

From Makeshift to Wow: Our New Media Centers

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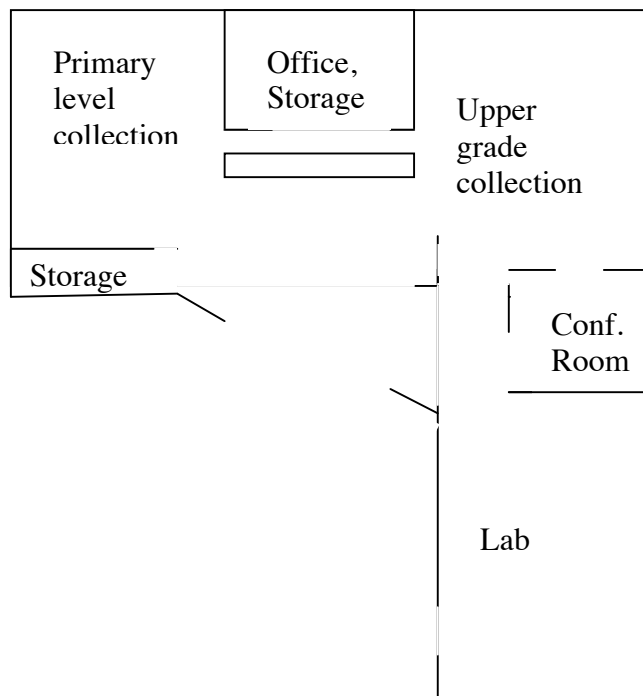
Students in our district are benefiting from new or renovated media centers in four of our nine schools, a significant part of our district's renewed emphasis on facilities improvements. The district opened two entirely new secondary media center constructions in 2000 and 2006; this month a new elementary media center opened in completely renovated spaces, another relocated to improved spaces in former classrooms. We'll look at features that enhance the functionality and educational environment of these very long overdue new facilities.

A little background: Before 2000 the middle school was housed in two 1920's era buildings, separated by a street. The media center occupied a former auditorium; the computer lab was on the stage. The high school media center had long outgrown today's needs, just barely functioning in a two-level 1970's era facility. The elementary media centers were makeshift, operating in halls, adjacent classrooms, and a former window-less movie projection room.

Creating a welcoming educational environment that will draw today's learners was # 1 on our planning lists. Bistro seating and ample soft seating facing a 50-foot glass wall that provide a generous view of a lake and hills are the WOW factor at our new high school media center. Hard wood flooring and curves add to the appeal of this area. It's "the" spot for students who want to relax with a magazine, read a Teen Lit novel from the adjacent teen lit section or use a laptop. As an added eye-catcher, teen lit books are shelved face out. The initial building remodeling plans gave district administration the view, but concern citizens spoke up and 1300 students are now enjoying the view and ambiance. Very contemporary metal chairs and a mottled green carpet and laminate top tables throughout add a contemporary feel appealing to teens.

High ceilings, chandelier style lights, and purple counter tops contribute to the WOW factor in middle school media center which opened in 2000. The center is truly in the center of the school with ample lower and upper internal windows bringing in light. Large display cases with glass on interior and exterior sides help provide a connection to the commons. Windows in two labs also add light and give people passing by to see in, the idea of a former superintendent who wanted people coming into the school to see "kids using technology." Additional windows bring light into interior spaces while also provide visibility into the main part of the media center. The spaces do not feel claustrophobic even though there are no outside walls. Brick support pillars with limestone tiles depicting Winona are add design interest.

