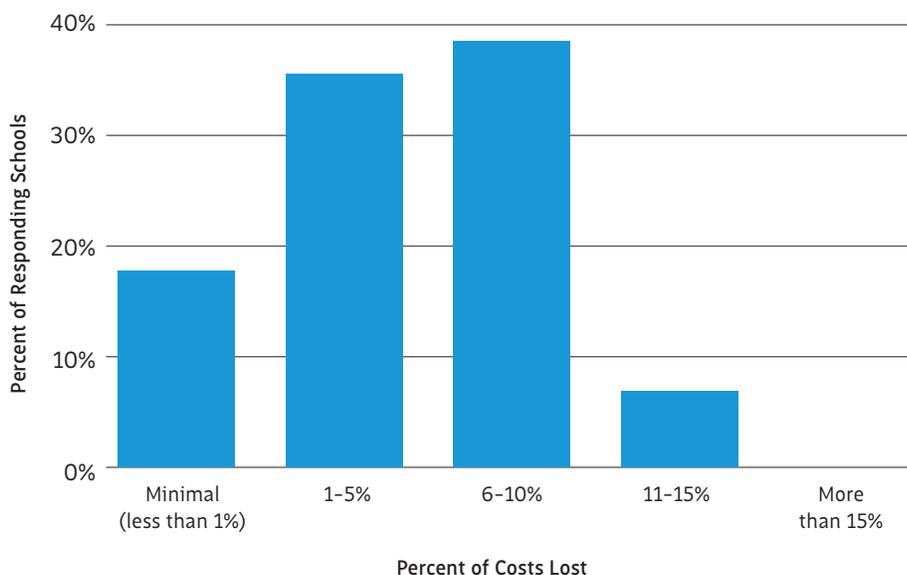
“The nature of the 21st-century technology team is one that works so closely with so many areas of school life that it develops a well-rounded, empathetic perspective,” Campbell noted.

Gender Differences

According to the survey, male tech leaders (67%) were more likely to get involved in capital projects before groundbreaking than female leaders (50%).

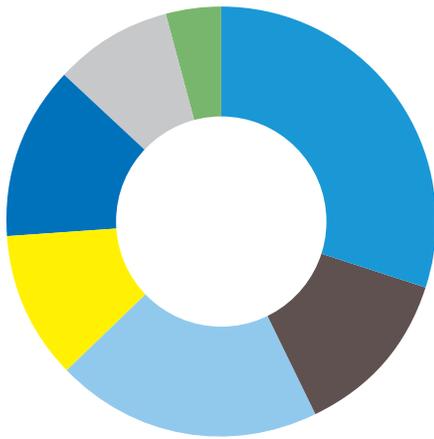
Further research is needed to more fully understand the impact of gender.

Percentage of Capital Project Costs Lost Due to Avoidable Technology Problems





Point at which technology leadership began participating in planning for the school's most recent capital improvement project



- 30%** Strategy-setting or long-range pre-planning for all long-horizon projects
- 13%** Kick-off for this specific project
- 20%** Planning leading up to groundbreaking or the start of project
- 11%** After the project had started, but in the first half of its timeline
- 13%** In the second half of the project's timeline
- 9%** When the project hit a technology-related roadblock
- 4%** Never

“Those organizations that value such a perspective [can] leverage it by bringing in the technology team early in any capital improvement project.”

Beyond helping save time and money, technology leaders can effectively partner with the business office during capital improvement projects in a number of surprising ways. These include project management, budget optimization on infrastructure solutions, coordinating emergency planning and aligning construction strategies to the school's ed tech goals.

