

Q & A with Dr. Eric Runez

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Dr. Eric Runez is a K-12 Project Director for McKinstry, a national construction and energy services company dedicated to engineering and designing environmentally friendly buildings and building systems. Before working in the private sector, he spent more than 10 years in the Wisconsin public school system as a superintendent. His work in both the public and private sectors gives him a unique perspective on the importance of partnership, communication, and innovation to empower schools with learning environments that help students maximize their potential. Read on to see what Eric has to say about his experiences and what advice he has for school districts.



Q How does your background as a superintendent play into your current role at McKinstry?

A As a Wisconsin superintendent, I had a lot of experience with both capital and operational referendums. I obviously paid a lot of attention to student achievement and the instructional side of the house. But I also had a lot of responsibilities related to operations, learning environments, and facilities. Those experiences supported my transition into the private sector. In my current role at McKinstry, I support the K-12 market sector in the Midwest. McKinstry is a building solutions company, and our services range from construction projects, energy efficiency projects, and sustainability projects to strategic facility long-range planning.

Q What do you enjoy about your current role as a K-12 Project Director and what did you enjoy in your previous role as a superintendent?

A I absolutely loved superintendency. I really enjoyed the problem-solving aspect of the role — figuring out how to improve learning environments, instructional practices, and educational experiences for our students. I enjoyed supporting our instructional staff and our classified staff, building a great culture for our students, and supporting the community.

I enjoyed engaging with the community — making sure they understood the investments they were making in their school systems for the benefit of the children and sharing out the successes.

In the private sector, a lot of what I do is more on the operational side. But I'm enjoying similar problem-solving experiences. I particularly enjoy bringing solutions around school facilities operations and getting to support the next generation of superintendents and school district administrators.

Q What does it mean to create a learning environment and why do you feel they're so important?

A There are different aspects to a learning environment. There are the intangible pieces: the culture, the relationships between students, staff, and the greater community, and the experiences around that. And then there are the tangible pieces of the learning environment: the furniture, aesthetics, air quality, temperature, and lighting. It all contributes to a positive learning environment and to student success.

Q What do you feel are the critical components of a learning environment?

A As far as tangible aspects of learning environments that support modern instructional practices, I ask fundamental

questions. Is the learning environment flexible to adapt to the instructional needs of that lesson or that day? Is it warm and inviting? Is student comfort taken into account?

When considering comfort, that could be the furniture, but also temperature, air quality, or lighting. Air quality can contribute to students feeling tired. Poor lighting makes learning more difficult. Uncomfortable furniture or unwelcoming room aesthetics can negatively affect the educational experience. These are integral components to helping students access the curriculum. They all factor into the quality of the instruction, too. If teachers feel like they have a great place to work and to provide learning for students, that contributes to a positive learning environment and a positive working environment.

Q What advice do you have for school districts facing growth or in need of funding for a large project?

A School districts often can't cover increasing costs for improvements or renovations within their annual operational budget. So, districts must go to their communities and ask for a bond to exceed the levy to increase their operational budget for a one-time capital improvement. In my experience, it's essential to engage your community. You have a wide range of community members who utilize your facilities, including community members who don't have students in the school system anymore, or never did. You want municipality representation, business leaders, clergy, etc. And you want to involve them as early as possible and gain an understanding of what they value about the school system. You also want to help the school district prioritize any additional resources they may get. It's a comprehensive and thoughtful approach.

Q From a superintendent's perspective, what can a construction partner like McKinstry bring to the table that makes you want to work with them?

A Good capital improvement partners (and that can be general contractors, architects, or a learning environments company like Demco) are ones that make communication easy. They're readily accessible and they ask good questions. They don't come in with predetermined solutions. Once they've identified the pathway for solutions, there's a willingness to continue to refine and improve it as new information or perspectives become available. They communicate well, listen well, and want to build a good foundation for a long-term relationship.

Q From a construction perspective, how can school districts be the best partners for you?

A They can be candid about their needs and be willing to facilitate processes that provide multiple perspectives and a variety of input and feedback. It's helpful when districts are willing to be innovative and open to opportunities that might not be your traditional cookie-cutter approach.

Q What trends are you looking forward to in school construction?

A We're seeing several districts that are considering climate action plans. I'm really interested to see how that continues to evolve. How will schools approach future capital projects and capital improvements to be more sustainable, reduce their carbon output, and be better stewards of the environment? It's an interesting pathway that's developing. 🌞

Read the full interview with Dr. Eric Runez at ideas.demco.com (search **Runez**).

