

Aligning Vision Mission & Values with School Design

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A Guide for School Boards, Leaders, and Community Design Teams

By Dr. Robert Dillon

Whether you are building a new school, adding onto an existing building, or remodeling and making the most of a current building, it is essential that you create explicit links between who you are and where you learn. The most effective schools craft visions, missions, and values that are alive — in that they feed the decision-making around all aspects of the school, including the physical design. Without this alignment, schools can actually create barriers to excellence. An apparent mismatch between what they say and the spaces they create can generate confusion about their true commitment to their vision and mission, discouraging buy-in from their communities.

This doesn't have to be the case, though. When thoughtfully designed, the physical spaces within a school can significantly enhance the educational experience, support the well-being of students, and foster a sense of belonging and connection. They can also be figurative ambassadors that speak loudly about the excellence of the work happening inside. Through this article, we hope to outline a process for ensuring

that future school designs align with the district's core principles while avoiding the most common potholes.

Set the stage for success

ARTICULATE YOUR MISSION

The first step in any design project should be to articulate the district's vision, mission, and values clearly. So many schools and districts think that their mission statements are clear, but in reality, many audiences don't have a sense of their real meaning and message. They are missing context, making it impossible to align design decisions to these statements of core principles without a shared understanding of what they truly mean. In clarifying, make sure that the long-term goals of the educational experience you want to provide (as well as the instructional strategies to unlock that experience) are clear. Remember that it takes ongoing engagement with all stakeholders — teachers, students, parents, and community members — to ensure a shared and continuous understanding of these priorities and the language that surrounds them.



EVALUATE THE CURRENT SPACES

Double checking the current reality before proceeding into new design is important, as leaving some aspects of the building or buildings much farther behind others can detract from your mission. To avoid this, conduct a needs assessment to evaluate the current state of facilities and identify areas that currently fall short. This assessment should consider factors such as:

- Whether the current spaces support modern teaching methods and learning modalities
- How well the current spaces promote physical, emotional, and social well-being
- If the current spaces foster a sense of community and belonging

ENLIST THE HELP OF A DIVERSE TEAM

The schools and districts that have done this work in the most effective ways form a collaborative design team that includes a diverse group of stakeholders, such as educators, architects, designers, students, and community members. This helps to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered and that the new or updated design reflects the needs and aspirations of the entire school community. This allows a small group to keep the focus on intentional, linked design during every step of the process.

Beware of common pitfalls

ONE SPACE, TOO MANY FUNCTIONS

One of the most common pitfalls in educational space design is trying to serve too many purposes. Multipurpose spaces often fall short of excelling at any single purpose, therefore failing to connect effectively with the institution's mission. As a result, the design does not support the intended activities or learning outcomes well. It is crucial to focus on defining and creating purpose-built spaces that are aligned with specific educational goals.

NOT ENOUGH FLEXIBILITY

On the other hand, designs that are overly rigid can quickly become outdated and fail to support evolving educational practices. It's essential to incorporate flexibility into the design. This can be achieved through the use of movable furniture, adaptable spaces, and technology that can be easily

updated. Such flexible design elements empower teachers and students to modify their environments according to their needs, which not only enhances the learning experience, but also ensures that the space aligns with both the micro and macro missions of the school. Allowing for continuous evolution keeps the learning environment relevant and effective.

MAJOR CHANGES MADE TOO QUICKLY

Too many schools design grand changes without a plan in place to get feedback along the way, but moving from theoretical change to actual change often creates new feelings and ideas that can be crucial to alignment and success. Pilot projects allow for this testing and refinement, including regular check-ins about mission alignment. This ensures you don't move too far into a redesign without updated input and allows you to adjust and improve before scaling up.

Prioritize what matters most to your mission

Classrooms and makerspaces can be designed to support a variety of learning modalities, allowing for more dynamic and engaging learning experiences. Common areas and flexible spaces encourage interaction and collaboration among students, teachers, and community members, reflecting the value placed on community and collaboration and fostering a strong sense of belonging.

Elements such as natural light, good ventilation, comfortable furniture, and quiet zones promote physical and mental well-being, helping students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn. And design choices that celebrate student achievements and provide inspirational stimuli can significantly enhance the learning atmosphere; when students see their work displayed and feel that their environment reflects their identity and aspirations, it boosts motivation and engagement.

Aligning school design with the district's vision, mission, and values requires thoughtful planning, stakeholder involvement, and a commitment to flexibility and adaptability. By following a structured process and avoiding common pitfalls, school boards, leaders, and design teams can create environments that truly support educational excellence and community well-being. When a school's mission and values are effectively integrated into its design, the impact can be profound. 🌞