

The Media Center: Got a New Media Center or Remodel in Your Future?

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Visit any larger bookstore or coffee shop; you will notice high school students cozily tucked into soft chairs and sipping coffee while doing homework. Think about the competition media specialists face as they plan new or remodeled media centers! We definitely considered this trend as a district committee began planning for remodeling our senior high's current media center.

Creating a media center that is "forward looking, inviting and welcoming" was at the top of our list. Other priorities:

- Creating a transparent information environment that supports both active and quiet learning
- Equitable access to information in all formats
- Program needs drive facility needs
- Multiple computer labs and access to numerous computers not in the lab
- Generous access to data and electricity
- Abundant storage
- Accessible before and after the school day
- Good supervision and a safe environment
- Visibility and central location
- Maintain the current beautiful view

We toured a dozen new or recently remodeled facilities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. We visited media centers that were palatial and others that were traditional and surprisingly small for the student population. We saw facilities that placed a high priority placed on technology and others that provided only a limited number of research stations. We were especially impressed with facilities that were welcoming and inviting while providing high-quality access to information in all formats and first-rate access to technology productivity tools.

This column highlights some design features that caught our attention. Possibility there will be some the options that might work for you if you are fortunate enough to have a media center design or remodel in your future.

Up or down?

Common wisdom suggests media centers should be on the first floor, one level, and centrally located. We saw a variety. First floors, especially those in senior high schools, are not always the logical location. Ground levels are often occupied by offices, gyms, locker rooms, or

community spaces. The school's main entrance is not always ground level. A central, first floor location may not be feasible in a remodeling situation. As our architect reminded us; "Remember the facility you loved is a new construction; ours is a remodel."

Second floor media centers we visited were usually located close to academic classrooms and computer labs. One multi-level media center had access from two levels. A mezzanine level lab in another was accessible from two levels and visible from below. One or two-step variations in floor levels added interest and created zones in another. Ramps connected different levels in another.

Visibility, sunshine, and ambiance

Noticeable design trends include high ceilings and visibility *into the media center* from outside the building, from the halls, or from other parts of the school. Glass walls were part of almost every media center we visited. A superintendent commented, "when visitors to our school walk by the media center and lab they should be able to see in and see kids learning." In several schools students could see into the media center from walkways on the other side of the facility. The visibility integrates the media center into the school. One media center had great views to the outside even though it was in the center of a school. Clerestory windows brought in additional light. Glass and a good view affect us psychologically. Visibility to the outside is a must

Cozy furniture and soft seating added to the ambiance in every facility we visited. We especially liked cozy chairs dispersed throughout the Media Centers where they provided more choices for individual or group work. Chairs with armrests for writing or holding a laptop in a seating area overlooking the school's commons captured our attention in one new technology-rich new senior high.

Attention to decor adds ambiance. Plants, quilts, student artwork, attractive displays, photos and posters and decorative items were plentiful in the most welcoming facilities. One media specialist removed sections of shelving from taller shelves, replacing it with photos and posters, contributing to the overall welcoming atmosphere. We noted lamps on tables, angled walls, the incorporation of older wooden shelving, and an antique oak checkout desk only slightly modernized to accommodate technology.

Check out desks is command center central and deserve careful planning. One favorite was a "Welcome desk" with soft seating a coffee table and inviting displays close by. Most were functional, practical, and designed to provide visibility for good supervision and workspace for several staff. One especially impressive design showed considerable attention to detail with many noteworthy features:

- Lazy Susan for ease in access to corner cupboards
- A breadboard style shelf to provide additional workspace
- Slide out shelving
- Shelving, cupboards built just the right size for professional periodicals
- Doors that folded all the way back, making it easier to get into cupboards
- Slight variations in height of the different counter levels
- Rounded corners to prevent injury

- Drawers with multiple divisions for storing all the small necessities of running a media center
- Large drawers for storing large flat objects (such as book covers, tag board)
- A teacher desk built into the command center which could be used by a teacher whose students were in the adjacent computer lab or by media staff

Never enough storage! Storage spaces behind or adjacent to the checkout desk are still the preferred location. The largest we saw was the size of a classroom, but separate from the media center because only limited storage was planned in the media center. Another favorite was almost the size of a classroom. Technology takes space, books take space, all the things media centers supply to meet teacher needs require space. Keep the need for good and efficient forefront during design meetings.

