

The NEW Winona Middle School Media Center. . . On a scale of 1 to 10 it's a 9+ **Mary Alice Anderson**

Note: This article takes a different approach than most article about new media centers; the focus is on what's wrong, what we'd do differently. We hope it will be helpful to readers who may be planning a new media center or renovating an existing ones.

Winona's 1100 middle school students moved to a new school in September 2000. The media center is a dream come true! It's aesthetically pleasing, functional, and is the center of the school. The layout is functional and interesting; there is a lot of natural light a great view of the hills looking east even though there are no outside windows; the purple/teal and brown decor adds a touch of class that is contemporary and inviting but not trendy. The fiction collection just inside the front entrance attracts readers and has soft comfy chairs and benches. Two open labs and clusters of 30 other computers computers create a true transparent information environment is great; kids move between labs and book/table areas seamlessly. An alcove off to one side has computers with scanners, the career collection, and functions as a nice small group work area. The scanner nook adjacent to a small conference room. A very functional check out desk is the main work area and information center. The rear of the media center has another group of computers and rooms for video production and instruction. A teacher workroom with copy machines and other resources adjoins the media center.

I was fortunate to have considerable input in the planning; I attended multiple meetings with the architects and the core planning committee. I maintained a huge planning notebook and stayed on top of the design process about as well as I could. Visitors, parents, and students are impressed with the end result and so am I. On a scale of 1 to 10 I'd definitely give the WMS Media Center a 9 +. But the media center is no different than a less than perfect dream house; there are design flaws, stupid mistakes, and things I wish we'd done differently. I attribute some faults to the give and take that comes with planning a large school; everyone can't have everything they want. Other faults are from just not thinking through things quite as well as we could have. Why isn't the media center a 10? What would make it even better?

Space and spaces

- We requested 10,000 square feet. We ended up with 8000, loosing some square footage to the very spacious and well used house centers. (And you should see the staff restrooms, which are large enough to be a private exercise room!) The architects argued that kids would stay in their houses; use the house center computers, visiting the media center less. The opposite has happened. The pleasing atmosphere of the media center and curricular integration of media/technology means we are busier than ever. The house centers contain 6-8 computers, not enough for more than small group work. (We also have not been able to afford new computers for these centers, another area they are underutilized.)
- The media center accommodates four classes easily if two of those classes are in the labs. If two classes are working outside of the labs the 4300 square feet seating/book stack area is inadequate. We still must plan and schedule carefully to make the best use of space. When the media center is extremely busy, the traffic flow can become congested; we encourage classes to use the entrance closest to the area they are using.

- The labs of 625 square feet are very functional and easily supervised, but they could be *smaller*. Each lab has a generous amount of kitchen cabinet type of storage; it's very useful but we should have put some of that cabinet money towards open shelves for display.
- The media center as a whole needs more space dedicated to display and marketing our materials. It would be wonderful to market our materials the way a bookstore can. Wouldn't a kiosk be wonderful?
- The conference room can handle up to eight adults comfortably; a nice size most of the time. It's entered through a door by our "scanning alcove," but should also have a door from the hall. A folding wall between the conference room and scanner alcove would have created a more spacious feeling and flexibility than what we have. (but also more maintenance problems.) I requested a change, but the cost of a change order was too high.
- The instructional area was originally designed as a potential distance learning classroom. We are not using it in that capacity now, but the space is wonderful for instruction and presentation. What's wrong? It's slightly irregularly shaped making it difficult for everyone to see the video images on a TV or from a projector. The room also lacks storage.
- We are just now beginning to use the video production room, but more with iMovie work that standard "stand in front of a camera" video production. Unfortunately we did not carefully think through the need for this room. I anticipate this space becoming more dual purpose, perhaps another lab.
- I'm not fond of my office and am seldom in it for more than 5 minutes. I prefer to be where the action is and don't like to *appear* unavailable so a less than ideal office is acceptable. If I had to do it again I would have requested an office nook rather than a true office. But the office as it is does meet the occasional need for privacy

Electricity and Data.

