



SCHOOL BUILDING TRENDS THAT ARE SETTING THE CURVE

The way societies deliver education has evolved over generations to accommodate emerging student needs and support new learning methods. At HED we recognize that school buildings must evolve as well, not solely to facilitate learning but also to create a positive impact on students and the broader community. Schools are critical because, as Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

As school buildings take shape, they send a message to educators, students and the surrounding community. In a real sense, schools are value statements, communicating where decision-makers are investing and how they account for today’s needs while planning for the future. Our experts at HED have identified three school building trends to watch in the years ahead.



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1 SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

Schools are a community within a community. A growing school building trend implicitly recognizes this by creating spaces that serve as community hubs. HED brings the right approach by designing schools that strengthen bonds within the school community and assist whole families to enrich the larger community.

For example, research shows clear links between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, and that student stress about family finances can be distracting and demoralizing. Schools can serve as helpful resources through spaces that connect families with services or facilities that de-emphasize income disparity.

One campus was recently modernized to create a secure single-entry point, a safety feature now standard in newer schools, and to add a building that combines school administration offices with a separate but adjoined family center. This thoughtful approach gives school personnel a control point for campus visitors and provides a welcoming space where families can access health resources and services such as English as a second language instruction.

Another school borrowed a city planning idea to create a walkable, multifunctional space for students, teachers and families to create closer community ties. The building incorporates shared copying facilities to encourage student-teacher interactions and a food court-style cafeteria area where all students pay with identical school-issued cards to reduce the stigma for students receiving free lunches.

The new space keeps students on campus for lunch, eliminating what used to be a socioeconomic status marker. The school also features a parent resource center that is set up like a retail environment where families in need can access food and clothing. Intentional approaches like this create a more cohesive on-campus community while benefiting the larger community at the same time.

2 WELLNESS AT THE FOREFRONT

Wellness is a huge focus for HED school design in the COVID-19 era, which is why biophilic spaces are moving to the head of the class. As an Education Today article on biophilic design notes, classrooms that feature natural light and organic material can improve creativity, cognitive function and academic outcomes and are scientifically proven to enhance health, well-being and learning in new school buildings and existing space renovations. Studies on biophilic design have found positive impact on our physiological health and well-being; further studies are being conducted on the potential economic and financial benefits as well.

We’ll continue to see schools find ways to enhance connection with nature both inside and outside. This includes using more natural materials, enhancing views to the outdoors, and increasing outdoor learning spaces. When feasible, access to outdoor instruction and recreation areas is extremely beneficial for students. Adding features like building overhangs that provide shade can give students an opportunity to get some fresh air and learn in an outdoor setting.

Other strategies for incorporating wellness can also include quiet spaces inside that can be used for respite and flexible spaces that can support small or large gatherings. This trend grew post-pandemic as students returned to busy schools after spending time learning at home in solitude. Creating designated spaces both indoors and outdoors where students can get away from crowds and recharge helps improve overall wellness.

3 EXPANDING CTE PROGRAMS

Another building trend to watch is space that supports career and technical education (CTE) programs. A U.S. Department of Education study found that, eight years after graduation, students who participated in CTE programs in high school had higher median incomes than those who didn’t focus on CTE.

Spaces for technical education have unique elements to support the convergence of research, hands on learning and teaching. These include labs, innovation hubs, workshops and more. Many of these programs focus heavily on student success and instructor interaction which require flexible, modularized spaces and furnishings that can adapt for small and large group instruction.

But CTE programs are a building challenge for schools because spaces where students are trained in fields like robotics or advanced communication technology — or where the next generation of healthcare workers learn — typically require an upfront investment



for infrastructure to provide necessities like connectivity, air compression, hydraulics and program specific inclusions. Creating CTE spaces doesn’t have to be expensive for the schools. With career education becoming a focus for many districts, state governments and foundations, HED can help the district apply for grants to fund these specialized classrooms. To utilize this funding fully, CTE classrooms should be designed with an open concept that allows for a variety of technical training to take place.

When planning CTE spaces, it’s important to keep in mind that schools built in the 2020s will support training for careers that don’t yet exist, so it’s imperative to build in flexibility. Open building concepts are highly adaptable, as are spaces that provide flexible infrastructure, so it’s worthwhile to think through how spaces can be readapted in the years to come — it’s an investment in future flexibility.

SCHOOLS THAT CREATE A POSITIVE IMPACT

A throughline that connects all three trends is that an investment in schools is a statement that a district values its students and their families and has an eye on the future. By investing in new buildings or renovations, schools have an opportunity to show students that the space is for them. Centering community connection, wellness and technical education will have a positive impact on learning outcomes and student experience for years to come.



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