Trends in School Library Media Facilities, Furnishings, and Collections

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For many years school library facilities have been the stepchild of the family. As they were hurriedly built in the 1960s and 1970s, very little interaction took place with the architects and administration concerning philosophical and behavior outcomes that were to be expected in the media center. Planning was seldom done with the anticipation of change or expansion. These attitudes are changing today. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the school libraries we shape in turn shape us. What happens today and tomorrow will have lasting effects on the way school library services are perceived by the total school community, just as the developments of the last twenty-five years shaped the school media centers of today.

In 1983, a survey by Tony Schulzetenberg noted that: (1) school library construction decreased during the preceding decade, (2) remodeled school libraries were more common than new, and (3) most new construction occurred in areas of high growth and economic stability. We can expect these broad trends to continue, at least for the near future.

Any time a school library media facility is examined, questions must be asked regarding what the future warrants in a given building or a given situation. There are three essential options that can be considered for remodeling or expanding a media center. First, a school can refurnish the existing library. If only minor changes are needed and the media center has been successful then minimal change may be needed. If it meets the present and projected usage then only minor refurbishing

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should be requested. The second option is contingent upon an acknowledged that the existing space is dysfunctional or inadequate. Renovation, which can include expansion, is the most common avenue taken today. The most prevalent mistake in this type of decision is to just add another classroom to the existing center by knocking out a wall. An awkwardly shaped area often results, and the syndrome of elongated (rectangular) media centers still persists. The third option is when school officials acknowledge that the current facility cannot be expanded or altered to meet the needs and a relocation is sought, either by renovating another part of the building or building an addition. Many recently rebuilt school libraries have very successfully taken outdated cafeterias or gymnasiums as their new homes.

The past decade has seen an addition to the basic components of school library planning. Historically, the function of the school library facility has come first and foremost, often to the exclusion of everything else. In the last twenty-five years, however, school officials have become more aware of the aesthetic values that must also be in place to make the library media center a more pleasant place to be. The atmosphere that is created by the style of furnishings, color schemes, lighting, and many other enhancements have revolutionized schools. A stark warehouse mentality can no longer be accepted. Function and aesthetics, then, have long been key components of school library design.

A third component has been expressed only recently, with very little acknowledgment and even less implementation. There must be a very clear understanding of the behavioral expectations of students and staff. These expectations can change daily. Layouts should encourage the behavioral patterns expected from users, both faculty and students (for this reason the planning team for a school library should include student representation). Given recent observations about behavioral understanding, it could be concluded that it even ranks above the aesthetics of the media center and is as important as function in contributing to a successful design.

A model for future planning should include all three components. If the thinking is unified then truly a school can have a FABulous operation that will enrich the learning process of students. Each component must be considered and reevaluated periodically.

Use of Library Space by Students and Staff

Traffic patterns must be continually studied and reexamined to increase the usage of the facility and materials. Carefully planned
allocation of collections and furniture will lead to a smoother running service-based information center. Rockwood and Lynch pointed out that "layout is a potent tool for increasing circulation and interlibrary use of materials. A good layout can increase (1) the quantity and frequency of use traffic, (2) the time per visit a user spends in the library, (3) the number of materials a user is exposed to on any visit, (4) the examination and comparison of materials by users, (5) the number of *unplanned impulse selections*, and (6) self-service by users."² They further noted that users of school libraries have different objectives that can change from one day to another. If we think as retailers of merchandise, we will increase the "volume of sales."

One vitally important observation brought out in the earlier mentioned study is the location of the circulation desk. Because we are a "walk on the right" society, the desk should be on the left as patrons enter at the center. This allows the exiting students to stay on the right side. The front of the circulation desk should also be studied to determine whether it impedes traffic. With the addition of security systems that slow down exit from the center, the staff should be aware of the adverse feelings of those who are standing at the desk checking out items while behind them assembles a "cattle drive" of their classmates. Recently, high schools have installed security systems with two exits for
each entrance. Circulation could be moved a short distance away from the exit or new designs should be applied to traditional straight modular desks; arrangements that allow people to step out of the flow should be considered (see figs. 2a, 2b).

