



CONCRETE MASONRY HELPS NEW ALABAMA SCHOOLS MAKE THE GRADE

With aging schools and growing enrollments, school districts across the country are looking for ways to stretch their dollars with buildings built to last. Over the years, concrete masonry has become a clear product of choice for schools because it meets both economic and aesthetic qualities designers are looking for.

Architect Tom McElrath, of McElrath & Oliver, Architects, P.C., says, “day in and day out concrete masonry weathers very well and needs only periodic cleaning. It is simply as low maintenance a product as you can get on a building.”

The school has brick facing on the exterior with a steel frame inside filled with 300,000 concrete masonry blocks. McElrath and school administrators also chose concrete masonry for the interior of the new Gadsden City High School (*pictured at right*) located on Black Creek Parkway. The new facility opened its doors for classes last August, combining students from three area high schools. This year the school has 1,500 students and has room for 250 more in the future.

Gadsden Superintendent Bob Russell is impressed with both the performance and look of concrete block. He says they are “very satisfied” with the finished school along with the students and parents “who love it.” Russell says the chief selling points on the concrete masonry were the economy of block, its look, and durability.

Architect McElrath says Gadsden City High School has been a good selling point for other projects. He says his firm has been selected to design a new city high school in Tarrant “as a result of administrators touring the new Gadsden school.” He says this building went a long way toward getting his firm on board with the Tarrant Board of Education.



Students head to class in the new Gadsden City High School, completed last August. Much of the school's interior walls are constructed of concrete masonry because of its ease of maintenance and long-term durability.

W. Lee Bryant, Vice President of Lathan Associates Architects, P.C. of Birmingham, serves as architect for the new Calera High School and Helena Middle School. Both schools are in the early stages of construction with completion set for fall of 2008.

Bryant shares the positive views of those on the Gadsden school project calling it “a no brainer to use concrete masonry on the interior” of schools. In the short term he says, “it is not the cheapest product to use. But over the life cycle of the school, when you consider that is so durable and maintenance free, it is less expensive.”

Bryant says new building codes which took effect in 2003, became much more stringent when it comes to engineering school walls for reinforcement and load bearing. He says concrete masonry “meets those requirements” and holds up well in storms. Schools are also designed with a number of firewalls and concrete masonry is a non-combustible product. Bryant says installation takes “skill and care with inspectors doing checks at regular intervals.”

Bryant calls the selection of concrete masonry a joint decision between the school system and architect. Calera High School is 185,000 square feet at a cost of 25 million dollars. Helena Middle School is 170,000 square feet with a 24 million dollar price tag. Both are designed to initially hold 800 students with room for expansion. Combined, these two projects will require an estimated 575,000 concrete masonry units.

Research studies have found that the quality of a school’s facilities can have an impact on how well students do in school. In 1999, Jeffrey Lackney, Ph.D. told a Congressional briefing “the evidence is overwhelming that school buildings are of critical importance to the teaching and learning process.”

Children spend so much of their day in a school, it is critical that they are in a quality, safe environment. That is something Gadsden, Helena and Calera were buying into when they selected concrete block as a major component in the construction of their schools.



The new Calera High School, seen here under construction, will be 185,000 square feet when completed .