An angled entry with glass walls invites 300 K-4 students into a spacious L-shaped media center opening this month in spaces occupying former classrooms and hallways. (Figure 1) Architects are often cautious about the additional costs of angles, but this angled entry cost little and adds considerable punch. It creates a true foyer with space for displays, a professional collection and comfy seating from wasted hall space. The L's tall side includes a lab, conference room, and area for the upper grade fiction and non-fiction collections. The L's short side holds the checkout desk, two storage areas and a primary resources room with a reading corner. The new spaces can accommodate three classes and have a much more open feel than we imagined when we learned the load-bearing walls could not be removed entirely. The remaining supports help provide the distinct spaces that teachers desired and nooks for display. Another remodeling surprise was the ability to fill in a stairway well; that space is now used for the



conference/collaborative group room. Huge windows on three outside walls provide abundant natural light. Strategically placed internal windows enhance visibility into all areas from the foyer and circulation desk. The view *into* the media center from the hall invites students into a spacious and functional media center, a major change from *walking through* the “library in the hall.” Students now have an environment for active learning, not just a place to grab a book and go. Media staff, district administrators, architects, parents, and teachers collaborated on creating the overall design of this welcoming media center. The school’s principal described the new spaces as “spacious, well lit, and conducive to student achievement.”

Large east windows mean bright spaces for 100 students in another K-4 school where the new media center occupies two former classrooms separated by an open doorway. Students previously went into two windowless rooms to find a book. The adjacent lab was hodgepodge, a result of limited funding. The new center’s WOW factor is a bay window in the easy reading area, a nice touch that adds a lot. When funds are available the wall between the room will be removed and other structural changes will be made.

Technology throughout. Our media centers have had computer labs for over 20 years; a design feature that ensures media specialists and other media staff has an integral role in technology implementation, a more difficult role if labs are through a doorway or down the hall. The new secondary media centers each have three general-purpose instructional labs. Two at each secondary media center are off to the side, totally open to the rest of the media center, and visible from centrally located circulation area. Sufficient storage cupboards are wonderful for both technology needs and overflow media center materials and supplies. A third lab in each media center is in the middle of the action, designed for drop-in use but also available to classes. The centrally located circulation desks trumped the “old-style” contraction mentality of locating the desk by the main entrance or adjacent to a storage room or office. Placing staff and work areas in a central location create efficiencies and help establish a patron-friendly environment.

Elementary media centers each have one lab. A district wide switch to thin-client labs this summer has lowered the wiring costs these new labs.

Spaces for non-lab computers and peripherals throughout the media center are equally important and conducive to individual and small group work or information searching. At the secondary level we especially like semi-private alcoves or nooks with stations for multimedia work. A small area outside the media specialist’s office at the idle school provides a semi-private collaborative work place or a place for people to work who may need frequent assistance.

Multipurpose rooms add functionality to the new secondary media centers. Used for group instruction, collaborative work, meetings, staff development, adult education and special events, they are greatly appreciated by staff and community groups. Often booked months in advance, these spaces also contribute to media center awareness by bringing in visitors who might not otherwise visit the media center. They also contribute an income to the district when used by outside groups. The long term goal for the high school multipurpose room is television production; a similar room at the middle school media center provides a dedicated space for “Friday Live,” an in-house weekly video broadcast produced by teachers and students. The primary room in the L-shaped elementary media center is spacious and open enough to accommodate activities and special functions. We have intentionally kept much of the floor space open to create a flexible space which can be used for reading, meetings, or viewing a video or computer presentation.

A spacious teacher work center open to the middle school media center is without a doubt one of the best design features. The space is home to a copy machine, laminator, a large and popular staff recreational reading collection and tables for teachers to sit and visit. Visibility into the room from the circulation desk and immediate accessibility enhance teacher/media staff communication. Other media center design features we like are conference rooms with space for special collections. The high school conference room also doubles as a well-used yearbook archives room and the staff diversity collection. The new elementary conference room will serve as a collaborative work area for both staff and students.

Pieces of the past. It’s part economics, part aesthetics; either way retaining built-in oak cupboards bookshelves, and deep windowsills that were part of the original 1930’s era construction create interest and functionality in the remodeled elementary spaces. Teachers who have taught in the schools for several years (or even attended them as a child) especially appreciate the touch of old.

From “make-shift” to “wow,” whether palatial or basic, our new media centers are significant improvements, especially in an era of declining enrollments and difficult budgetary situations. We are confident the new media centers will meet the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s students.

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“Moving a Boatload “ (January/February 2007)

“A New School for a New Century” (September 2000)

“Got a New School or Media Center in your Future?” (May/June 2006)