- The 125 "hot" data drops are not enough. We've had to use a small hub in one lab because "they" apparently forgot to put wiring in a one portion of the wall.
- The floor outlets leave no flexibility in how we arrange the free standing computer workstations.
- Two other labs in the school and some classrooms surprisingly do not have enough electrical outlets; during the past year we've bought at least 60 power strips. The legs of the house center computer counters are in *front* of the electrical outlets, true ignorance.
- Suggestion: Each outlet and each drop costs money; ask for twice as much as you really need and then hope you have enough. And request that all drops are "hot."

Furnishings

- The circulation desk is spacious and accommodates four people. It's almost too big even though we had it trimmed in size from the original plan. The counter's depth and height from the counter to the top counter is too far. The architect told us to live with it for a while. We did. . . . My secretary developed arm and shoulder problems. Thanks to recommendations from a physical therapist, the desk was remodeled. Cheaper than additional health insurance claims.
- The book return rates the top prize for design stupidity. It's placed on the side of desk facing *away* from the front door. It's amazing a student didn't knock himself out as he stood up from putting a book in the slot hidden *under* the lip of the counter. Our district carpenter recently built an extension to make it possible to return a book without standing on your head.
- The book return did not have a box for with a depressable top for the books to drop into. We used a cardboard box until we were able to order one.

- There are four stand-up workstations dedicated solely to online catalog access on either side of the check out desk. They are too wide and hinder traffic flow. They but should be against the walls or spaced throughout the media center.
- The shelving installation folks said every architect they've worked with has underestimated the amount of shelving needed for today's media centers. We measured the linear feet of books we had and asked for room for growth, but we apparently didn't convince anyone that middle school kids still need and do read lots of books. Fortunately most of the books we buy now are "skinner" than those we throw out. The limited shelving is only a minor concern at this time.
- We requested tiered shelves for the leisure reading, uncatalogued paperback collection. Our intent was to put shelves against support pillars at the rear of the media center to create browsing areas. The shelves are too wide and extend beyond the pillars. A better solution would have been a space for these collections with the fiction at the front of the media center.
- The lighting in the book shelving area is surprisingly inadequate. Who would think to be concerned about enough light in an area planned for books? The light should have been measured.
- We requested white boards rather than projection screens since they can serve a dual purpose. There several throughout the media. But. . . one takes up too much wall space; I anticipate removing it an replacing the space with a counter for computers. The white boards in the lab are too high; apparently the people w ho installed them think we are all at least 8 feet tall.
- There are glass display cases in the front and back of the media center. The front cases are visible to the media center and commons. One would be adequate; the space could be better used for shelving or seating. The display cases at the rear are seldom noticed since they are on either side of an entrance usually used by people in a hurry. The space could be better used for seating.

Location next to the common

The school is very quiet, but since we are adjacent to the commons noise is often a problem during the lunch waves. Keeping the doors shut leads to door slamming, a situation we have remedied with tape across the latches since it seems difficult to adjust the doors. Supervising lunch-hours students who are just "on tour" is often challenging. But this problem is minimal compared to the benefits of a central, visible location and efficient access for students, staff and the community. I've often wondered if there could be a glass outer entrance or foyer placed in front of the front doors? By the way, I'm often asked about noise from our open labs. It is *never* a noise problem.

Storage and server space

Architects argued that since we were throwing out so much old stuff and distributing computers and TVs to all classrooms we wouldn't need much storage! We ended up with one room which functions as an office for a part-time secretary, storage for resources such as video tapes, magazines, odds and ends of AV equipment and supplies, computer peripherals, and other necessities. The one piece of furniture we did bring from our old school, an ancient card catalog, is used for storing batteries, bulbs and small cables. Works great.

