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Colman School deal: something of value

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The purchase agreement between the Seattle Public Schools and the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle is good at its core because it turns a public eyesore — the dilapidated and abandoned **Colman School** — into a public good.

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The deal pours \$804,000 into the cash-starved **school** district for a building that has sat on the market for years. The district also gains indemnity against current and future litigation surrounding the **school**.

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This is no small thing. Plans to transform the former elementary **school** into a complex of offices, apartments and an African-American **museum** had until recently been besieged by in-fighting and costly lawsuits. From this vantage point, Superintendent Joseph Olchefske did well to rid the district of an albatross around its neck.

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The question of whether the district — in the midst of budget cuts and employee layoffs — could, or should, have gotten a larger sum for the building is a fair one.

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The answer is uncertain.

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The 103-year-old building's assessed value is nowhere close to an indication of its market value. The same holds true for the appraisal price. The true price of any building is whatever the market will bear.

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In the current economic downturn with high commercial vacancy rates, the purchase price for the **Colman school** does not seem inappropriately low.

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The Urban League, led by James Kelly, will spend nearly as much on cleaning up the property as on the purchase price. Community activists occupied the building for eight years to dramatize their demands for an

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African-American Heritage **Museum**. And the building has been boarded up since 1985.

For starters, the Urban League will spend about \$700,000 removing hazardous materials including asbestos. Since the building has historical significance, it won't be razed but remodeled, a more costly approach.

Under the Urban League's guidance, the project is the closest it has ever been to reality. Widespread support for the project is demonstrative of this city's strong commitment. The City Council has given \$400,000. The University of Washington's architecture and urban-planning students are creating design concepts. And local philanthropists and seasoned fund-raisers have raised significant amounts. At a **School** Board meeting this week, citizens lined up to speak in support of the school's sale.

The board is set to vote on the purchase agreement Wednesday. Board members should vote yes.

Something had to be done with the **Colman School**. The agreement between the public schools and the Urban League opens the window for something of long-lasting value to Seattle.

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