

# THE FUTURE IS NOW

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## ABSTRACT

Maybe the labels "school of the future" or "21st-century school" spark your imagination with fanciful science fiction scenarios: students arriving on jet packs instead of bicycles, or teleporting to a distant campus for their next class. Yet, as advocates of new approaches to learning have been saying for many years, the layouts of most learning environments being used in 2015 remain stuck in the past: boxy spaces with a teacher at the front delivering information to a passive audience of students sitting in orderly rows of desks.

## FULL TEXT

Maybe the labels "school of the future" or "21st-century school" spark your imagination with fanciful science fiction scenarios: students arriving on jet packs instead of bicycles, or teleporting to a distant campus for their next class. Or maybe these characterizations are just cynical marketing gambits to attach a forward-looking brand identity onto an otherwise mundane place of learning.

The reality is that, to students, any school they attend is the school of their future - for better or worse. The classrooms and learning spaces that students find themselves in as they work their way through the education system play a critical role in determining how well prepared they are for achieving career success and rewarding lives.

For educators, administrators and designers, a key part of their mission is to provide learning environments that are geared to deliver the promise of a better future for students and the community at large.

That's easier said than done in a nation where thousands of classrooms were designed and built for earlier generations of students with different needs and career paths, and where tradition, limited resources and aversion to risk make efforts to update those facilities an uphill slog.

"Learning spaces need to be collaborative and flexible so schools can react to changing curriculum," says Bob Vajgrt, learning environments studio director and principal at Eppstein Uhen Architects in Milwaukee.

### OLD WAYS

The idea is not hard to grasp: Students of today, and the knowledge and skills they need, have changed significantly compared with earlier generations. It stands to reason that the ways students are educated, and the places they receive that education, should be modernized to facilitate the requirements of 21st-century learning. Yet, as advocates of new approaches to learning have been saying for many years, the layouts of most learning environments being used in 2015 remain stuck in the past: boxy spaces with a teacher at the front delivering information to a passive audience of students sitting in orderly rows of desks.

"There's been a lot of talk about new ways of learning," says David Epstein, managing principal at TruexCullins in Burlington, Vt. "But many schools have been reluctant to take the leap."

The typical rigid layout of classrooms may have worked in the society of 50 or 100 years ago, when most people used their education to work in an industrial or agricultural setting. But those kinds of employees are no longer in great demand. So why is it so easy to find a classroom welcoming children in 2015 that would not have looked out of place in 1965 or 1915?

Change is slow, especially in education. Charting a new course for a massive infrastructure that accommodates

about 55 million K-12 students and another 21 million higher-education students is a lengthy and often frustrating process.

And even in places where change is welcomed or desired, the costs associated with such facility overhauls can snuff out envisioned improvements. Many education budgets have taken major hits since the economy tanked in 2008, and consequently, administrators and designers have seen their more ambitious plans reined in.

But another factor that keeps school facilities embedded in the past is an unwillingness to take risks and allegiance to "this is how we've always done it."

"There is reluctance to try the next new thing," Epstein says. "Schools really want traditional classrooms. Most teachers are wedded to their classrooms."

In one district, Vajgrt says, district administrators have been hesitant to try new designs and approaches at one school because of the perception that it would be unfair to other district schools.

"They said we prefer to create what we already have - it was an issue of equity," Vajgrt says. "But at some point you have to decide that a school design is obsolete, and you have to go in an opposite direction."

#### NEW APPROACHES

What common qualities define so-called schools of the future? Here's a primary list:

**Student-centered.** Instead of an environment focused on a teacher, spaces are designed to enable students to have more control of the content and pace of their learning by working independently or in groups.

**Project-based.** This approach emphasizes learning through hands-on problem solving rather than passively receiving information from a teacher.

