

Customer Views

An interview with Bruce Thomson

Manager, Capital Projects, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

What are the key factors in achieving success with a school renewal program?

Renewal projects are large undertakings, and our limited resources make it difficult to manage and implement all the required measures. One of the key factors in achieving success with your renewal program is having the right resources. Through partnering, we are able to assign a dedicated body to act on our behalf to ensure the job is being done right, on time and on budget. By partnering with Ameresco, we saw an improvement in scheduling because our Project Manager Karl Flood was able to keep the project an upfront priority, and keep our contractors (as well as the board) on track.

Another important factor is knowledge and experience. I find that by partnering with a respected organization such as Ameresco, my team is able to gain experience, knowledge and resources to help with future projects. With their many years of experience in the education business, Ameresco has built up the knowledge of how to best implement the measures required, and how to achieve them within an educational environment, without distracting our students and staff.



New second floor classroom at Central PS.

Lastly, completing projects in a timely fashion and being able to manage implementation costs are important. Operationally, partnering allows us to establish a budget for the program and bill against it. I found this extremely helpful as I did not have to issue contracts for work required since Ameresco was able to do the work and was paid against the original budget under one purchase order, which again saved time and resources.

What capabilities were you looking for in a partner to ensure success?

It is important to partner with a company that you feel not only hears your needs but understands them and responds accordingly. Synergy is key to a successful partnership.

Our renewal partner Ameresco has a lot of experience working with school boards. This experience helps them understand and appreciate the internal decision making process of a board. As well, the background and knowledge they bring from working with other boards is beneficial as it helps us to understand what other boards are doing to provide quality teaching and learning environments and helps us with our process when we take a proposal forward. We want to be part of the solution, not the problem — and having this external experience helps us be just that.

Why partner versus doing it yourself?

There are many benefits to partnering with a company such as Ameresco — it saves time, improves efficiencies, and most importantly saves money.

My team and I usually like to do the work ourselves; however, we don't



Bruce Thomson, Manager, Capital Projects, HWDSB.

have the capacity to complete the work — our team is too small and there are too many distractions that take our focus elsewhere. Ameresco manages the day-to-day details, i.e., working as an integrator getting purchase orders to all of the individual contractors and making sure that they deliver the results, saving the board time, money and hassle.

As well, we are implementing green energy into our school buildings, and taking on the work ourselves would include a steep learning curve as green technology is new to us. With the help of Ameresco, we are able to implement sustainable elements quickly — and our students and staff reap the benefits sooner.

Has your school renewal partner enabled you deliver this on time, on budget, on task?

Generally, I would say yes. However, there are situations where the scope of the project is forced to change due to issues that arise and/or more urgent needs that come to the forefront. For example, at Delta, we ran into a major asbestos problem, which forced us to redirect our attention to a

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bigger issue. However, once resolved, we were able to return to the school and finish the control work. Ameresco did an excellent job in resolving scope issues in a timely manner.

Were you happy with the outcomes of your partnership with Ameresco? Did they deliver what they promised?

Yes. From my perspective the goals of this project and our partnership have come to fruition. We have greatly improved the teaching and learning environment, which is our main objective. The difficulty with a project of this size is properly demonstrating how we saved overall. Before you begin a project you establish a baseline of savings, but from start to finish there may be other 'things' that come into play that take your focus and funding in a different direction. If you simply look at the dollar figure you can't always see the savings. For example, we have found items in schools that we thought were working all these years but in fact were not. While some measures may save energy overall, others will provide a comfortable learning environment for students i.e., air conditioning, which in the end may impact our overall energy savings.

From my experience, if you keep the project on time or ahead of schedule, you realize savings on the deferred maintenance and projected energy costs. By implementing the measures faster this will reduce reactive maintenance and costs.



Students at Central Public School enjoy learning in their new computer lab.

How have you engaged students, staff, principals, and teachers in your renewal strategies? How have they re-acted?