IT'S ALL IN THE TIMING

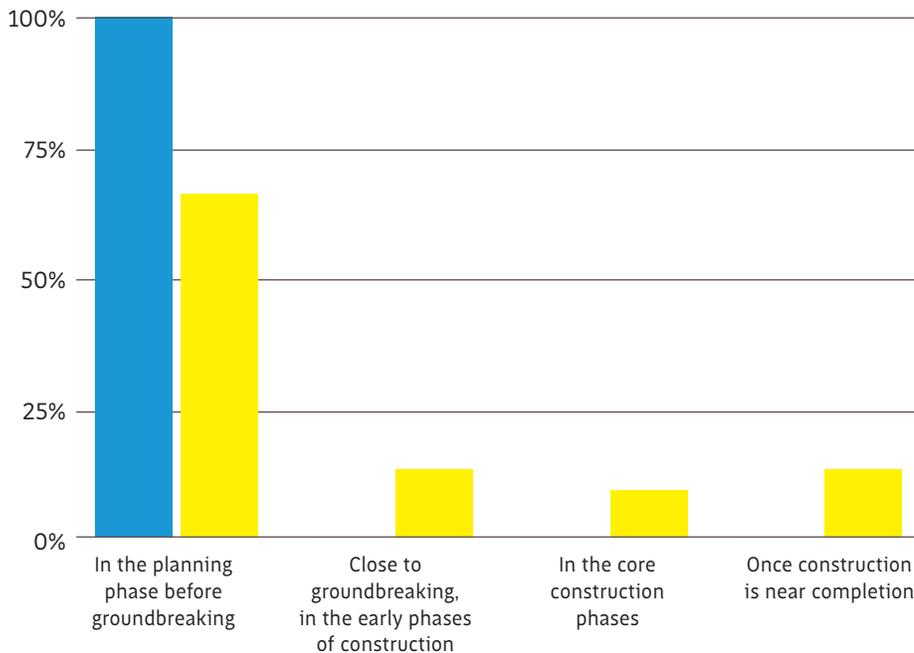
More than 60% of survey respondents reported that technology teams were brought into the capital improvement project before groundbreaking. The remainder reported being incorporated after groundbreaking, with 4% saying the technology team was not involved at any point in the school's most recent project (See graph above left).

Meanwhile, 100% of tech leaders said they wanted to be involved before groundbreaking. This compares to 66% of school leaders more generally who believe tech leaders should be involved from the get-go (See graph immediate left). Furlong's cautionary note about involving a tech leader is to ensure the individual has sufficient time and capacity for involvement. “I think [the tech leader] has to have a mindset that this is a priority for [their] work,” said Furlong.

