

Designing schools for the whole community



School buildings should be beautiful and inspirational, raising the spirits of those who use them. This issue, written by Sharon Wright, Managing Director of School Works, explains how important it is that schools with funding for building work or improvements involve pupils, staff, parents and the local community in articulating their vision for how the buildings should be designed and used.

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The changing face of schools

In the past, schools were places where children went to be taught their times tables and the 3Rs. Children sat in silent rows being taught from the front of the classroom. This form of schooling may have been appropriate for society in the past, but in the 21st century our emphasis is on transferable skills and good communication, on adaptability and a culture of lifelong learning. This requires education of quite a different kind.

Schools have evolved to reflect changes in society and changes in technology. The curriculum has become more flexible, and a massive increase in the use of ICT is increasingly affecting the way the curriculum is delivered. This is beginning to lead to a blurring of school boundaries giving the student more control over the way they learn. Schools are also embracing opportunities to offer informal learning outside school hours and are beginning to open their doors to the whole community. Their buildings must keep pace.

In June this year, the Government announced a massive increase in capital expenditure on school buildings. Within the 'Building Schools for the Future' initiative,

spending will rise to £5.1 billion by 2005-06. Over the next 10 to 15 years DfES plan to create '21st Century school facilities for every secondary school pupil'. This level of expenditure is unprecedented since the Victorians created the school system.

Over the past few years much of the

funding for school buildings has been spent on overdue repairs leading to a culture of 'patch and mend'. Despite their importance, many school buildings are dull and uninteresting. At School Works we argue that school buildings should be beautiful and inspirational, raising the spirits of the

Get pupils thinking

School Works has produced a web game aimed at 11-16 year olds to help them think about their school environments. In the game Tike's dog has run off and disappeared into the local school. The aim is to reunite Tike with the dog by completing a series of missions to address problems in the school. These include long queues for lunch, a dining hall where the pupils are bored, and a tricky security door. Alongside the main missions there are a series of interactive tools to highlight specific issues related to school design such as a classroom changer which allows you to create your best learning environment, and a myth mixer where you can find out what the community thinks of the school. Alongside the game are curriculum materials which include a teacher guide to the game and ten lesson plans linked to KS3 and KS4 subjects including art, citizenship, literacy and design. The game is available free at www.school-works.org/game/



Participation works

Our first partner school, Kingsdale in South London, was awarded £9 million by the DfES to implement our proposals. A large co-educational comprehensive, Kingsdale was in special measures at the start of the process. The classrooms were in disrepair, the corridors were vandalised, and the toilets so awful pupils would go home rather than use them. In partnership with the school, our multi-disciplinary team ran workshops with pupils, staff, parents and the community to understand the direct and indirect effects of the school building on learning and culture. As well as the 'hard' design issues, the workshops also looked at management and behavioural issues. And it was the pupils who gave us some of the most useful insights into what needed to be different.

So, at Kingsdale, where the major phase of construction is now underway, corridors and timetable have been redesigned. There are clustered flexible spaces for interactive group-working in a way that resembles and prepares for the hi-tech workplace. There will be access for the local community to a new auditorium and library. And the school is thriving under the visionary leadership of Headteacher, Steve Morrison. It is no longer in special measures and GCSE A-C results rose from 16 per cent in 2001 to 41 per cent in 2002.

Despite the success of these large capital build projects, participation on a smaller scale can be just as beneficial. Involving pupils and the local community in improving the school environment need not cost a fortune and will often help to overcome issues of vandalism. Where a community feels that it has some ownership of a building, they are more likely to care for it. Ongoing participation in the life of a building will not only give pupils a sense of ownership but will increase knowledge of some of the issues of the built environment, particularly when linked to the curriculum. Involvement could include:

- regular questionnaires to the local community on how the school can meet their needs
- ensuring the school council has the opportunity to advise on design issues and building improvements (such as where artwork is displayed, the choice of furniture, how circulation works in the school, areas where pupils feel safe and unsafe, how social spaces are created and maintained both inside and outside the school)
- setting up continuing 'green projects', such as audits which monitor the energy usage of the school.

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schools

communities within them and providing a range of facilities to meet a variety of needs.

In March 2003 the DfES announced that it would provide £52.2 million pounds over the next three years to fund the development of 240 'Extended Schools'. The 'Extended School' will provide a range of services and facilities to the local community, including adult education, childcare or nursery provision, ICT access and training and extensive community sports programmes. It is clear that these schools will need to take a fresh look at the way their buildings are used and the impact that community use will have on design.

But for all schools, whether or not there is a major rebuild or just enough money to refurbish the dining hall or reception area, there is a real need for a new outlook in relation to how the design meets the needs of pupils, their families and the community (and not forgetting the requirements of informal learning environments for out-of-school-hours work). Sustainable communities can only function where all members have access to learning and can develop their skill base to meet their aspirations. Schools have an important role to play in this.

