TAKING THE FIRST STEPS INTO 21st CENTURY LEARNING

*It’s more than just handing out iPads*

By Greg Smith, Project Manager, Brailsford & Dunlavey, and Dr. Debra Henson, Executive Director of Facilities Management, Dekalb County School District

Planning for the future is often done in a rear view mirror—we plan based on what we know and create based on our own personal experiences, education, and expectations. So how can we, as educational facilities leaders and professionals, create an environment that delivers education in a way that resembles real world learning/working environments as they exist now and as they will exist in the future? The need to prepare students for a work place that no longer operates in an industrial economic fashion, as it once did, is critical in order to ensure the next generation is ready for a new economy and workplace. As we enter this transformational phase in K-12 education and strive to prepare students for this new reality, we are challenged to determine the most beneficial capital improvement investments that incorporate new 21st century learning components.

American schools, designed around a standard learning environment that supports a lecture-style of teaching, have remained relatively unchanged for the last 50 years while we have evolved into a society of visual and tactile learners. “Show me,” “interact with me,” “don’t just speak at me,”—this is what our students ask of us. The critical components of learning that allow the modern student to effectively engage with educators and fellow students alike are the foundation for environments that encourage the four C’s: critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. This new model of education that focuses on engaging with students in a variety of ways is referred to as 21st century learning and the supporting facilities are 21st century learning environments.

Technology is often considered the catalyst for identifying 21st century spaces and its importance cannot be overrated. It is a tool, a resource that aids in the learning process and links real world platforms to PK-16 educational environments. But it is only a tool.

So what defines these 21st century learning environments? The words we most often use are *flexible*, *agile*, and *adaptable*, words that ultimately mean being able to adjust to new conditions, modify for a new use or purpose, and allow flexibility to engage students in a variety of ways. The 21st century learning environments respond, not react, to individual learning styles, teaching styles, and a variety of educational paradigms, including new Common Core standards. Educational facilities, similarly, need to
respond to the needs of students, teachers, and community – form follows function – and provide a variety of opportunities for students to experience authentic interaction with real world involvement.

But how can we make informed capital investment decisions on adaptable learning environments? The practice of “evidence-based design” helps connect the relationship school facilities have with their impact on learning. As we continue to advance the research and examine what has been done in traditional schools and classrooms in planning and delivering 21st century learning, it will become increasingly imperative to understand the drivers responsible for different educational outcomes and create an effective physical framework for making capital improvement decisions that consider risk tolerances.

The Dekalb County School District (DCSD) is currently implementing construction of approximately $500 million in capital improvements under their special-purpose-local-option sales tax (SPLOST) IV Program. A primary focus of the program is how to best incorporate 21st century learning concepts into their facilities. One of the key challenges arising from this focus has been bringing its aging elementary schools into the 21st century while maintaining a balance with traditional education. DCSD is designing and constructing seven new prototypical elementary schools to replace some of the schools that are aged and in need of replacement. The project’s architect laid out some of the decisions made in order to achieve traditional education environments while also advancing their schools with new 21st century learning elements. He explained the three primary design decisions that the district made. First, they decided to incorporate 8-12 “flex spaces” that are smaller than classrooms and available for use in a variety of ways ranging from teacher meetings to student groups to specialized smaller learning sessions. These spaces will allow DCSD to maintain traditional classrooms as the primary learning environments while giving them the flexibility for collaborative learning or other uses, as needed. The second decision made was to incorporate an outdoor amphitheater in the prototype design. This option allows the schools to have outdoor classes, presentations, or group-based projects. And third, DCSD is currently working toward replacing the existing classroom furniture that combines the chair and the desk into one unit with separate mobile chairs and tables that allow teachers to be flexible in classroom set-ups. Rather than having student desks in rows for a lecture-oriented class, as is the case with the chair-and-desk combination unit, the new furniture can be set up in several ways to support different class activities.

America’s schools must continue to take these initial steps to evolve its schools and prepare students for the new economy. This, of course, means that facility planners must continue striving to identify drivers that produce the educational outcomes schools seek for their students, ones that help owners make informed capital improvement decisions to achieve a new targeted reality. There is much we continue to learn about transforming our K-12 schools into adaptable and flexible spaces and careful capital planning is as important now as it has ever been. Maybe more so.

grsmith@programmanagers.com
debra_henson@dekalbschoolsga.org

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