ACAI NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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Modern Times, Technology Reflected in New Architectural Approach to Schools

Fort Lauderdale, FL (July 2007) -- What's new at South Florida high schools and colleges? For starters, consider major changes in the way school buildings are designed and constructed, according to Adolfo Cotilla, president of ACAI Associates, which has provided architectural and design services to many of South Florida's public and private schools, as well as universities and colleges, for more than 22 years.

Cotilla points to several recent changes in contemporary school buildings. Changes in society, technology and budget pressures have markedly impacted the infrastructure, interior and exterior of school buildings and campus designs.

"The increasing use of technology in schools has changed not only how people learn, but also the design of the optimum learning environment," says Cotilla, whose firm, a minority-business enterprise founded in 1985, is consistently placed amongst the top 25 architectural firms in South Florida. "Instead of relying entirely on open classrooms, schools now require high-tech work stations where learning modules can be adapted to individual needs," he says.

Cotilla's ongoing work for Nova Southeastern University reflects the increasing importance of designing for distance learning. With more and more students attending college classes via the Internet and relying on video conferencing to communicate directly with teachers and other students, Cotilla has adapted classroom layout, lighting, wiring and other building components to improve the environment for students who participate from remote locations.

"As architects, we have to put ourselves in the classroom setting before beginning design work," states Cotilla. "Perhaps more than in other facet of society, technology has reshaped how we educate our students, from elementary children to university students and researchers."

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State-of-the-art goes far beyond making sure computers, simple printers and laptop connectivity are a part of learning and research settings. Many classrooms and labs now also facilitate use of LCD overhead projectors, videoconferencing equipment, digital camcorders and cameras, Bluetooth tablets and wireless interfaces, interactive whiteboards and plasma displays, document cameras and all matter of sophisticated printers. Efficient classroom settings go well beyond professors podcasting their lectures; there are now even classrooms with their own IP network addresses. And tomorrow's multimedia technology will far surpass that which is being tapped now by teachers and students.

"We not only have to design and build learning centers that will stand the test of time from a construction standpoint," states Cotilla. "We also have to design smart classrooms to accommodate tomorrow's audiovisual, telecommunications and information technology. That will enable students and researchers, as well as their supporting faculty and staff, to keep their competitive edge. Accommodating tomorrow's technology will also help our students differentiate themselves in a competitive job market."

Technology aside, today's schools must now accommodate many atypical uses at different times of the day. "They have become important community centers where local residents often meet in groups or take night-school classes as individuals. To allow maximum adaptation to the changing needs of students, whether they be children or adults, flexibility is key in designing classroom environments," says Cotilla. "A building and its campus may be a traditional school from 8am to 4pm, but it's often a community center during the evenings and weekends."

Cotilla points out that this need to design schools for greatest flexibility and maximum efficiency overrides teachers who zealously guard their turf. "Long gone are the days of Professor Smith's classroom, Ms. Jones' lab, and the old PS 17," Cotilla says. "Physical facilities are designed to maximize the flexible scheduling of classes, labs and independent study." In the newest schools, labs are grouped together and auditoriums are grouped together for greatest adaptability and efficiency, then programmed through scheduling. "It's very definitely a no-turfing environment today," says Cotilla.

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Crime and safety considerations also have forced architects such as Cotilla to come up with creative solutions to ensure the safety of students. At ACAI, where several staff members are CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) certified, the focus is on designing new school campuses to protect students and faculty from outside intruders, and to allow for the most efficient use of security personnel and equipment. Moreover, potential attacks by terrorists or others now require materials specified for construction to be stronger and designed to resist explosions and fires.

New materials are also specified to ensure durability and safety for students. As new plastics and other products come on the market, they are carefully tested to improve school design and construction. New schools also are designed for easy expansion to accommodate Florida's inevitable population growth, especially in developing areas.

ACAI's design of the Health Professions Division Campus at Nova Southeastern University, considered to be an architectural cornerstone of what is now one of the 10 largest independent universities in the United States, is an excellent example of an architect putting in the homework on the front end; carefully listening to a client's needs, expectations and aspirations from design and functionality standpoints; and connecting the pieces to offer an ultra-efficient and extremely high-tech environment for its users. The $40 million, 800,000-square-foot project included 11 auditoriums with distance-learning video conferencing and computer hook-up capabilities; a full medical library; wet laboratory teaching classrooms; a teaching clinic component; areas for administration, food service, student services, a museum, nurses and custodial services; its own physical plant; and a connected parking garage for 1,500 spaces.

ACAI's extensive educational-client list includes design and/or construction work on more than 40 schools in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties over the course of the past 22 years. In addition to Nova Southeastern University, the firm also has done work for Barry University, Broward Community College, Florida Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida International University, Palm Beach Community College and the University of Florida.

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"We are deeply committed to ensuring that Florida students learn in safe, modernized classrooms and environments," says Cotilla. "One of Governor Crist's stated goals is to see education in Florida become the gold standard in this country. At ACAI, we believe that applies, also, to school construction and renovation. Even with ever-present and very real budget constraints, we as a society cannot afford to allow lack of space and outdated facilities limit the quality of our public school system or our university or research environments."

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ACAI is an award-winning, full-service architecture firm with offices in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach Counties. Founded in 1985, ACAI's project-tested architects, engineers and construction professionals consistently deliver innovative, functional, sustainable and cost-effective design solutions. A minority-business enterprise, ACAI has built a longstanding reputation for excellence in the planning and design of universities, schools, local and state government buildings, healthcare facilities, industrial and commercial businesses, and private and public corporations. To learn more, contact Sandra Smerkers, LEED AP, ACAI's director of marketing, at 954-484-4000, ext. 38, or ssmerkers@acaiworld.com.