

The Media Center: A New School for a New Century

Mary Alice Anderson, Media Specialist
Winona Middle School
Winona, Minnesota

Column originally published in *Multimedia Schools*, September 2000,
Published by Information Today

A new school year; a new century, a new school, and a new media center! It's been fifteen years since plans for a new school factored in my job acceptance, fourteen years since the first of three failed building referendums, and almost three years since the successful October 1997 bond referendum

Phase 1, Program planning. Teachers, administrators, architects, a board member, and community members made up the program committee. Our task was to examine the current educational delivery system and make recommendations for future curriculum and teaching team composition. How many special education teachers will be part of each team? Will classrooms for areas such as world language, music and art be physically part of the house or will they retain their separate areas? How many houses will we have? What impact will the district's declining enrollment have on our decisions? Discussions were serious and decisions were tough as they would affect the physical layout of the school, curriculum delivery, and staffing. The final decision was houses (teaching teams) with classrooms for science, language arts, communications, social studies, math, and science, two special education areas, a house conference room, and resource/technology area. Other areas will retain their own physical spaces but teachers will be part of the house teaching teams.

Phase 2, facilities concept planning, was also demanding, and even a small step backwards for those of us who had been planning in our heads for years. Instead of looking at possible blueprints we looked at very rough bubble designs showing the physical proximity each area of the school would have to other areas and possible layouts within a house. Most of our staff have taught in our 80-year-old building throughout their teaching careers. At times it was difficult to imagine anything other than teaching in a 19th century style building.

Location, location, location. Concept planning was the time to discuss the media center's location. Highest priorities were central location, convenient community access, close proximity to houses, and close to administration. It needed to meet both current and future program needs and be convenient for all staff members.

Our group toured several secondary schools designed around the house concept. What stood out more than what to do was what *not* to do. I was surprised, shocked, and even saddened to see a media center in a new suburban school that resembled a 1950's era school library. The media center in an otherwise beautiful school was located at the end of the hall, far from core academic areas. Other media centers were student centered, but had nothing to draw staff. The school with

the most state of the art technology and largest media center was too palatial for our \$23,000,000 construction budget. I saw nice facilities, but nothing particularly exciting or visionary. My principal, our network specialist and I made separate visits to other schools just to see media centers. Surprisingly, media centers that best represented my vision were remodeled facilities in 30-year old-buildings. Neither was a "wow" facility, but they were designed with kids and strong, active media/technology programs in mind.

I attended conference sessions, posted requests for information on Internet discussion groups, and searched the Web for ideas. I didn't find the futuristic resources I wanted, but I did find solid resources, among them Doug Johnson's "Some Design Considerations When Building or Remodeling a Media Center," ERIC ED425609, January 1, 1998, < <http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/buildingquestions.html> > and Tweed Ross' *Planning Educational Facilities for Information Technology* (The MASTER Teacher, Inc, 1997.) I knew I would be able to utilize technology projections, current thinking about technology and media programs and experience.

Phase 3, getting down to detail. After months of discussing and touring we were finally able to look at rough blueprints. More teachers and community representatives joined the planning team. We met twice monthly to discuss design options. Throughout our meetings I kept all my data, notes, meeting, minutes, ideas, and research in an increasingly thick red three-ring binder, a resource that proved invaluable on more than one occasion.

There were also numerous opportunities for media/technology staff including support staff to meet privately with architects and the interior designers. The challenge was thinking beyond current needs to the future and technology unknowns. Architects asked "does technology take space?" "Yes," I argued.; technology fosters active, collaborative learning which requires more space than traditional teaching and learning. Every student who comes to the media center should be able to work at a computer for information access or productivity.

Architects also challenged us to think about the need for a large media center and labs when each house resource center will have computers. Again, I argued for space. Technology brings information but to the classroom, but our experience has been that increased access means more demand for the media center, labs, and non-technology resources. We need both labs and classroom technology.