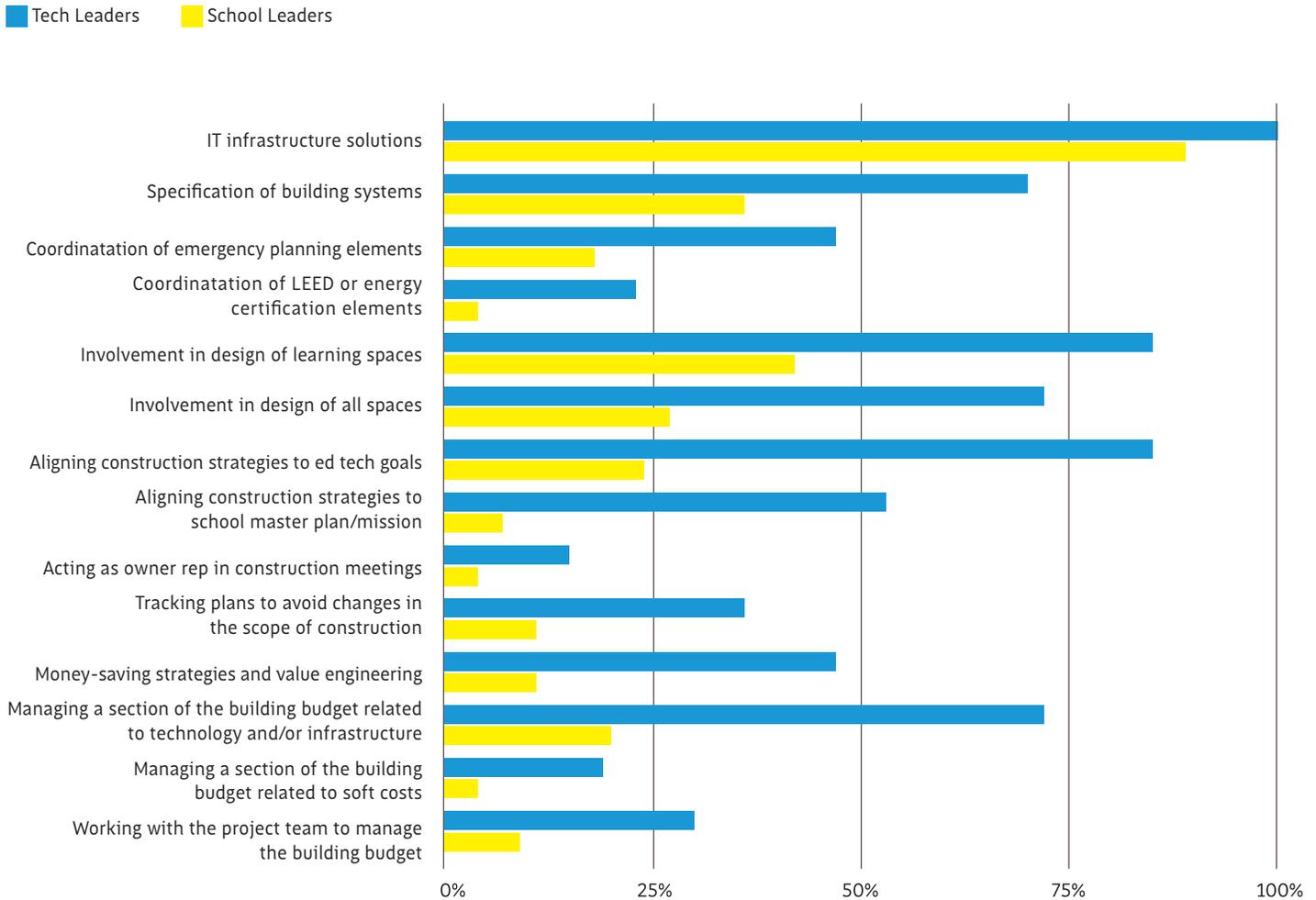
While tech and other school leaders seem to be on the same page for the most part, following through on intentions to include technology leaders early is key. “Any tech equipment purchased needs to be incorporated into the current system,” said Renee Ramig, former technology director at Seven Hills School, Walnut Creek, California. Purchasing unneeded items can add up. “Too often we have heard of stories where projects forget completely about running the network cables for wired and wireless internet access, which often leads to a much greater expense than [would have been] had the tech team been involved early on,” said Campbell. “Bottom line,” added Ramig, “is [tech leaders] can save the project money and ensure the current system continues to run during construction.”

Sentiment comparison: When is a good time for technology teams to begin involvement with capital improvement projects?

■ Tech Leaders ■ School Leaders



Sentiment Comparison: In What Ways Can Tech Leaders Serve Capital Improvement Teams?



EYE TO THE FUTURE

Tech leaders can also help ensure the school purchases tech systems that are easier to maintain, repair and replace going forward. “AV and internet wiring might be done in such a way that it is not easily accessible for repairs, making the initial installation the only installation,” Campbell explained. “Or when the general contractor or design team selects a brand or vendor that has a questionable past or a future in doubt, primarily due to lower cost ... you [may be] left with installed equipment and no one to provide the quality support that it needs. What was once new and state-of-the-art becomes old eventually, and must be replaced in like or better quality.” Including tech leaders earlier in the process may also help the school budget appropriately.

One simple way to make this happen is to include a tech leader in your school’s

buildings and grounds task force. When technology leaders are brought into early stages of the planning process, school leaders may have fewer headaches, budget better for present and future needs and perhaps more importantly gain more time and resources to celebrate the beautiful buildings that help our schools deliver on their missions. [N](#)



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The full report, “The Role of Technology Leaders in Educational Capital Improvement Projects,” is available at [theATLIS.org](http://theatlis.org). ATLIS members schools can access the report at no cost, and non-members can pay to download the full report.