An inspiring example



Chafford Hundred Campus, situated within a new housing development in Thurrock (Essex), is a dynamic example of a school that has opened its doors to the local community. The building houses an all-age school which includes nursery, primary, secondary and adult education centres. The community has access to the library, recreation and secondary school spaces during the day and PE spaces after school hours. There is also a crèche facility that allows parents to attend classes. Praised by Ofsted in 2003, Chafford Hundred Campus provides us with a working glimpse of what the school of the future could be like. It was designed to offer the town a centre for lifelong learning and to provide its residents with a civic focus.

So what do we need to think about to develop fantastic schools which work now and for the future? Every school will be different. Its community and their needs will be unique. It is important therefore that schools are able to articulate their vision in partnership with their stakeholders, including pupils, staff, parents and the local community. Once they have a clear set of priorities it is much easier to design a building to meet them.

We encourage schools to look at good examples of other learning environments to give them inspiration and a critical appreciation of what works. As well as visiting schools which have been built recently and speaking to staff and pupils about what is working well and less well, we suggest looking at other sorts of innovative public spaces. Libraries, further and higher education institutions, concert venues, open spaces in parks, gardens and civic areas. At School Works we often take groups of staff, pupils and other stakeholders on a tour of 'inspirational spaces' and ask them what they like and don't like and help them to explore how they can translate those experiences into lessons for their own learning spaces. It is important to raise your sights and ask for what you want, otherwise you are likely to get what you are given!



Kingsdale's ICT suite

Pupil participation

Too often young people do not have a voice, or a choice, in how their education is delivered. If we want young people to feel engaged with democratic processes, we must show them that their views are important and that they can make a practical difference to their local area. The new citizenship agenda promotes the importance of debating rights and responsibilities. Behind the growth of school councils is a realisation that pupils need to be engaged early in issues of decision making and democracy. In terms of real involvement, it is not enough to simply consult young people. They must be encouraged to actively participate, effect change, set their own indicators of how they will measure success, and monitor the outcomes. This is a challenging agenda which promotes ownership and understanding. And it is as relevant for making decisions about what colour to paint the corridors as it is for major refurbishment or new build projects.



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This fresh thinking, in addition to the massive capital investment, creates challenges for us all but provides a fantastic opportunity to raise expectations about what schools should be like in the future.

So where do you start?

As a first step we suggest you begin by asking:

- What issues are you trying to address through your school design?
For example, what is your school's vision of the sort of education it wants to deliver in the short, medium and long term?
- What works well now that you would wish to retain?
- How will you measure the success of any changes?
- Who do you need to involve – who makes up your school community?
- What specialist help and support might you need and when? For example, you may wish to talk to an architect once you have decided on the critical issues you need to tackle.

As part of these discussions we suggest that you:

Think about both education and design

Education issues might include the type of curriculum you wish to deliver and how that relates to the spaces you need. Design discussions could explore issues of colour and texture. Try also to reach the less tangible issues such as whether people feel they belong and what helps to promote a sense of community in the school.

Think about the purpose of particular spaces

Who uses the various spaces in the school and when? For example, is the staff room used as a working space, or purely to socialise and what does that mean for the facilities provided?

Take account of management and organisational implications

The way you organise and manage the school will impact on your needs in terms of the layout of the building, the communications systems within it and the location of ICT.

Include considerations of school maintenance

The school's design will have long-term implications for both ease and cost of maintenance. Look at the potential costs over one academic year and longer to see the impact on future budgets.

Include thoughts on future revenue

You might consider new sources of income which could be generated for the school through, for example, community groups using facilities in the evenings and at weekends.

Think about how you will keep your community involved

How will you keep pupil, staff, parents, governors and the wider community engaged as you go through the design process? Where are the key points at which they can contribute and how will you keep them in touch with development?

And finally...

Allow yourselves to dream

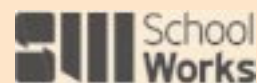
Regardless of the issues you explore, the aim should be to tap into participants' aspirations and creativity. By encouraging people to use their imagination, the design is more likely to reflect their needs and so stand the test of time.



Sources of help

There are a range of sources of help and advice available including:

- In addition to the DFES 'Schools for the Future: Designs for Learning Communities' (Building Bulletin 95), their Exemplar Design initiative will see top designers publishing their ideas for primary, secondary and all-through (combined nursery, primary, secondary and adult education facility) schools shortly. (www.dfes.gov.uk)
- CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) have published advice on what makes a well designed public building. (www.cabe.org.uk)
- School Works has produced a Toolkit to help you through the process and think about how to engage stakeholders in your discussions. (www.school-works.org.uk)



- Learning through Landscapes can help you with the spaces around the school. (www.ltl.org.uk)
- The Design Council's 'Furniture for the Future' initiative is working to redesign school furniture to meet the challenges of a 21st Century curriculum. (www.designcouncil.org.uk)

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