Professional resources and ready access to human and online resources were invaluable when I needed support. Especially useful documents were the original Colorado study about the impact of school media programs on student achievement (Lance, Keith Curry, Lynda Wellborn, and Christien Hamilton-Pennell, *The Impact of School Library Media Centers on Academic Achievement*. Castle Rock, Colo.: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 1993), facilities planning materials from the Minnesota Department of Children Families and Learning, and data about media center size from schools of comparable enrollment. Our own detailed inventories and statistics were very useful and

Phase 5. Persistence, planning, and participation paid off. The media center really in the center of the Y-shaped school! It is visible, readily accessible and close to administration. There are no outside walls or windows, but ample glass provides indirect lighting and an open feeling to the halls and 2nd floor classrooms. At 8,000 square feet it is larger than our current facility,

but smaller than what I originally wanted. The space is efficient and will easily accommodate five-six classes.

There are two computer labs, one on either side and close to the front entrance of the media center. Labs were designed without an interior wall, providing a transparent information environment and ease in supervision. An additional 30 computers will be placed on tables throughout the remainder of the media center. A nook will be the multimedia production area. Additional seating for 50 students is a mix of tables for four and soft seating. Future computer access in these areas will be wireless. Other spaces include a conference room, office, a distance-learning classroom, which will double as an information literacy instructional area, and a video production area. All interior rooms have windows into the central area to provide an open feeling and good supervision. We can even see the surrounding Mississippi River Valley even when in an interior room.

A storage room with an abundance of cupboards and drawers also contains the main wiring closet and the district phone switch. A large circulation area has space for several workers and storage for often-requested supplies. The teacher/staff workroom is a short step from administration and can be entered from the hall or the media center. This "must have" space has the copy machine and other materials all teachers need to use. The room will also house the professional materials and staff recreational reading collection. Four houses surround the media center on first floor, four others are on second floor. Gyms, the pool, auditorium and specialty areas are close by.

The school has two specialty labs; a 15-station industrial technology modular lab moved lock-stock and barrel from its current location, and a new 30-station music technology midi-lab. House resource centers will have several computers. Each attendance area has a computer for instruction and online attendance and grades. Staff also has computers in team planning areas.

Phase 6, final infrastructure and technology planning was completed this past spring. The district network specialist, my principal and I worked with engineer and architects to plan the voice, video and data system. We carefully examined blueprints, updated all the inventories, and visited the construction site several times. The school is wired with 100 base-T Ethernet with fiber running between the main wiring closet in the media center and four others. My principal, the head of maintenance, and I toured every space in our current facility to physically update the inventory of televisions and other audio visual materials to determine what could be used, and what televisions were suitable for wall mounting. Anticipating potential money for new computers and video technology from the construction contingency fund, we proposed budgets for future purchases and planned for the reallocation of current resources. Fortunately, many construction costs were below the original estimate, making it possible to acquire \$200,000 for classroom and media center video and computer technology technology.

Planning was a mix of hard work, fun, frustration, and satisfaction. Architects listened to suggestions and appreciated preparedness, detailed information about existing resources, and quick access to data. As with any planning process striving to meet the diverse needs and desires, there was give and take, but the result is very satisfactory.

One of my favorite cartoons shows students looking excitedly at a computer screen. One student is excited about seeing a school without a leaking roof or peeling paint.* Finally -- that school on the screen is a reality for 1000 middle school students in Winona and I can put that big red planning notebook away.

Sidebar

Planning a new media center or remodeling? My top suggestions:

- Be involved throughout the entire process.
- Focus on media/technology program needs; let the other people worry about "their area."
- Be prepared. Gather data, ideas, supporting documents in advance and keep them ready.
- Be prepared to consider all ideas.
- Visit schools that have strong media/technology programs and strong leadership.
- Take pictures when you visit other school; keep notes on likes and dislikes.
- Take notes during all meetings and keep the organized.
- Listen to other ideas; be prepared to compromise. Everyone can't get 100% of what they want in a project of this scope.
- Talk to people who can help you including non-educators who can offer a different perspective.
- Enjoy the process; it's a rare opportunity.

*Jim Margulies, *The Record*, New Jersey, 1996.