Do we need fixed computer labs in the age of wireless computing? The staff in the schools we visited say “yes.” Most media centers we visited supplemented fixed labs and computers with mobile wireless computers and labs. Consider wireless as you plan, even if it is not in the immediate future. What style lab is best? Some media specialists designed different styles of labs to provide options for teachers. Our favorite labs occupied open areas in or just off the media center and were easily supervised from the command center. We especially liked tiered labs and labs that contain spaces for computer work and desk work. We liked seeing non-media center labs adjacent to the media center; it’s a logical arrangement for efficiency and fostering collaboration. We also liked schools that placed spaces students have to go adjacent to or part of the media center. These included writing labs, tutor areas or career centers.

We were also impressed with locating spaces that teachers have to go to adjacent to media centers. These conveniences include teacher workrooms, copy machines, staff mail boxes, restrooms, or administrative offices.

Collaborative instructional spaces isolated from the traffic flow were part of most designs. Some successfully occupied corners of larger media centers; others were adjacent classrooms or multi-purpose rooms. Many rooms featured a flexible design making them suitable for large group meetings, faculty meetings, or staff development. Most were equipped with computers, wireless access, projectors, drop down project screens, and appropriate audiovisual equipment. Many had demountable walls and were large enough for faculty or community meetings. One especially large and well equipment instructional/multimedia room was located above the media center, but media staff handled all scheduling. Often classrooms functioned as multimedia production areas useful for working with computers or video production. These spaces are invaluable for getting people into the media center as well as meeting program needs. Plan for them! The more flexibility you build in to your design, the more option as you will have as curriculum and technologies change.

Special soft touches in a technology rich environment stand out as the most impressive design features we saw. One media center created a true coffee shop feel in an area featuring slate floors and windows looking onto a patio and berm. Seating was a mix of bistro style tables and chairs and soft furniture surrounded by plants and magazines. What students wouldn’t want to be the first there each day to enjoy the morning sun? At the other end of the media center a local

history room furnished with wingback chairs and a wooden bookcase. The room housed school yearbooks, photos, and community memorabilia.

Other features that helped create a welcoming, interesting environment

- An area or room for a staff leisure reading collection
- Carpet with inset designs to establish zones. One wide “stripe” created a center aisle that drew visitors into the center
- Corner cupboards and bookshelves
- Comfy chairs and coffee tables by the reference section
- Angled walls and railings or ledges to separate levels
- Separate lighting zones

More ideas for creating efficiency, flexibility, and convenience

- Electrical outlets or data above the wall-mounted bookshelves; at the ends of freestanding units, and directly inside and outside the main entrance. These ports are great for lamps, displays and information kiosks or OPACS.
- Tack strips above bookshelves, on walls
- An abundance of outlets for data and electricity in the storage room
- Shallow (12”) and deep (2’) shelving in the storage area
- Stand-up work OPAC workstations which invite kids to search
- Bookshelves on wheels for ease in rearranging and creating areas
- Projection screens that pull down from the ceiling throughout the media center and labs
- Cubbyholes for storing items such as battery chargers and digital cameras
- Pegboard for hanging cables
- Shades or blinds to prevent sun glare
- Motion sensor lights
- Cupboards in the labs

Some things we recommend avoiding

- Soft seating that is really hard seating!
- A book stack area with little or no seating. (Readers and researchers need to a place to sit and work when they pull book off shelf)
- No access to the OPAC or dedicated search stations outside of a lab.
- Offices that make the media specialist seem inaccessible
- Inflexible floor plans
- Allocating excessive floor space to ramps or stairs
- A limited number of computers. (Every student in classes using the media center should have access to information)
- Cords and cables hanging all over (be sure to plan for cable trays, conduit or holes for cables to run through)

A well designed and welcoming media center with a format-neutral environment will draw students and staff. It will support collaboration, support learning, and promote student achievement. Planning today’s media centers is not just spaces for books or computers, print or non-print. It’s about creating environment that is a cool place for kids to be and an inviting place to learn.

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