

Classroom Flexibility is Key in the Future designing for the 21st century learner

Classroom design for the 21st century learning environment should accommodate a variety of learning skills and needs.



Classroom Flexibility is Key in the Future

The space should be large enough to be reconfigurable to accommodate a number of learning activities. This also includes furniture that provides flexibility to the learning spaces which will accommodate collaboration and interactive work between students and teachers.

Configurations of Space

Flexibility is a reoccurring theme throughout the history of school design. In the framework of a 21st century learner, flexibility of the learning environment is even more critical. Let's talk about some of the configurations of space for learners. Some of the new configurations will have to provide for teacher-directed instruction, individual study, small group, large group, presentations, one-on-one instruction as well as discussions among students and teachers. A sufficiently-flexible classroom and furniture should allow for learning to take place through all of these mentioned mediums.

Mobile Tables and Chairs

Through the use of mobile tables and chairs, the learner can create the proper setting for the activity being performed. The use of mobile tables of 30" x 60" or 36" x 72" can provide for a small or larger group discussion as well as a presentation format. Project-based learning is a key attribute of a STEM curriculum. Mobile tables allowing different configurations in different areas of the space accommodate learning flexibility.

Accommodating Technology

Technology must also be accommodated in a variety of different ways. Furnishings must allow for one or twenty one computers and a variety of visual media. Classrooms and furniture need to adapt to the learning style of the student. Along with reconfiguring furniture, the furniture itself must be flexible to a variety of different size and proportion of users.



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Ergonomics by furniture manufacturers will play an important role in the 21st Century learning environment. Flexibility for furniture location as well as furniture adjustments is essential. Since a student will sit for long periods of time during a school day, the furniture should flex to a number of different positions, heights, angles and movements. The student's physical body will also dictate furniture flexibility. Physical attributes in our youth are becoming more diverse in the 21st century.

Not a Study in Openness

It is important not to think of flexibility as simply more openness. Open concept classrooms were experimented with in the 1970s and 1980s but did not survive. Flexibility was taken to the extreme at the expense of other learning environment features, such as acoustics, visual distraction, day lighting, size and proportions of space.

Moveable Walls and Systems

We suggest that larger classrooms, moveable walls and mobile storage units can provide flexible classroom configurations. We are using structural systems today in schools that allow us to change classroom walls more easily, and less costly. Moveable storage systems provide mass for acoustical separation as well as visual separation of classroom spaces. Classroom sizes of 1,000 to 1,200 sq. ft. provide for zones within the room for different activities.

We know that how we learn will change in the future, just like it has changed in the past. Learning styles, subjects, technology and students evolve. Our spaces and what we put in them must adapt readily to this change. To compromise our future students' learning ability is not an option. We must provide the very best so their goals can be achieved.

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