

MAINTAINING A BETTER FUTURE

Why strong facilities leadership is essential for good stewardship

Ryan Silvola

WASBO's Marketing
& Communications Coordinator

Turn to Page 26 to learn more about how strong leadership in your school's facility department is crucial for effective long-term stewardship.

In this article, WASBO highlights the

decrease in the number of facility supervisors and custodians in recent years.

We also look at what business managers and facility leaders have to say about the value of buildings and grounds directors, rising costs & fees, and the increased usage of school facilities.

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Roles & Responsibilities of the School Facilities Manager

Facility directors make every Wisconsin school a safe, healthy, and vibrant environment for teaching and learning. School facility officials are multi-faceted leaders whose roles and responsibilities are both strategic and operational. A school facility official will partner and coordinate strategic planning with the business manager, district administrator, board and community to support the vision and mission of the district. The typical role of a facility manager varies between each district. Facilities managers are responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the district's buildings and grounds, ensuring that they meet legal requirements & health and safety standards. Facility managers operate across different functions, working on both a strategic and operational level. The role of the facility manager is to ensure that the facility is operating as it should on a daily basis by completing daily inspections and conducting proactive maintenance.

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Ryan Silvola
WASBO Marketing
& Communications Coordinator

Maintaining a better future

Why strong facilities leadership is essential for good stewardship

School district budget difficulties, caused by minimal revenue increases and declining enrollment have led every school district to search for operational savings.

When a search for cost savings results in eliminating the facility director role, cutting custodial staff, or deferring building maintenance, the long term consequences may show no savings at all.

For example, after the previous facilities director left at the School District

of Cudahy, Business Manager **Brian Dasher** said the district tried moving to a shared leadership model where two of its lead maintenance people split the duties.

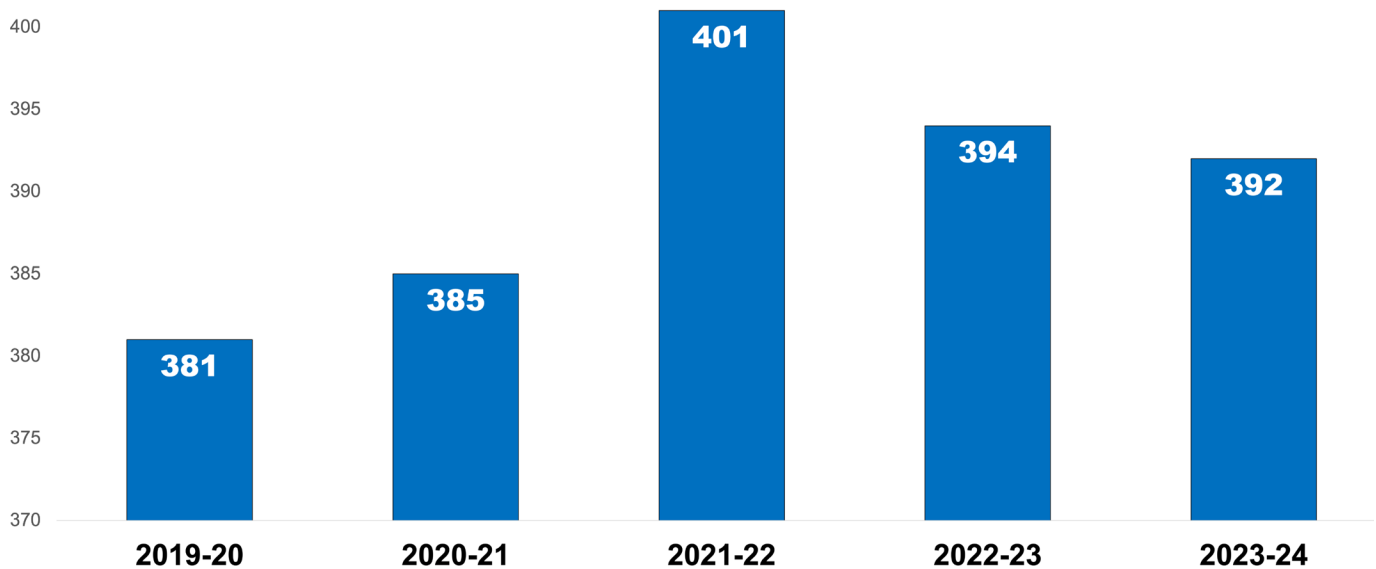
Dasher said that was inefficient, so Cudahy returned to a single person leading the department.

