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Friday, February 16, 2007

## Architects help Memphis City Schools improve facilities to meet ADA guidelines

Memphis Business Journal - by [Janet Wiens](#)

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Picture being in a wheelchair and trying to access a school building 20 years ago. More often than not, getting into the school, let alone navigating through its halls once you were inside, posed significant challenges.

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Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act by Congress in 1990 changed the landscape for disabled individuals. The ADA covers several major issues, including requirements for physical access to public and private buildings. Viewed by many as the most

encompassing federal civil rights legislation protecting the rights of the disabled, the ADA impacted building design relative to access and accommodations for the disabled.

Memphis City Schools is in the midst of a comprehensive effort to bring all of its facilities into compliance with the ADA. The system is currently in the third year of the program, which will eventually total \$150 million in construction costs.

"The ADA work is an integral part of our Five-Year Facility Plan," says Michael Goar, the school system's chief operating officer. "We allocate in our money budget each year for ADA improvements and this is an important component of our facility program."

Goar says that MCS worked with state and federal officials to address the required ADA work.

"The majority of our schools were constructed prior to 1990 when the legislation took effect," he says. "In some schools we don't need improvements, or the required ADA work is fairly easy to complete. At some of our schools, however, the projects are more extensive."

For fiscal year 2007-08, MCS will invest \$16.5 million for ADA improvements at elementary, middle and high schools throughout the district. The projects range from adding elevators and ramps, to changing door hardware, providing sinks at appropriate heights or adding signage.

MCS began the program by completing an exhaustive assessment of all city schools, which also included looking at deferred maintenance. This enabled the district to prioritize projects based on the level of deficiency and to make the best use of available money.

**Self Tucker Architects** is an ADA-certified architectural firm. Jimmie Tucker, managing principal with Self Tucker Architects, worked on the MCS survey in a joint venture between his firm and O.T. Marshall Architects. Tucker says improvements were divided into four categories.

"The survey and the resulting information enabled the district to address the greatest needs first, and to develop a phased plan for construction," he says. "Some schools require little or no work because of when they were constructed or because they are scheduled for closing, while other projects necessitated numerous exterior and interior modifications."

Tucker and others on the team started the assessment in a school's parking lot where they evaluated the lot itself and the path of travel from the lot to the school. Other survey items included access into the building and throughout the school, door handles, restroom



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accommodations, signage and heights for drinking fountains and counters.

Construction scheduling is an equally important part of the program. Tucker says that MCS staff, architects, engineers and contractors minimized disruptions to students and staff during construction.

"We work to keep operations ongoing in a safe environment for all occupants," Tucker says. "If possible, construction is done during the summer or during breaks, but most work takes place during the school year. It requires extensive communication between the design and construction team and school administrators to ensure that construction is completed efficiently and with minimal impact to a school's daily operations."

### Self Tucker Architects

Architecture, planning and interior design firm  
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Web site: www.selftucker.com

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