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A Board-Ready Guide to Evaluating Custodial Operations

**Practical Questions Every District
Should Ask Before Renewing
Its Current Model**



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Introduction

Across the country, school district leaders are facing a quieter but increasingly urgent question: is our current custodial model actually sustainable?

For many districts, the answer has been assumed rather than examined. In-house custodial operations are often treated as a fixed feature of the district — woven into budgets, staffing plans, and building routines for decades. But rising labor costs, persistent staffing shortages, escalating benefit obligations, and growing community expectations around cleanliness and air quality are putting pressure on a model that was designed for a different era.

This guide is not a sales pitch, and it is not an argument for any particular path forward. It is designed to help superintendents, business officials, facilities directors, and board members structure an internal conversation about the long-term viability of their current approach — *before* a budget crisis, a staffing collapse, or a public incident forces a rushed decision.

Each of the sections below offers a short framing paragraph and a set of practical evaluation questions. Use them in cabinet meetings, board prep sessions, or one-on-one conversations with your facilities leadership. The goal is clarity, not conclusions.

1. Cost Stability

Custodial operations are one of the most labor-intensive line items in any district budget, and labor costs rarely move in a predictable direction. Healthcare premiums, retirement contributions, overtime exposure, and equipment replacement cycles can quietly compound year over year — often outpacing the rate at which districts can raise revenue. A clear-eyed view of the full cost picture is the foundation of any responsible long-term plan.



Evaluation questions:

- ✓ Are labor, benefits, overtime, equipment, and supervision costs predictable year over year, or are we routinely surprised at budget time?
- ✓ Has the true, fully loaded cost of in-house operations been accounted for — including benefits, workers' compensation, training, supervision, and equipment depreciation?
- ✓ How exposed is the district to rising healthcare and benefit costs over the next three to five years?
- ✓ What is the 5-year trajectory of our current model if current trends continue?
- ✓ Are we comparing our actual all-in cost per square foot against regional benchmarks?
- ✓ If a major equipment replacement or staffing event hit next year, do we have the budget flexibility to absorb it?

2. Staffing Reliability

The single biggest operational risk in most in-house custodial programs is no longer cost — it's staffing. Districts across the country are reporting chronic vacancies, rising turnover, and growing reliance on principals and facilities leaders to fill gaps that should never have reached their desks. The question is not whether you have a staffing problem, but whether you have a sustainable answer to it.

Evaluation questions:

- ✓ Are buildings consistently staffed at planned levels each day, or are we operating with chronic vacancies?
- ✓ How often are principals, assistant principals, or facilities leaders personally filling custodial gaps?
- ✓ What is our current annual turnover rate, and what does each separation actually cost us in recruiting, onboarding, and lost productivity?
- ✓ Do we have a sustainable recruiting pipeline and retention strategy — or are we reacting position by position?
- ✓ How competitive are our wages and benefits relative to private-sector employers in our region?
- ✓ What is our contingency plan if turnover accelerates over the next 12–24 months?

3. Service Quality

“Clean” is one of the most assumed and least measured standards in district operations. Most districts have inherited a custodial program built on routine and tenure, not on documented standards, structured inspections, or transparent reporting. That can work — until a board member walks through a building, a parent posts a photo, or a health concern surfaces. A defensible quality program requires more than effort; it requires evidence.



Evaluation questions:

- ✓ Are our cleaning standards clearly documented, communicated, and measurable — or do they live in individual custodians' heads?
- ✓ How do we actually know whether buildings are clean, beyond informal walkthroughs?
- ✓ Do we have consistent quality across every school, or do outcomes vary significantly by building and shift?
- ✓ What structured reporting do district leaders and principals receive on cleaning performance?
- ✓ When a quality issue is raised, do we have a clear process for documentation, response, and follow-up?
- ✓ Could we confidently walk a board member through any building in the district on short notice?

4. Student and Staff Impact

Custodial operations are not a back-office function. They are part of the learning environment — directly shaping attendance, health, focus, and morale. Research consistently links clean, well-maintained buildings to better student outcomes and stronger teacher retention. The question for district leaders is whether the current model is treating cleanliness as a strategic lever or as a background utility.

Evaluation questions:

- ✓ How does building cleanliness affect attendance, illness rates, and learning conditions in our schools?
- ✓ Are hygiene and indoor air quality being managed proactively, or only in response to complaints or incidents?
- ✓ Are facility conditions equitable across the district, or are some schools consistently cleaner than others?
- ✓ How does the current state of our buildings affect teacher morale, recruitment, and retention?
- ✓ Are we hearing recurring concerns from parents, staff, or students that point to systemic issues?
- ✓ Do our buildings reflect the standards we set for academic excellence?