Additionally, Howards Grove School

District eliminated its Buildings and Grounds (B&G) Director position during the 2023-24 school year due to a budget deficit. Howards Grove Business Manager **David Ziegelbauer** said the district shifted many of the B&G director responsibilities to different people currently working in the district.

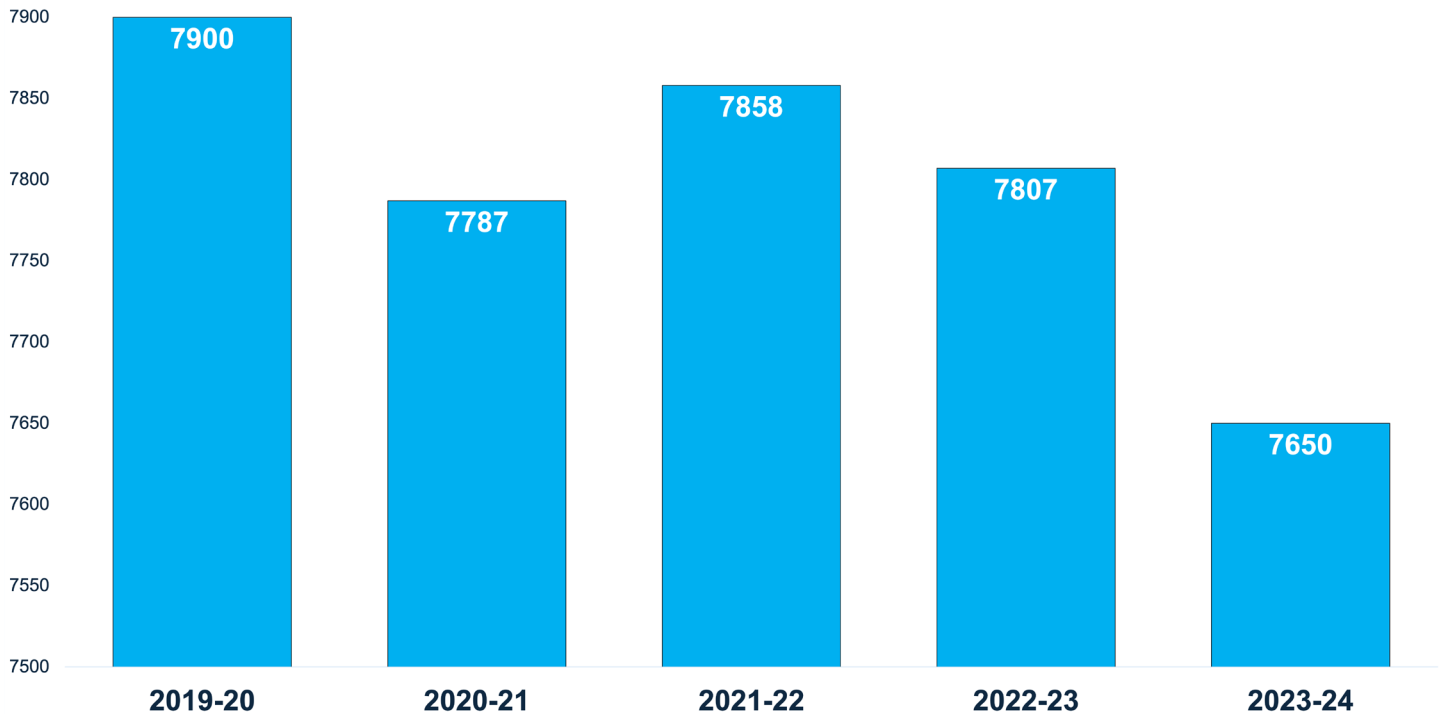
“Instead of having one person whose

Figure 1: Number of Facility Supervisors & Coordinators by School Year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's All Staff Report. See more information in footnote.

Figure 2: Number of Custodians by School Year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's All Staff Report. See more information in footnote.

sole job was to oversee everything (in B&G), we have certain employees overseeing their specific areas and reporting to the business manager,” Ziegelbauer said.