The renewal process to this point has been driven mainly by the board as we have been trying to deal with our long list of backlog maintenance items. Staff has been engaged minimally through conferences and question periods.

In saying this, student and staff engagement are a top priority, and we are looking into methods and procedures to increase communication in the coming months. For example, we plan on informing Principals about projects before they begin so that they can effectively communicate changes to their staff and staff to students. Further, we will be making better use of our Blackboard newsletter as well as improvements with our online information methods.

In the past, we have developed a report to the board, which helps us to manage any questions or concerns Trustees and other staff have. We will continue to publish this report. We are also planning to do special events and media releases to promote our renewal projects and energy conservation including student activities or green team efforts at the school level.

As we obtain the funding/economies to renew items outside our backlog list, we'll be looking to our staff for their input. In fact, we have already started doing this, as can be seen from our current work with science teacher, Tim Car, from Waterdown who we are assisting in the applications to apply for a green initiative valued at \$2 million that will allow us to incorporate many green technologies i.e., solar photovoltaic panels to the school. With community and political influence, staff and students at Waterdown care greatly for the environment and are hoping to use the funds to create a greener school.



Teachers and students alike enjoy reading time in their school's new library.

Will you continue to work with Ameresco? Would you recommend them to other boards?

Yes. Ameresco provides a very useful service and we have established a good team that works well together. Continuing our partnership makes sense.

We trust Ameresco. We have been working together for many years and we are getting premium service. Can you get that kind of service elsewhere? Perhaps, but not at the same level of expertise and synergy that comes with Ameresco. If you choose to work with a different company you will experience nuances that you wouldn't expect with Ameresco.

What's next?

We have a lot going on in the coming months. A top priority for me is to investigate ways to increase capacity. By doing so, we'll be turning our focus to our older schools and investigating how we can address their needs, and how we can use RECAP more advantageously. For example, we'll be looking into accessibility of our buildings. There is a huge demand to do so from the public and by investing in our buildings and improving accessibility we're in a better position to retain them in our community.

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A new walkway outside Memorial School helps build pride of place for staff and students.

We are also looking at standardizing our technology. New technology is always hitting the market and we're interested in updating what we currently use with better, energy-efficient options. Siemens has our interest but we are open to other companies that offer what we need.

Energy effectiveness is also a priority for HWDSB. As a result, my team and I will be looking into ways of reducing our energy consumption. We'll be focusing on controls, lighting occupancy and heating systems that do not meet GPTL requirements and require improvement. Even though some systems have not reached the end of their life cycle, we will gain 10% - 15% by renewing systems that do not meet the GPTL criteria but are taxing on our system.

We are working on making our schools greener in response to our system-wide strategic plan, community



New windows at Delta offer students bright classrooms where they can reach their full potential.

and political pressure. For example we are working with the municipality to get LEED certified design features at a newly designed school in Binbrook. We're excited about building a sustainable school that will incorporate the technology required to reduce our ecological footprint.

We are currently in discussions with Ameresco to install solar Photovoltaic panels on our rooftops, which will help increase revenue for the board as well as serve as an intrusive educational source to students — the solar partnership will include a student engagement component, which is key to the success of a program so visible on school property.



Photovoltaic panels on HWDSB rooftops will help increase revenue for the board.



Bruce Thomson
Manager, Capital Projects

As part of HWDSB Facilities team Bruce employs ongoing renewal and energy efficiency strategies to support quality learning environments including new construction, revitalization and green energy initiatives — all of which enable students to reach their full potential. Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board accommodates 50,000 students across 18 Secondary and 96 Elementary schools. Nine new schools recently opened and two additional schools — Dr Davey Elementary School and Binbrook Secondary School — will open in the fall.

To learn more about this project, please contact:
Bruce Thomson
Manager, Capital Projects
HWDSB

Ph: 905-527-5092 x2612
Email:
bruce.thomson@hwdsb.on.ca