Trends in Elementary School Design

The start of the 21st century was just 14 years ago, but school design has since evolved dramatically. New standards for elementary school design have yet to be written, but clear trends have emerged. Here we explore these trends and what we as architects and educational planners know to date.

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Breakout Spaces

More than just corridor space, breakout areas are located adjacent to classrooms. They provide individual students or small groups with alternative areas conducive to learning, encouraging students to engage in collaborative group work or individual learning moments outside of the classroom. Breakout areas also reinforce the flexibility and adaptability of an educational space. Providing students with nontraditional spaces outside of the classroom lead them to view learning as a continual, ongoing process versus one that is solely reserved for the classroom.

Safety and Security

It's important to remember that the purpose of safety and security measures is to enhance the learning space. They should not deter from the educational purpose of a building, and they should not be the primary focus of the building. In other words, education must remain the top priority in schools, not security. It is our role as Architects and Educational Planners to plan and design security implementation options that don't distract from the warm and welcoming presence that elementary schools aim to foster. Secured entrance sequences, compartmentalization and video monitoring are

discreet yet effective options that can be incorporated into a facility's design. For more detailed information on these options, please visit the Thought Leadership section of our website (www.prarch.com).

Variety is Necessary

Today's generation of students is more diverse than ever before. Elementary students need a variety of places to learn, and one type of space no longer accommodates all children. The traditional lecture style classroom, with rows of desks facing a blackboard, is no longer the only effective teaching (and learning) format. Providing spaces for all learners at the elementary school level involves adding flexible furniture, moveable walls and partitions and niche learning spaces (i.e. breakout areas) to a building's design.

The Flipped Classroom

Technology's ever-expanding influence on education introduced what is now known as the "flipped classroom." The flipped classroom is a form of blended learning in which students learn new content online by watching video lectures (usually at home) and then complete the assigned homework in class, where teachers are nearby to offer more personalized

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guidance and facilitation. Time previously spent delivering or hearing the day's lessons is now freed up for collaboration and additional focus on individualized learning objectives. This format also fosters a more collaborative style of learning, a process that benefits both the advanced and less advanced students.

Pre-K Programs

"Pre-K Debates: Current Controversies and Issues," a 2011 publication authored by three industry experts, addresses the multifaceted perspectives relative to pre-K programs. Should pre-K be structured around direct instruction or learning through play? When should pre-K services be provided and for how long? Regardless of how, where or when these programs occur, professional evaluations of pre-K programs suggest they are successful in improving children's academic skills. The recommended location of these programs, whether it be within an elementary school or at a separate building, is debatable, but many public elementary schools are now choosing to incorporate dedicated early learning spaces into their school's design.

Games as Educational Tools

Technology also introduced an extraordinary plethora of new educational games. Games can be used as educational tools, providing students with problem solving challenges and developing critical thinking skills. To create an environment that is both educational and playful, gaming rooms with soft casual furnishings and multiple large screens can be added to existing areas of a building, such as the IMC (instructional media center) or commons area.

Discovery and Exploration

Students utilizing project-based learning assignments can achieve a multitude of skills to further their educational experience. Adding "Discovery Rooms" or dedicated science lab capabilities to elementary schools and classrooms provides resources that the traditional classroom does not account for. Power, water, data ports and video screens should be available at numerous locations throughout the classroom. Adjustable workstations that accommodate both small and large group teams should be provided. It is also important to remember that exploration can take place outdoors or indoors. Direct access to nearby gardens, outdoor classrooms or sustainability features like rain gardens or alternative energy sources give elementary students the opportunity to discover and explore, inside or outside of the building.

These are just a few current trends in elementary school design. Administrators, board members and school principals should not assume they need to wait for an entirely new school to be constructed before these Student-Centered Learning Spaces can be achieved. Just think: if you wait for new construction, you are essentially putting your young learns at an automatic disadvantage. Conversion of existing buildings into 21st Century Learning Environments is possible. Feel free to contact me directly at any time. We're here to help!

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