Ziegelbauer said one of Howards Grove’s head custodians takes care of coordinating many of the projects taking place in the district, and a head grounds person oversees much of what is happening on the exterior of the buildings. Ziegelbauer said the reassigning of duties has been working well so far.

“We are in the middle of building a new middle school as well as other building renovations, so the key is to make sure everyone is communicating everything to ensure nothing is getting missed,” Ziegelbauer said.

DeForest Area School District, which is seeing growth in enrollment, recently restructured its facilities department by creating a Director of Safety and Operations position, adding an

administrative assistant for this department, and eliminating the buildings and grounds manager position. **Kathleen Davis-Phillips**, Director of Business & Auxiliary Services for DeForest, said she previously oversaw the district’s buildings and grounds department.

However, with the addition of the director of safety and operations position, the district hopes to have enhanced facilities & safety resources to better accommodate the growing district.

“We realized that we really need to put more resources to elevate the whole buildings and grounds department,” Davis-Phillips said. “They deserve to be on the same level as other departments.”

Like many districts, Davis-Phillips said they had to get creative to meet the needs of the district.

Dave Hoh, Ex Dir for GSF USA (a

WASBO Service Affiliate), believes reformatting facilities departments could be a growing trend across the state due to tight budgets.

“If Wisconsin would have kept on funding their schools the way they did back in the ‘90s, this would not be happening,” said Hoh, who previously served as a school facilities director. “In fact, I think we’d have more smaller districts that could afford to have a good buildings and grounds director taking care of their buildings.”

Data from the Department of Public Instruction shows that Wisconsin has seen a slight decrease in the number of facilities directors and a noticeable loss of custodians in recent years.

According to the DPI’s Public All Staff Report, from the 2021-22 to the 2023-24 school years, Wisconsin has lost nine facilities supervisory/coordinator positions (see Figure 1) and 208 custodians (see Figure 2).

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Proving the value of facilities leaders

Andrew Daniels, Director of Buildings and Grounds for Franklin Public Schools, said the growing number of districts reducing facilities positions has the potential to be somewhat dangerous.

Therefore, it's up to facilities directors to prove their worth by both detailing the work their department is doing and being able to answer stakeholder questions with confidence and accuracy.

This includes questions from direct reports, school officials, community members, and more.

Proving value for the position also could mean taking on additional responsibilities when the need arises. For example, Daniels took on transportation responsibilities while working in another district, which he said added to his skill set.

Having a seat at the table is also important. **Jeremiah Johnson**, Chief Operations Officer for Muskego-Norway School District, said it's up to facilities leaders to advocate for their departments by being a part of district leadership conversations even if they aren't always related to facilities.

That way, Johnson can provide data to educational stakeholders on why roles in his department are needed.

"If there's going to be cuts in my department, I would rather drive the cut than just take it," Johnson said. "So, I think the solution is to be as engaged as possible in things that don't seem to connect to your job."

The Dreaded Deferred Maintenance

To fix the leaky roof or save a teaching position? **Holly Burr**, Executive Director of Finance for the Appleton Area School District, said decisions like these are not easy, and because of

this, the business and facilities offices are collaborating more than ever.

Burr began her career working in a tiny district of 300 students where she oversaw both business and operations, which at the time was essentially a necessity due to the enrollment size of the district.

Burr didn't have a strong background in facilities at the time, but she quickly obtained WASBO's Facility Manager Core Certification and made a strong network of peers — including Hoh and the now retired business & facilities manager Tim Prunty — through attending WASBO's conferences.

"Tim (Prunty) and Dave (Hoh) were my go-to guys I would call with random questions," Burr said. "They would always laugh and say, what did you get yourself into now? Honestly, I would not have made it as a pseudo facilities manager had I not had them."

Having worked in both roles, she understands why some smaller schools are combining roles. However, she also recognizes the value of having different perspectives.

Those perspectives aren't all about cleaning, either. **John Stangler**, Director of Buildings & Grounds for the Pewaukee School District, said having a long-range facilities maintenance plan is vital.

To accomplish this, Stangler said facilities directors must stay updated on the ever-changing facilities landscape,



Jeremiah Johnson
Chief Operations Officer
Muskego-Norway School District

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from new floor maintenance techniques to updating HVAC systems.