Figure 2a. Designs that Assist Traffic Flow

Taking a cue from the marketing perspective in retail bookstores, the library circulation desk should be attractive and eye-catching. It should draw a person to take one more book along. School libraries are becoming more aware of strategies to increase lending of materials. Leaving the returned books cart out in a public area draws people to see what others have just brought back. New items nearby also attract potential usage.

Unified collections and services are developing, and this is a long overdue trend. Too often in the past, collections have been placed by their size rather than by their potential use. Many schools today still house periodical microfilm/fiche in one area, back paper copy in another area, microform readers in still another area, indexes in the reference collection, and current copies of magazines in another location. Yet all five of these functions could be logically grouped in close proximity. Schools that have grouped their collections according to anticipated use have found that this increases use and cuts research time by staff and students.

Another area of consolidated service functions revolves around the circulation desk. Traditionally, many schools have either separated this function from other staff functions or allowed it to be staffed by student
assistants. Today's technology is changing the traditional approach. Computerized circulation as well as electronic security systems require a more thoroughly trained staff. Microcomputers located at the circulation desk lend the area to cataloging, word processing, and bookkeeping. The concentration of automated equipment at the circulation desk leads to a concentration of staff at the desk; what once was done in the relative isolation of a workroom may now be done at the desk. The size and shape of the workstation(s) at the desk will change even more in the next decade. Flexibility must be considered as this expanse grows.

**Impact of Electronics in the School Library**

Electronic technology has forced planning for new workstations that can handle varied tasks depending on the immediate needs. A bank of terminals can now be used one period as the classroom instructional program (from a database vendor) to teach online retrieval skills. The second period the same terminals can be used for interactive instruction from optical laser disks. The third period, CD-ROM products like
electronic encyclopedias could be used with the same terminals and so on through the day. Space and costs will likely force the use of multitask terminals for the foreseeable future (although online catalogs will demand separate installations). How many terminals will be needed? How much can be spent? How much space must be dedicated to this? How much time for installation and operations must the staff incur? These questions will have to be answered by each individual school.

Security systems are being installed in increasing numbers. Rarely acquired in the lower grades, this "necessary evil" is a must to protect collections in many secondary facilities. They have changed the appearance of entrances and circulation desks, although today's units are attractive and very inconspicuous. One serious concern that has been encountered by staff is the ability of microcomputer monitors to radiate a signal that can often defeat the security system's ability to detect theft. This can be corrected by filters on each system and by increasing the distance between the microcomputer and the security sensor.

Satellite access is opening the way to sundry possibilities. The use of many public broadcasting channels permits wider selection and often live viewing. Foreign language broadcasts have already strengthened the school library's interaction with language instructors and students. Viewing French broadcasts from Canada or Spanish broadcasts from Mexico have expanded our ability to meet the needs of the curriculum. C-SPAN and the NASA channel are fine examples of broadcast programming for school use. School libraries may receive live broadcasts from NASA, for instance, with students asking questions to the presenter via conference phone lines. The possibilities are unlimited. From authors doing live interviews to school to school competitions (like Battle of the Books), the use of satellite channels is increasing.

In some areas dedicated channels are being used for shared instruction. Library channels that are opening up via state networks will assist the continuing education of all teaching staff. Facilities for viewing must be provided either in individual carrels or a large viewing room. Beam projectors or rear view large screens are becoming fixtures in larger media centers. Acoustical control of these areas is a major concern in many school library facilities. In large library media facilities, the need to change the television studio from just an in-house unit to that of a transmitting studio will increase; districts are sharing more of these services with surrounding districts.
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Other Trends in School Media Centers

Space saving efforts take many forms, particularly when additional square footage is not forthcoming. Compact shelving is gaining acceptance in schools. High density storage is useful for items in low demand yet worthy of continued maintenance. One high school very wisely installed such a unit behind the circulation desk. In half the space otherwise needed, they are able to house the back periodicals, prepackaged media kits, small audiovisual equipment, and little used supplies. All are quasi-secure behind the desk.

