If You Had a Blank Canvas to Design Your Ideal School, What Would You Paint?

By Kieren Corcoran

Schools are challenged to fill many important roles today. They must balance students’ physical and emotional wellness while inspiring them to reach their goals. All within strict budgets and timelines.

Do school administrators, teachers and facilities managers ever get the chance to ask themselves: What will the schools of the future look and feel like? If I could design them without any limits?

Four Key Elements of School Design

What goes into a transformative educational design? We asked a group of decision makers for their thoughts, including designers, an architect, a safety expert and a facilities manager.

Their vision incorporates these four elements:

- Community
- Environment
- Innovation
- Wellness

Community

School design must involve both the internal (students, faculty, parents) and external (district, municipality, taxpayer) communities. The school is part of its community, and also serves as its students’ own mini-community. It is another home, a welcoming place where they forge peer networks and nurture their dreams. Students should feel connected to the school, the moment they walk through the doors—it is their community.

Congressional School’s administration redesigned its 60-year-old building to embrace community, wall emblazoned with words from their mission statement, new carpet customized with school colors to inspire collaborative learning. “I see students spilling out the classrooms into the hallways, sitting down on the floor and working together,” says Chris Hyatt, Assistant Head for Advancement.

Innovation

Technology to rapidly changing, and schools must keep up. This requires investment, upgrades, careful planning and flexible educational spaces—excluding wayfinding elements and creative use of color to guide learning without the need for physical dividers. Innovative school spaces are teaching tools.

Mathical Schools created new designs that encompass STEM initiatives, including its Fab Lab, where high school students design and fabricate innovative products. They revitalized new flooring with wayfinding colors and letters that first graders recognize and use to expand their vocabularies. Says Becky Speight, Director of Special Education and Pupil Services.

Wellness

Students need a safe, healthy and welcoming school. Their surroundings must be comfortable, inviting and clean, but also truly protective of their well-being every single day. Lighting, painting or updated colorways, open classrooms and soft, inviting seating can make students feel safe, welcome, protected and inspired. Wellness in our built environment supports students’ physical, emotional and mental health.

Santo’s Manual Student Union is the heart of California State University, the place where students hang out, collaborate, study and dream.

According to Facilities Director Anthony Roberson, the student union’s new carpet tile and resilient, which includes the university’s signature blue, not only makes its students feel at home, but proud.

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