Cabinets and shelves are more adequate than anticipated and we do a good job of not keeping things we really don't need. However, we wish we had:

- More small drawers for odds and ends of cables and small items
- Cubbyholes to keep small equipment better organized
- Locks that weren't the same as other cabinet locks throughout the *entire* school
- A workbench with tons of data and electrical ports
- A wall with pegboard for hanging cables of assorted types

The plan did not specify a separate area for the servers and the phone system. At the last minute a corner was walled off, but the wall is in the wrong place. The ceiling fan is on the other side of the wall! And, the already installed carpet had to be removed from that space. The space is too small to hold all of the servers so they ended up being placed down the hall. And—don't put a server or phone room under a restroom; our quick thinking network specialist saved the phone system from a potentially disastrous leak.

Would I go back to the old school with its media center that was formerly an auditorium? Never! The less than perfect aspects of our new media center are very minor.

What did we learn? It *is* possible to build a media center that is functional, efficient and beautiful. It *is* possible to get *almost* everything you ask for. Students enjoy our media center and are there until from the minute we open until well beyond the end of the school day. Visitors and community members are impressed.

If you are planning to build new or renovate, these suggestions are for you:

- Think about the environment you want to establish; and program needs before you think about space and details. Program planning precedes physical planning.
- Be prepared for the tough questions architects and the planning committee will ask.
- Learn about lighting, wiring, furniture, ergonomics, colors—and everything else you might not have thought you had to worry about.
- Remember that *technology does require space* and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.
- Listen carefully with your calculator handy when people discuss taking space from one area and giving it to another. Every inch of space costs money. At one planning meeting the architects calculated costs for adding just 1-2 inches to the width of a room.
- Be prepared to compromise; think about media/technology program needs; let the other people worry about their needs.
- Visit other schools and media centers including those that aren't new. I got my best ideas from a 25 year-old school.
- Keep notes of all planning meetings.
- Plan for the tiniest details. More than one media specialist has told me they don't not have enough data or electricity, hard to imagine that can happen in 2000, but it does.
- *Don't assume anything*
- Enjoy the process. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity!

"A New School for a New Century," published in *Multimedia Schools*, September 2000
"Fighting the Good Fight: Designing a Library media Center," published in *Book Report*
May/June 2001

Media Center Square Footage of major areas

Reading/seating areas 4300

Labs 625

Conference room 240

Resource and Storage room 575

Staff work area 370

Video room 355
ITV/instruction 520

More details

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| Location | Center of the school, adjacent to commons |
| Square footage | 8000 |
| Computers | 98 accessible to students 6 reserved for staff |
| Spaces & technology | 2 labs - 31 each Computers outside of labs: 34 Table seating (square) - 32 Soft seating -- 12 upholstered chairs, 7 upholstered benches Distance learning/instructional area Video production/control area Office Staff work area (copy machines, professional journals, and staff Recreational reading collection, laminator, tape duplicator etc) Resource room/storage/office/server farm/wiring/district phone center Circulation desk/storage -- work space for 4 |
| Shelving | 14000 volumes Mix of 6 and 3 high Metal shelving Light oak ends, purple laminate tops |
| Carpet | Brown tweed, flecs of aqua and purple purple "stripes" to designate areas |
| Soft seating | Brown, purple, aqua patterns |
| Student chairs | Purple fabric, racks for books, arms |
| Lab chairs | Brick colored, swivel chairs |
| Lab counter tops | Brown |
| Staff chairs | Reddish pattern |
| Walls | Sheet rock, painted beige or reddish brick |

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|---------------------------|---|
| Display cases | four; 2 face into commons on east end, 2 at West End |
| Wiring/data | T1 lines, 100 MB Ethernet, fiber between wiring closets and to Internet provider 125 data drops throughout media center 9 phones, 9 lines in media center Internet and cable access provided by local cable/internet company |
| Classroom Technology | |
| Computers/classroom/phone | 1 Data drops/classroom, 2, 1 phone, 1 cable drop / classroom |
| House centers | 6 computers each, potential for 15, 1 voice, 1 cable |
| House conference area | 1 data, 1 voice, 1 cable |
| House staff office | 8 data, 8 voice |
| Wall mounted TVs & VCRS | 5 /house, 2 in each hall, and most classrooms, offices, gyms, fitness center, music suite |