

Fighting the Good Fight! Designing a Library Media Center

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Finally! A new school and a new media center. With a solid program and a thorough knowledge of what didn't work in place, we were more than ready to begin planning 21st century facilities when voters agreed to fund a new school for 1000 students in grades 6-8.

I'm frequently asked, "Were you involved in planning?" YES! I was involved in overall program delivery planning, general building planning, media center planning, and school wide technology planning. Later, when we learned we had construction fund contingent money my principal and I planned how to spend an additional \$200,000 for more technology.

We were guided by the philosophy of having a media center that is a transparent learning environment, is the true information and physical center of the school, and has the potential to serve the community. Simultaneously, the media center would support both centralized and decentralized information environments. This would require:

- Central location, close to core classrooms and administration
- Computer labs that are distinctly part of media center, not separate or adjoining rooms
- Flexible, open spaces
- The ability to accommodate 5-6 simultaneous classes and other activities
- Computer access for every student
- Spaces for video production, distance learning and instruction
- Leisure reading areas
- Efficient storage including adequate space for data, voice, and video wiring and equipment
- A teacher work area that everyone has to use

Our 8000 square foot media center is almost 100% of what we planned and asked for. It includes two labs, a distance learning room/instructional classroom, a video production room, conference room, office, instructional resources storage area/ server farm, a research area, a teacher workroom/professional area, shelving for 15000 volumes, and computers scattered throughout. We can accommodate up to six classes. All classrooms also have computers and all house/classroom resource centers have mini-labs. What are the implications and programmatic impacts?

Location, location, location

State guidelines and a desire for community access helped provide the support needed to ensure that we would indeed have a central location. We are in the center of the school, facing the cafeteria and with houses and classrooms on either side; multiple stairways provide convenient access for second floor classrooms. The front half has a two-story ceiling; the front wall and skylights provide adequate natural light and a scenic view. Four 2nd floor classrooms overlook the media center.

Grand central station? Yes, and we love it! We have more interaction with staff that stop by for both instructional and productivity needs and more drop-in patrons. The accessible location offers a pleasant environment for activities such as family reading night or community meetings. Parents coming to school to pick up their children late in the day have a pleasant atmosphere to relax while waiting. One negative is noon hour noise, a problem that has lessened with increasingly strict guidelines.

Media center labs are integral to the school's curriculum and the media program. Our labs are wings off the front of the media center; there is no wall. The design encourages a transparent information environment; classes are able to move back and forth between the labs, reference collection, or the multimedia production nook. It's easy for media center staff to assist students and teachers formally and informally or provide on the spot troubleshooting. The openness makes supervision easy and allows students to use the labs on their own. Noise is not a problem; students working on computers are productive and involved.

Networks and computer access

We requested that all students working in media centers have access to networked resources. We didn't get as many data drops as we wanted, but 100 students (including those in the lab) can access the network simultaneously. The increasing affordability and ease of wireless networking means more in the future.

Storage?? Architects argued that wall mounted televisions and distributed equipment would eliminate many storage needs. The storage area/resource room is large enough for circulating equipment, videos, magazines and supplies. It doesn't provide space for large equipment that for now occupies whatever space is available. Butmuch of this is older equipment that will be phased out within the near future. The resource room also holds the school's phone and video distribution systems, all of which require more space than planned. The area doubles as the office for a part time secretary who can assist people needing resources.

The teacher work area has become the place to congregate; it provides an opportunity to touch base with people we might not otherwise see. Copy machines, the laminator and a tape duplicator are the draw, but occasionally we see staff glimpsing at the professional materials or staff recreational reading materials. Sometimes we can do some spontaneous planning with teachers while they are cranking out copies.

Flexible spaces

Data and electrical locations dictate where tables, computer workstations and bookshelves are placed. But, there is some flexibility. Square tables can easily be rearranged. Five upholstered

benches and twelve upholstered chairs offer options for creating seating arrangements for instruction or informal staff development.

What's not happening?

We wondered if teachers claimed the old media center was too inconveniently located to use would use the new media center. We are not surprised to find out the convenient central location makes no difference. Using a media center is not as much a matter of location as it is pedagogical philosophy. An added deterrent is the considerable amount of change that came along with the new building. Everyone is swamped; many people tend to hold up in their comfortable classroom house areas.

Architects suggested that the availability of classroom and house center technology would lessen the demand on media center computers; that is not the case. House center technology is not used as much as we anticipated; it appears that staff and students prefer to work in the media center, perhaps so they can receive assistance or interact with others. I expect this will change when comfort level with new technologies improves.

With the school year almost half over, we've made limited use of the video production and distance learning rooms or the school wide capabilities for broadcasting video. But, we're working on it! Change always takes time, anything new implemented at the same time as a move to a new school takes even longer. I hope these "what's not happening" items will be "happening" by the time you read this article. We planned some of our spaces for the future; I'm glad they're there. It's nice to have goals!

What's best?

Aesthetics and the color purple. The media center is beautiful and architecturally pleasing; colors are appealing but not trendy. Walls, cupboards, tables, and most of the carpet are a standard brown and beige. Red brick in the walls, purple paths in the carpet, purple book shelf tops, and purple student chairs add a touch of class. Upholstered furniture is colorful, but practical. Large hemisphere light fixtures provide added interest. The room is both cozy and open.

- Accessibility and visibility. Everyone can find us! Visitors can readily see that the media center is always busy and well used.
- A large central check out desk. that accommodates three-four workers and storage space for our most needed items. The architects had originally placed it dead center; at my request it was moved closer to the labs at the front of the media center. The location is ideal for supervision and providing assistance.
- The leisure reading areas! Kids love them. It's wonderful to see kids reading in comfortable surroundings.
- The glass. We do not feel like we are in an interior space.
- The oohs and aahs.

What would I do differently?

Eliminate separate video production and distance learning areas. I argued for combining the spaces and using the separate distance learning area for additional seating. I didn't win that argument.

A dedicated conference room. I asked for a nook that could be separated from the media center by a folding screen, if necessary. Again I didn't win. The conference room is used, but probably not enough to justify the space.

Not build a media specialist's office. My office has a glass wall, the door is always open, but I feel inaccessible. I am seldom in it for even as long as five minutes and prefer working at a table in the midst of everyone.

Make sure the plumbing isn't above the equipment storage, wiring closets and copy machines! We've had two leaks!

Eliminate the two of the four display cases; we do have not time to make displays; people don't look at them, and they take up too much square footage.

What's missing? Not much. We don't have the spaciousness I envisioned, but we have enough space and do not feel crowded. I'd love the luxury of space for book-store type displays, lots of space between tables, and a foyer to help eliminate lunchroom noise. But, space is expensive and building a new school is a lot of give and take. Yes, it is possible to be satisfied with what you get.

Advice? If a new or remodeled facility is in your future begin planning now. Define your present needs and what you want to see happen in a new facility. Develop the program that justifies the facility you desire; don't expect to get a facility beyond the needs of the program. Do your homework and provide data; architects and others involved in the planning respect and appreciate it. And . . . hang in there. Planning and everything associated with the move does not come easy, but it is definitely worth it.