**Collaborative.** Spaces are designed to encourage students to interact with and learn from one another.

**Flexible.** Depending on the subject matter and the personalities and learning styles of the students involved, the types of spaces most effective for learning may change over time - or even from hour to hour. So schools should strive for spaces that can be altered easily to adapt to new circumstances.

**Flexibility is critical in the school building as a whole, in specific spaces, and in the furnishings.**

"The furniture has to support what you're trying to do," Vajgrt says. "Otherwise, it's like a toolbox with only half the tools. It's not going to work well."

At Lake Mills Elementary School in Lake Mills, Wis., Epstein Uhen chose furnishings for their flexibility - tables and chairs on casters, sectional tables, and mobile cabinets and bookcases to facilitate easy reconfiguration; workstations of different heights, storage capacity and mobility so teachers could personalize their space; and adjustable furniture that enables students to find comfortable positions and learn without undue strain or fatigue. The best 21st-century learning solutions, Vajgrt says, combine building design with selection of furniture, fixtures and equipment.

"We try to package them together," he says. "But if you can't choose the furniture, you should at least make sure that the school administrators are aware of the design and which furniture would work best."

#### DON'T CALL THEM CLASSROOMS

To emphasize that schools should be looking at different approaches to their facilities, Vajgrt is careful to identify areas as learning spaces instead of classrooms. The classroom has an ingrained identity as a container where students are taught, but in a 21st-century school, the design provides a variety of spaces so students may acquire and absorb knowledge anywhere on campus.

Educators who embrace that mind shift may begin to see their facilities in a new light: Corridors no longer are just passageways; they also have nooks or cubbies where comfortable furniture may be placed, encouraging informal interaction between students or providing space for connecting to the Internet. Traditional classrooms can be divided into sections to accommodate small-group learning, one-on-one instruction, or technology-driven distance learning. Classrooms also may be altered with movable walls and dividers so classes can be combined and teams of teachers can work together to integrate and reinforce related subject matter.

#### GAINING ACCEPTANCE

Several years ago, Vajgrt says, he and his colleagues would give presentations to school officials about 21st-

century learning spaces.

"Clients would ask us to show them one of those schools," he says. "There wasn't one. We could show them only in bits and pieces. But there has been a shift. Administrators are much more open to collaborative spaces and open-learning spaces."

In some cases, that means administrators have to drag skeptical staff members along for the ride. Vajgrt recalls one such school that created non-traditional learning spaces.

"The teachers were saying, "Where is the front of the room? Where are the rows of desks and chairs?" Vajgrt says. "But a few weeks later, I went back to the school and talked to the staff about the breakout space. They loved it. They loved being able to move things around."

In Vermont, where TruexCullins works with many schools, Epstein also has encountered district leaders who are less eager to embrace sweeping changes in designs of learning spaces.

"The moves tend to be more modest," Epstein says. "We are more successful getting them to take smaller steps, like connecting existing classrooms. It's hard to create a first-grade team if the teachers have to open their doors and go out into the corridor to see each other."

Other smaller-scale changes that have been welcomed include clustering classrooms together and creating meeting spaces between them, adding sinks and storage to classrooms so students can carry out projects more effectively, and providing a variety of spaces in libraries.

"Schools have been more willing to experiment with libraries and configure them in different ways," he says.

#### FUTURE SHOCK

Proponents of these modern school designs acknowledge they have to overcome the distrust some administrators and teachers may have over rushing in headlong to embrace the latest trend to remake education. Many recall the push in the 1970s to remove classroom walls and open up education spaces, only to eventually put the walls back and declare that experiment a failure.

"Some view the term '21st-century learning' suspiciously and might not have that initial zest for it that we do," Vajgrt says. "We try to be a little less in-your-face and talk about flexible space and collaborative spaces. That way it doesn't feel as if it's a ledge and you have to take a leap."

The most important element is winning people over to these new approaches is to have someone in the school system championing the changes.

"As long as an administrator or principal is on board, there is a good likelihood of things getting done," Vajgrt says.

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