

Learning Beyond the Classroom: How to Make *Every* Space A Learning Space



If K-12 leaders limit their concept of a learning space only to classrooms, they're missing a key opportunity to extend learning throughout the building (and the school day).

With the right design elements, any school space can support and even encourage rich student inquiry, reflection, communication, and collaboration. Here's how to design non-instructional spaces so they allow students to engage in continuous learning beyond the classroom.

CREATING A CONTINUOUS LEARNING CULTURE THROUGH SMART LEARNING SPACE DESIGN

It's the dream scenario for every educator: Once class ends, students continue the discussion on their own outside the classroom—or maybe they're so engaged by the topic that their curiosity is piqued, and they want to look up more information for themselves.

Is your school building designed to support these continuous learning opportunities effectively?

If so, then students might benefit from additional conversations and reflection about what they just learned in class. If not ... then they're apt to pass on this opportunity and move on to thinking about something else.

Non-instructional spaces such as cafeterias, common areas, and outdoor spaces can serve as extensions of the learning that occurs in classrooms. However, this is more likely to happen if these spaces are equipped with comfortable, versatile furniture and tools that support continuous learning.

Here are four key design elements that can help turn non-instructional spaces into places where learning continues beyond the classroom.

Comfort

For students to continue the learning that just occurred in class, they need easily accessible places to sit down and talk, read, study, or look up information. These spaces, which can be hallways, large common areas, or even outdoor spaces, should be furnished with comfortable, appealing seating that draws students to the space and encourages them to stay and talk or do work between classes or after school.

Learning is largely a social activity, and K-12 leaders should create opportunities for students to gather in small groups, hang out, and engage in informal learning when they're not in class.

Using soft lounge seating or café-style tables and chairs can make these areas comfortable places where students enjoy spending time. Students are more likely to continue academic conversations or reflect on what they've learned if they have a comfortable place to stop, hang out, and relax after class.

Flexibility

Informal learning spaces should be multipurpose spaces that can support many different kinds of activities and interactions. Some students might want to sit and read by themselves, for instance—while others might want to talk or work together in pairs or small groups.

Equipping these spaces with a variety of furniture types, or with agile, modular furniture that can be configured in multiple ways, allows for many uses.

Stimulation

Students are most likely to use non-instructional spaces as extensions of the classroom if they feel inspired to continue their learning. While much of that depends on the quality of instruction they



receive in class, schools can help foster a continuous learning culture by making informal learning spaces intellectually engaging and stimulating.

For example, use furnishings, decorations, and age-appropriate tools or manipulatives that inspire curiosity in hallways and other common areas. Objects such as globes, maps, artwork, inventions, shelves of books, posters, inspiring quotes, dioramas, and displays of student work can encourage students to continually think, reflect, and explore.



Utility

For learning to occur anytime, anywhere, students need tools and materials to support their learning. These might be high-tech tools such as laptops, tablets, and interactive displays or low-tech tools such as whiteboards to jot down their ideas.

While digital devices bring an entire world of information to students' fingertips, allowing students to learn from wherever they are, a dead battery renders this advantage useless. If you want non-instructional spaces to support continuous learning effectively, consider how these spaces will meet students' power needs with strategically placed electrical outlets—such as outlets embedded within tables, chairs, and other furniture.

The remainder of this article will explore how you can apply these design elements to support continuous learning within three types of informal learning spaces in particular: cafeterias, common areas, and outdoor spaces.

DESIGNING SCHOOL CAFETERIAS TO SUPPORT INFORMAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

K-12 leaders often take the design of their school cafeterias for granted. As a result, these spaces tend to feel very institutional and uninspiring.

That's a big mistake. School cafeterias are places where everyone comes together during the school day. This represents a key opportunity to inspire school pride and a sense of community among students—and the design of the space can help foster this spirit.

School cafeterias can also become more functional by supporting learning activities when they're not being used for food service. Here's some advice for creating school cafeterias that are places students want to spend time in, leading to a stronger sense of community and more opportunities for learning.

Lose the institutional look and feel.

Students are subconsciously comparing your cafeteria to their favorite retail food chains when they're dining, and too often the cafeteria comes up short.

Consider replacing traditional picnic-style seating with seating you might see at a restaurant or café, such as booths and café-style tables made of more comfortable materials. These would make the space more inviting, giving students another place to gather and collaborate on their studies.



Think creatively.

Take inspiration from other food-service venues in designing your cafeteria. How can you increase food-service revenue while making your cafeteria an attractive place to be? Could you create a food court or use self-service kiosks to lend a more modern feel to your dining programs, while also increasing the options available for students? How about a cafe-style section with coffee and pastries?

Power the space for learning.

To make the space functional for learning or studying, consider how you can make electrical outlets readily available for students to plug in their digital devices. For instance, you could embed outlets in the floor, or choose tables and bench seating with outlets built into the furniture.