“I know some districts are trying to give the facilities hat to another person. You know, people can only handle so much,” Stangler said. “When you’re wearing a lot of different hats, you can only be spread so thin. If you’re spread too thin, there’s not enough prioritization on the facility side to properly take care of the facilities.”

Stangler said the role of facility leaders is to be good stewards of community resources. If buildings are not effectively maintained, they won’t last their full life cycle. This opens the district up to liabilities while also creating ill will with taxpayers.

“If you’re not showing that you’re being good stewards of your buildings, which are funded by taxpayer money, well, hey, good luck passing any projects in the future,” Stangler said. “I think part of the job is taking care of your facilities so you can continue to build a strong relationship with your community.”

It’s not getting any cheaper!

Like every industry, costs and fees are constantly rising, and Stangler said not having a director solely focusing on district facilities can easily lead to trouble. Burr said that while it was possible for her to serve as both the business and facilities manager in a small district, after she left, the district hired a part-time facilities director who also served as a day engineer.

Some districts also may consider a maintenance engineer to take on the responsibilities of a part-time facilities director. However, Stangler said this is at best a short-term solution to a long-term problem, and it could cost the district more money in the long

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Kathleen Davis-Phillips
Director of Business & Auxiliary Services
DeForest Area School District

run. Facility directors can often help the district save money. From energy savings to the increased need for safety resources, Davis-Phillips said even smaller school districts likely need a facilities director to keep up with the changing landscape.

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The facility leaders are required more to communicate now more than ever, which Davis-Phillips said includes updating manuals, conducting training, adapting to changing legislation, and more.

“With staff turnover and custodian and maintenance positions that are more mobile, leadership is essential,” Davis-Phillips said. “Facilities leaders are more important than they ever have been.”

Lynette Coy, Director of Finance & Facilities for River Falls School District, said she can’t imagine not having

a buildings and grounds director in her district who understands the complexities of facilities.

“I can’t imagine leaning on a director of finance or a business manager to know all of that,” Coy said.

When navigating the complexities of both the facilities departments and business offices, Davis-Phillips said professional development is essential.

Unfortunately, it’s also often one of the first items to be cut in budgets.

“Learning environments are much more thought of now than maybe years ago,” Davis Phillips said. “We’re starting to realize certain colors on the walls, lighting, temperature — all these things can impact a student’s ability to learn and feel safe at school. Good facility directors understand these ideas.”

Forgoing investments in professional development for facilities staff in favor of spending on immediate or emergency district facility needs offers another seemingly simple choice that may help districts in the short-term, but Burr

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said it will hurt districts over time.

“We want our maintenance staff to be trained just as well as our paraprofessionals and our secretaries,” Burr said. “We’re education institutions. So, to not prioritize the education of our staff kind-of goes against what we’re all about.”

Usage keeps increasing

Many of Wisconsin’s districts have aging school facilities that are being used more than ever before, both by the district and community.

Joe Ledvina, Director of Facilities for the La Crosse School District, said someone must be there to ensure safety, make sure the buildings are in usable condition, and ensure they’re being maintained.

Due to declining enrollment, Ledvina said it’s also extremely beneficial to have a facilities director who can

“If people came in and watched their facilities department day to day, they’d be surprised at all the different avenues that we’re involved in, whether it’s busing, transportation, building use, safety, or security. It’s all those things. It’s pulling all those pieces together.”



Joe Ledvina
Director of Facilities
La Crosse School District

analyze the sizing of facilities.

“Whether it’s getting rid of a facility that you currently have, doing the RFP process and talking to contractors, the responsibilities are great,” Ledvina said.

Preventive maintenance, capital improvements, and human resources

also are all within a facilities director’s purview.

“When I talk about human resources, I’m talking about it in terms of facility use from outside organizations and athletic facilities and how you really need someone who can pull that all together,” Ledvina said. “You need someone who can see the big picture as it relates to your facilities and the things that you have, and then can present that so that the people making decisions can make informed decisions.”

Johnson said communities continue to use schools at an ever-growing rate. At Muskego-Norway, his district has nearly 40,000 hours of afterschool activities per year.

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Holly Burr
Executive Director of Finance
Appleton Area School District

Additionally, emerging technology continues to be an area of focus, with everything from automated vacuums to security updates, to Artificial