In many elementary and middle schools, nonprint collections have been integrated on book shelving. Special clips and boxes assist in this process. By not separating types of media, the users retrieve materials faster and are also reminded of the different formats that information may come in.

A continuing trend in elementary libraries is the story area (either sunken or raised) that can be used for multiple purposes. Storytelling, dramatic productions, and puppet shows are only a few of the numerous possibilities that a "little theater" offers.

As Cohen and Cohen point out, color and signs are highly important factors often overlooked in the design process. Color coordination in either renovated or new libraries has recently down-played the bright, bold colors that were the fads of the seventies. There was a trend to use too many vibrant colors next to one another and therefore create optical vibrations. The eighties are predominately colored in earth tones with a few splashes of brighter color. Dark wood or wood-like formica have added a richness and warmth to the learning environment. Signs are being improved to make the school community less dependent on staff who otherwise would be answering questions like "Where is the biography collection?" Time savings to the user and staff result when large floor diagrams and large lettering are installed. More awareness to the height of visuals (especially in the lower grades) and their ability to be viewed (i.e., perpendicular mounting) is needed. The colors used in signs should complement the other tones in the area.

Lighting has changed over the last decade. From what was rows of fluorescent bulbs and some natural light from a few windows, the trend is to increase outdoor lighting if possible, return to some incandescent fixtures, and move to a newer type of fluorescent tube that reproduces a normal spectrum of light more accurately (these newer fluorescent tubes can bring out truer colors in their surroundings). By providing varied types of light in the library, people can pick and choose the area that fits
their needs. Candle power reductions from previously recommended levels have been implemented. Lighting in areas that involve computers, reader-printers, and the like has been softened to reduce glare.

Handicapped services have been recognized as a viable obligation of school libraries in the sense that in design or redesign of new or remodeled media centers, access to all areas must be attempted. No more tight stacks, no more balconies unless elevators are provided, and no more steps without ramps. In some schools special carrels have been installed with reading machines, enlargers, and now the newest technology includes microcomputers with voice activation and voice simulation devices to assist special students. If the rest of the school is being used for mainstreaming then the learning center must conform to the needs of all the students who use the building.

Aesthetic accessories that make the media center a more pleasant place can run the gambit. Large foliage plants and trees are adding beauty and a feeling of affectionate care to what is often an instructionally sterile environment. Aquariums and terrariums are adding a touch that brings tranquility to students. Even sandbox tables in elementary schools are being used to make the students feel that the center is theirs. Private nooks or cubicles for the serious readers have helped make the centers the place to be. One elementary school has large bean bags made from king size bedding.

Conclusion

We are constantly changing the appearance, the types of collections, and the space to handle students and materials. Examples of this transformation are: (1) paper copy data to 35 mm microfilm to microfiche to CD-ROM storage, and (2) slides and videotape data that is now stored on optical laser disk. What was once a large collection stored on shelves has been reduced, and yet electronic workstations have occupied the space freed by reduced collections.

Flexibility to change is imperative in the design of school libraries. When a change occurs, the foremost thought should be how this alteration will either help or hinder future alterations. Fixed function, built-in equipment discourages flexibility.

If there is one common theme to keep in mind, it is that change is here to stay. "The inability to change and the inability to think beyond the present can have drastic effects on the actions that affect area environments today and in the future." We must plan now for flexible
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physical plants that will allow alterations or modifications as the technologies force us to incorporate the newest information media. Charlie Lou Rouse points to the problem that befalls the library media specialist: "Many new technologies are finding their way into the school library media center. Careful planning of facilities is needed to ensure that they are used to their maximum potential." This maximum potential is denied if the space is not right and if the staff is not on top of what is happening. This final point is an absolute. No facility even with the finest technology and furnishings can be self-sustaining. It is the motivated staff that makes the distinction. The most FABulous library media center facility must have appropriate collections to support the curriculum and highly qualified personnel.

References


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