BREAKING THE MOLD

When Strongsville, Ohio, built a new middle school a few years ago, one of the most innovative features of this new building was its two-story cafeteria. The space is designed like a café, as administrators sought to re-create the kind of food court environment that students like hanging out in when they're not in school.

The centerpiece of the design is a 61-foot-long, candy cane-shaped booth that runs through the middle of the cafeteria. Built by a custom booth manufacturer, it's the largest piece of booth seating that the manufacturer had ever created for a school.

By breaking the mold on school cafeteria design, Strongsville has created an attractive and versatile space where students want to congregate—while also increasing the opportunities for learning beyond the classroom.

SUPPORTING CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN SCHOOL COMMON AREAS

School hallways, foyers, and other common areas are often underutilized spaces that hold great potential for extending student learning. If equipped with the right furniture and tools, these spaces can serve a wide variety of educational purposes.



For instance, students and teachers can use them as breakout spaces or extensions of the classroom, where groups of students might retreat to work on projects during class time. Students could also use these spaces for studying, tutoring, socializing, or independent reading—the possibilities are nearly limitless.

Because these are often high-trafficked areas, choose durable furniture with easily washable fabrics when furnishing them. To maximize the utility of these spaces, make sure you provide a variety of seating styles—or use modular furniture that students can pull apart to sit by themselves or move together to work in pairs or small groups.

Here are some creative ways that schools have outfitted their common areas to support extended learning opportunities for students.

Kranz Junior High School

From its classrooms to its common areas, Eugene Kranz Junior High School in Dickinson, Texas, is designed with both function and appeal in mind. Every element of the school’s design serves an instructional purpose.

For instance, a large, open common area between classrooms serves as a shared space for collaboration. The space is equipped with a large-screen interactive projector and tables for students to work at. The inclusion of soft seating options make it an inviting place to congregate and share ideas.



Shelby High School

When Ohio’s Shelby School District set out to construct a new high school, officials wanted to create the most visionary, advanced learning spaces possible. One notable departure from traditional practices is the school’s use of “double-wide” hallways that facilitate student collaboration, study, and socialization.

For example, small groups can now meet out in the hall where they don’t disturb their peers in the main classroom. The teacher can still supervise these groups thanks to the liberal use of glass throughout the school. Not only does this afford better views, but the glass also serves as a more versatile dry-erase surface without cluttering walls with chalkboards or whiteboards.

The hallways and other learning spaces are outfitted with modern furniture and equipment that are highly adaptable in nature. Every product helps students and teachers change from individual to group learning at a moment’s notice, with mobile seating, carpeting, and whiteboards.



“Every aspect and miniscule detail of Shelby High has come together to foster an environment of collaborative, 21st-century learning,” said Superintendent Tim Tarvin. “Faculty, students, and parents are ecstatic about the school’s unique design.”

DESIGNING OUTDOOR LEARNING SPACES THAT EXTEND LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Outdoor spaces offer numerous opportunities to extend student learning, and research suggests there are both educational and health-related benefits to learning outdoors.

Breathing fresh air can clear students’ minds and help them think by increasing the amount of oxygen their brains receive. Being outside can reduce stress and improve students’ emotional well-being, and exposure to natural sunlight helps prevent vitamin D deficiency—making students less vulnerable to bone problems, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other health issues. What’s more, research has shown that children with ADHD respond positively to spending time in natural settings.

Educators can take advantage of outdoor settings to teach students about subjects like science or conservation in a hands-on manner. Nature walks, collection or measurement stations, working gardens, and greenhouses are all scenarios in which students can engage in applied learning, observing the effects of nature first-hand.

Alternatively, outdoor spaces can simply be places where students have a chance to sit outside and learn, socialize, eat, relax, or work collaboratively. This might happen within an outdoor patio, courtyard, pavilion, or other space.

When furnishing outdoor learning spaces, use furniture that is weather-resistant and designed for outdoor use. Fabrics can retain moisture and are most effective if the space is sheltered from rain.

LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

When the Flora Community School District in Flora, Illinois, built a new elementary school, administrators sought to include areas for outdoor



learning and collaboration, and a playground was built alongside the school buildings. The playground is divided into two halves by a shaded, common space that includes a variety of sturdy, weatherproof benches and picnic table seating.

Open to all ages and grade levels, this common outdoor space serves as both a social and educational area, and many teachers use it to stimulate creativity through learning activities outside the classroom.

Engineered wood fiber was used as a safety surface in the playgrounds and the common area, and these spaces all have plastic border timbers and wheelchair ramps.

MAKING EVERY SPACE COUNT

To sum up, don’t overlook the value of hallways, common areas, cafeterias, outdoor spaces, and other non-instructional spaces when designing and outfitting school buildings. With the right equipment, furniture, and a little creativity, every single square foot of a school can support student learning.

To learn how School Specialty’s Projects By Design division can help you design non-classroom instructional spaces that extend student learning opportunities effectively throughout the school, call (800) 305-0174, email projectsbydesign@schoolspecialty.com, or go to www.schoolspecialty.com/projects-by-design today.