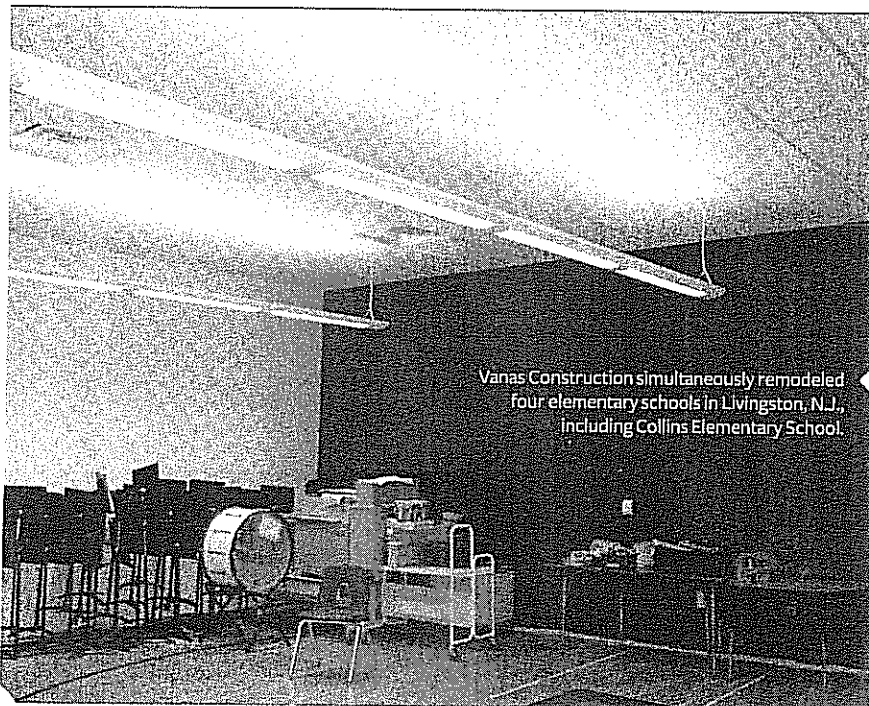


"The construction business is very different nowadays."

> Robert Vanas Jr., vice president

No Summer Breaks

✦ Forty years of experience in educational construction and more than 100 projects have moved Vanas Construction to the head of its class. *By Marta Jimenez-Lutter*



Vanas Construction simultaneously remodeled four elementary schools in Livingston, N.J., including Collins Elementary School.

Vanas Construction Co. Inc.
www.vanasconstruction.com
 Annual revenue: \$35 million
 Employees: More than 200 for the Livingston project
 Specialty: Educational construction
 HQ: Bogota, N.J.

➤ **When the bell rings at three o'clock** on the last day of the academic year, hoards of students run out of their schools in happy anticipation of summer vacation. It is then that the clock starts ticking for Vanas Construction – it's time for the Bogota, N.J.-based firm to get to work and turn old and outdated buildings into state-of-the-art facilities that will be ready for students when they return in August.

Vanas started its journey in 1970, when Robert Vanas Sr. founded what would

become a company with a focus on educational construction. Vanas initially ventured into residential and commercial areas, but soon found his niche in school buildings, where he established himself and his company as reliable, professional and experienced. The company has since performed more than 100 projects for school clients.

Changing Times

Vanas Construction today remains a family business, led by Vanas' sons Glenn and Robert Jr. as president and vice president, respectively. The brothers started from the ground up when they were in elementary school, fetching coffee, making copies and learning the business they would one day lead. When Vanas senior was ready to retire 10 years ago, he hand-

ed the baton to his sons who were seasoned by then in the intricacies of the construction world.

The second-generation Vanas leadership is facing a much more competitive construction environment than the one their father took on. "The construction business is very different nowadays," Robert Vanas Jr. explains. "We used to have eight or 10 people bidding for a project, now we have 20 or 30."

Competition might be stiff, but the brothers have been able to sustain a steady flow of business due in equal parts to "experience and reputation." Today, the company has 30 employees and an annual revenue of \$35 million. "We have established a solid reputation with the different school boards," Vanas says. To have those sorts of relationships "certainly doesn't hurt" when competing for new work, he notes.

Safety matters

When working on an operational school or even during breaks when fewer people are around, safety is the No. 1 jobsite priority for Vanas. The maximum level of safety is achieved with good communication. "School administrators do not like surprises," explains Vanas. "It is essential to make sure that the school is made aware of when and what tasks we will be doing in occupied areas well in advance of actually doing the work."

Vanas' crews also partition off work areas from the occupied areas to keep the work contained and separate from open areas. The next hurdle is to minimize disruptions for students and faculty. "We cannot do demolition work while the kids are at school," Vanas explains. "The noise reverberates through the walls; it is very disruptive." This is certainly why

schools want the work done while they are not in session.

Those deadlines have to be met even though the construction company might be building an addition to or remodeling an old building. That brings up the next set of challenges: What lies behind the walls, or beneath the floor? "We are dealing with buildings from the '20s and '30s many times," Vanas notes. "We do not know what we are going to find once we open up a wall." If, for instance, Vanas Construction encounters asbestos, "we have to stop all work and get a company specialized in asbestos abatement to remove it properly. That can add two to three days to an already tight schedule."

So how does Vanas do it? Simply put, it is a matter of tight synchronization between the contractor and school district clients, as Vanas proved in the sum-

mer of 2011 with a major school-remodeling project in New Jersey.

Four Schools at Once

In the project in Livingston, N.J., Vanas remodeled not just one, two or three, but four elementary schools - more than 100,000 square feet of combined space. Working during the summer break of 2011, Vanas simultaneously remodeled the Burnett Hill, Collins, Hillside and Harrison elementary schools, changing them literally from floor to ceiling. Each school received a thorough update: New floors, ceilings, lighting fixtures and bathrooms were installed. The work was completed in two phases; 60 percent of the project was completed while school was out, from mid-June to the beginning of September, and the rest was completed by May 2012, as scheduled.

To avoid disrupting the learning flow of the students, four trailers were set up over the summer to host four classrooms at a time. Once students returned to school in August, they were moved to these facilities for two to three weeks at a time while their classrooms were remodeled, then they moved back and another four sections took the trailers for their allotted two weeks.

Vanas Construction completed the project within the scheduled time without disrupting either students or faculty. As Vanas explains, "this project required a tremendous amount of work. Every aspect of the project had to be highly coordinated." That is where experience is irreplaceable; as Vanas was able to coordinate all moving parts to finish the schools on time for the first school bell of the new year. ☉



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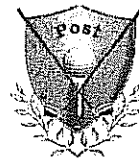
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