5. Transition Planning



For districts considering a change, the most common objection is not philosophical — it's practical. Leaders worry about disruption, about employees, about losing institutional knowledge, and about political exposure. These are legitimate concerns, and they deserve a structured answer. The good news is that transition does not have to mean upheaval. Phased, hybrid, and attrition-based models are increasingly common and can be designed around the district's specific workforce and timeline.

These hybrid and phased structures aren't theoretical. The Budd Group has designed and implemented variations of each for public K-12 districts across the Southeast — including districts that began with a single-school pilot, districts that retained in-house day porters while outsourcing nightly cleaning, and districts that transitioned region-by-region over multiple budget cycles. The right structure is the one that fits your district's workforce, facilities footprint, and political context — not a vendor's preferred operating model.

Evaluation questions:

- ✓ Could we consider a phased, hybrid, or attrition-based model rather than an all-at-once change?
- ✓ How would we protect current employees during any transition — through hiring preference, wage matching, or benefit continuity?
- ✓ What institutional knowledge (building quirks, equipment history, vendor relationships) do we need to preserve, and how?
- ✓ What does a thoughtful, low-disruption path look like over a 12–24 month horizon?
- ✓ Could we pilot an alternative model in a small number of buildings before making a district-wide decision?

6. Board Considerations

Eventually, every custodial conversation becomes a board conversation. Whether the discussion is about budget pressure, a staffing crisis, or a proactive review, board members will expect district leadership to articulate the long-term trajectory of facilities operations in clear, defensible terms. The strongest position is one of transparency and preparation — not reaction.



Evaluation questions:

- ✓ Can we explain our current model to the board in terms of stewardship, sustainability, and outcomes — not just historical practice?
- ✓ Are we prepared to defend the 5- and 10-year trajectory of our facility costs under the current approach?
- ✓ Do we have a solution that mitigates political fallout from laying off staff?
- ✓ How would we communicate any potential change to employees, parents, and the broader community in a way that builds trust?
- ✓ Do we have the data, structure, and narrative to support a transparent board conversation about facilities?
- ✓ Have we benchmarked our model against peer districts of similar size and demographics?
- ✓ What is our plan for engaging the board *before* a crisis forces the conversation?

What to Look for in a Partner

If your evaluation leads you to consider outside support — in any form, from a single building pilot to a full transition — the quality of the partner matters more than the structure of the contract. A few markers worth testing for:



Local support depth

Ask whether the partner has regional operations leadership within driving distance of your district — not a national account manager providing occasional oversight.



Defined service model

Look for named accountability at every level, with clear ownership of facilities, responsibilities, and outcomes.



Structured transition methodology

Responsible partners should bring a defined transition process—not a generic “we’ll figure it out together” posture. Ask about phases and support during the critical first 90 days.



Transparent reporting

Look for structured inspection programs, accessible performance data, and regular business reviews with district leadership.



Structured communication

Ask how the partner will keep principals and other building-level leaders informed. Brief monthly performance summaries can help demonstrate whether communication extends beyond the district office.



Recruiting and retention infrastructure

Evaluate the partner’s recruiting pipelines, wage-benchmarking practices, onboarding processes, retention strategies, and ability to cover vacancies without disrupting service.



Defined cleaning methodology

Look for documented systems, role-specific responsibilities, and coordinated workflows that support consistent results across buildings and shifts.



Accountability framework

A serious partner will put performance expectations in writing. Look for clear service standards, escalation procedures, and commitments to correct deficiencies when those standards are not met.

The strongest district leaders are not the ones who avoid hard questions about facilities — they are the ones who ask them early, on their own timeline, before circumstances force a rushed answer. Custodial operations are too important to student outcomes, too consequential to the budget, and too visible to the community to be left on autopilot.

If the questions in this guide have prompted useful conversations inside your cabinet or with your board, that is the most important outcome. Whatever path you choose — staying the course, restructuring internally, exploring a hybrid approach, or evaluating a full partnership — the goal is the same: a custodial model that reflects your district's values, supports your students and staff, and holds up under scrutiny for years to come.

Whichever path your district chooses, choose a partner whose time horizon matches yours. The right partner isn't optimizing for the current contract cycle — they're building a relationship that will outlast the current superintendent, the current board, and the current budget environment. The Budd Group has been family-owned for more than 60 years, and that continuity is part of what allows us to think about K-12 partnerships the way districts think about their buildings: as long-term stewardship, not short-term transactions.



If your district is starting to ask these questions,
**The Budd Group can help you think through
the answers** — without pressure, and
without a one-size-fits-all approach.

Contact The Budd Group to discuss your district's custodial and staffing needs.

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Ready to Evaluate Your Custodial Options?

Contact The Budd Group to discuss facilities needs across your district.



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