



A Vision of the Next-Generation Library/Media Center

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The role of the library has changed over the past decade—its vision and structure should change as well.

When you think about a library, what do you envision? A large room with shelves upon shelves of books, a few round tables with chairs, and a librarian tasked with keeping it quiet?

The role of a school library has changed substantially over the past decade for several reasons, including changing instructional paradigms, an emphasis on collaborative learning and makerspaces, increased community use of school facilities, and the proliferation of e-books and other technology.

The Darlington Community School District in Darlington, Wisconsin, is an example of a district with a new vision for its library. While working with a school facilities design and construction company on a master plan to improve the Darlington High School/Middle School/Elementary School campus, district leaders, school staff members, and community members identified the library/media/technology center as

one of the critical components within the master plan.

After analyzing district data, interviewing staff members and faculty, and reaching out to the community, the construction company designed a remodeled and repositioned library/media center that could provide flexible and collaborative space for students in a 21st-century learning environment.

Minimum Expense, Major Impact

Fortunately, in Darlington's case, it was possible to control costs and produce a project that would have a major impact on students and the district. When completed, the renewed library became both a community hub and a marketing point for the district.

What started as a dark, uninspiring, old-school institutional room was transformed into a bright, lively, multifocal, multipurpose space that promotes student, staff, and community engagement.

Districts with a vision for transforming



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Students in Wisconsin's Darlington Community School District enjoy the new library/media center's flexible furniture and work stations.



Creating an enhanced 21st-century library/media center with flexible workspaces and bright colors was one of the primary ways the Darlington Community School District determined it could improve the learning environment.

their library/media center should consider these 12 action items:

1. Listen. What do teachers, students, and community want and need? What do they need now and in the future? Working together to identify and address those needs generates interest and can secure the support of others who see how the library/media center benefits them.

Redefining and redesigning the space using the insights gained from surveys and interviews should be an exciting opportunity; however, being flexible will ease the necessary adjustment as technology, culture, and the job market change.



2. Create an alluring space. Colors, seating options, lighting fixtures, flooring and ceiling treatments, technology, and writable surfaces set the tone for space that is inviting.

Observe the locations toward which people naturally gravitate, both on the campuses and in other settings. How do students sit, engage, and collaborate naturally? Ask them what it is about that space

that makes them want to be there. Use these observations to shape the design.

3. Promote flexibility. Being capable of accommodating various functions and group sizes can make the library/media center a preferred destination for many. Wedge-shaped tables are a good choice; they can be separated for individual work or

grouped into numerous configurations for teams of various sizes. Wheels on chairs, bookshelves, video monitors, and whiteboards can help adapt the space to the specific needs of users.

4. Generate collaboration. The days of the school library being the quiet zone for reading and studying are gone, but the need remains for spaces that allow concentration and reduce distractions.

Provide separate rooms and zones for small groups. Be sure the space allows for members of a group to interact with one another and to document their discoveries, either digitally or on whiteboards.

5. Encourage relaxation. Providing comfortable space for downtime is also a useful role for the library/media center. Beanbags and other soft seating are inviting for users of all ages. Booths can be used for personal study, small-group collaboration, or a space to visit. Students appreciate a library that supports both rigor *and* rejuvenation.

6. Become a marketer. Consider the variety of audiences using the library/media center and whether the space “sells” learning and development to them. Is it attractive, convenient, and exciting? Change things up based on the audience, even if that means altering the space throughout the day. For example, if a language arts class is coming to engage with an author on Skype, accommodate that group’s purpose with appropriate monitor displays and books.

7. Power up the technology. Make it easy for users to stay powered up. Plenty of receptacles and USB charging stations are a much-appreciated feature. Make sure the network Wi-Fi is robust and has high bandwidth.

8. Be community friendly. All communities can benefit from a publicly responsive school library/

media center; however, it is especially important for rural and low-income urban areas. Through access to computers, low-fee or no-fee meeting space, and GED or technology courses, the school library/media center can be a beacon of hope for the neighborhood.

If the building configuration allows, find a way to provide a separate, secure entrance for after-hours use so the entire school need not be open.

9. Fuel creativity. Library spaces can be adapted to support media labs, video and music production

studios, application-focused computer labs for website design or photo manipulation, videoconferencing, and more.

If the school needs makerspace (a collaborative work space used for creating, learning, exploring, and sharing), the library/media center of your future might be the perfect environment for supporting STEM programs.

10. Provide options for space. Seating arrangements and furniture should accommodate different needs and preferences. If a lot of space is available, stadium seating can be an attractive option for additional classroom space and a venue for special occasions. Additionally, it can provide a unique venue for continuing education programs for teachers. Variety is the name of the game when it comes to the use of space.

11. Use natural lighting. Whenever possible, include natural

lighting in the design of the new or remodeled library/media center. Windows that control both glare and thermal discomfort can offer significant value for everyone’s mental and physical well-being.

12. Shift the mindset . . . and then share it. Introduce the transformed library/media center to the school community with an orientation at the beginning of the year for those new to the campus (i.e., freshmen and new students). If the district is opening the library/media center to the community, offer open houses and engage groups such as

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the Parent-Teacher Organization, booster clubs, continuing education providers, Rotarians, Kiwanians, and other civic organizations that will spread the word.

Library Transformations

Libraries of old were about transactions; libraries of today are about transformation. Schools don’t necessarily need to reinvent their library/media center space; but changing out finish materials, providing a fresh coat of paint, gaining new whimsical furnishings, carving out a few collaboration zones, and forming a new attitude can go a long way toward having a more effective impact on students and communities!

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