The Modern K-12 Library

As priorities in school curriculum shift, school libraries evolve alongside them.

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When people think of school libraries, they usually envision an outdated stereotype of one large space filled with uncomfortable wooden desks and chairs, surveilled by a stern librarian ready to shush them over the most minor infraction. Librarians know better. Instead of being dull and oppressive, the modern K-12 library is often at the forefront of innovation.

Librarians have been quick to adopt new trends in K-12 design, including designing environments that support mental health; collaboration and team teaching; project-based learning; and new technology. They are adept at conjuring up DIY solutions (sometimes paid for with money out of their own pockets) to keep libraries up to date with the changing needs of their students.

These new visions aren't overhauls of the traditional school library. Instead, these new trends in school library design are extensions of existing functions, with the traditional school library as the animating core.

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Libraries have several assets that make them uniquely elastic spaces compared to standard school classrooms:

- Large open space where multiple people can sit together to work.
- Often the largest classroom in a school.
- Unlike typical classrooms, libraries are not dedicated to a specific subject or teacher – they are a central hub shared by all students and faculty, with connections across all academic departments.
- Often the "heart" of a school, both figuratively and literally – most school libraries have an easily accessible central location on a school campus.
- Immediate access to a wide variety of media — books, magazines, DVDs, CDs, and more.
- Access to equipment such as audio/visual technology.

Of course, the most important resource school libraries have are their dedicated and highly creative faculty, who have been at the forefront of imagining the possibilities of the modern school library. When considering a library re-design, your library faculty should be the first guides you look to for how to best expand your library's capacities.

A HAVEN FOR MENTAL HEALTH

School libraries offer a restorative space, encouraging relief from mental fatigue and stress.

Restorative space:
a space that promotes relaxation and relief from mental fatigue or stress by providing a calming, comforting physical environment.

Today's youth are facing a mental health crisis. In Fall 2022, depression, stress and anxiety were the most cited obstacles to learning for secondary students at every grade level[1]. Studies suggest that the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic caused similar effects to the emotion and decision making centers in the brain as several years' worth of chronic, toxic stress — prematurely aging their brains and causing changes associated with higher risk of memory and learning problems and mental illness such as anxiety and depression[2]. The isolation of COVID-19 lockdowns exacerbated already record rates of loneliness among teens. In 2019, more than 1 in 3 teenagers reported feeling so sad or hopeless at some point over the past year, they had skipped regular activities, a 44% rise since 2009[3].

Taking advantage of its perch above picturesque rolling hills and valleys, the second floor South Point Elementary media center in Washington MO uses expansive windows with views of vast greenspace as a biophilic design element.

A fireside gathering area at Clayton High School Library uses soft seating and an electric fireplace to create a relaxing spot for young people to congregate around.

Because of these challenges, school administrators are eagerly seeking tools to address their students' mental health. Since libraries already offer a quiet, safe, monitored space, they are a natural starting point for creating a restorative area. Many school librarians have taken initiative on establishing their libraries as safe, welcoming hangout spaces — setting up DIY peace corners, sensory spaces, "zen dens," and "hygge hubs" equipped with soft lighting, relaxing music, and comfortable furnishings to help students re-center[4]. Many school librarians also develop mindfulness programs and activities for students, such as meditation and yoga sessions.

"A focus on wellness … permeates today's discussion about library spaces," remarks an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education. "Rooms that support quiet meditation and study, solitude in the presence of others, and biophilic design (which incorporates living plants and other natural features) all have been shown to have beneficial effects on health."[5]

The design of school libraries is following this increasing interest in mindfulness and mental health by moving towards physical environments that are softer, warmer, and more intimate.

Elevating a Space to a Destination

Creating an environment that feels less institutional and more like a welcoming destination transforms a library from just another classroom into a restorative space.

When redesigning Clayton High School Library, the Bond Architects team incorporated residential style furnishings to create a homier space. Plush soft seating and tactile textures invite students to linger. A new fireplace seating area with comfortable couches and chairs offer a magnetic focal point to congregate around. The finishes palette uses subdued versions of the school's colors (orange and blue) to celebrate the school's community identity without being visually overstimulating. There is even an area with "coffee-shop style" seating that offers the same quiet background noise one enjoys at a Starbucks or Panera — without the annoyed staff that will kick teens out for not buying anything. Students now see the library as an appealing option for socializing and hobbies instead of just a study space.

Creating Opportunities for Choice

Schools can support student mental health by offering them opportunity for choice in their environments. Opportunity for choice is an important tenet of **trauma-informed design**, a design movement that uses physical environments to reduce stress and nurture feelings of well-being. Giving students control over their physical environment gives them a sense of autonomy that they don't often experience during the school day.

Offering opportunities for choice in workspace arrangements or levels of sensory engagement also supports **social-emotional learning (SEL)**. By having control over their physical environment, students learn to identify what their immediate sensory needs are. For example, an overstimulated student may need a retreat from hectic noise and activity. This student can choose a workspace accommodating that need — for example, a high-back chair providing visual and acoustic separation. Students learn how to regulate their emotions by finding arrangements best suited to their personal work style, reducing feelings of frustration, anxiety, boredom, or overstimulation.

Creating opportunities for choice was central to our renovation of Clayton High School's library. Clayton High School students told the Bond Architects team the existing high school library was noisy and chaotic during busy hours. The overwhelming mass of noise and activity made it an unappealing option for study time or relaxation. Students desired more compartmentalization, with separate areas for quiet retreat and social activities (such as club meetings and games). Bond Architects solved this problem by dividing the library up into distinct "zones":

- **Active** zones for library services (service desk, IT desk).
- **Gather** zones for friends or clubs to meet.
- **Study zones** for focused independent work.
- **Quiet zones** for retreating with a book or restful alone time.

Furniture layouts and lighting define these zones and give students intuitive cues for how to interact with the zones. Students now have a choice in what level of sensory stimulation or social engagement they want to experience while using the library.

Trauma-informed design:
a design movement that uses physical environments to reduce stress and nurture feelings of well-being.

Defined zones at Clayton High School Library offer options for different levels of sensory stimulation and socialization.

Active
Gather
Study
Quiet
Flex
Service

COLLABORATIVE AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Flexible, multi-purpose library spaces are key to supporting 21st century skills.

Many districts are now emphasizing "21st Century Skills" prioritizing collaboration, communication, flexibility, leadership, and social skills. Instead of rows of silent students being lectured to, teachers now prefer an approach where students can gain leadership and interpersonal skills by teaching each other. Teachers are also collaborating with other faculty members, partnering up for team teaching sessions.

The school librarian is included in this movement towards collaborative and team teaching. The Association of College & Research Librarians lists among its seven Roles of Teaching Librarians the role of "Teaching Partner," who lends their expertise in "broader perspectives about information literacy, formal education in ways that information is organized and classified, [and] expertise in research skills."[6]

To support these changes in curriculum, librarians and other educators need flexible learning environments that can be quickly restructured for a specific project or lesson.

When Ladue Horton Watkins High School wanted to shift its curriculum towards a more collegiate, collaborative approach to learning, Bond Architects designed a new Media Center supporting project based and group learning. A large balcony fits several classes combined for collaborative team-teaching sessions. Study nooks and break-out rooms provide students with spaces for group work. Furniture was selected for maximum flexibility, allowing teachers to quickly rearrange and transform the space.
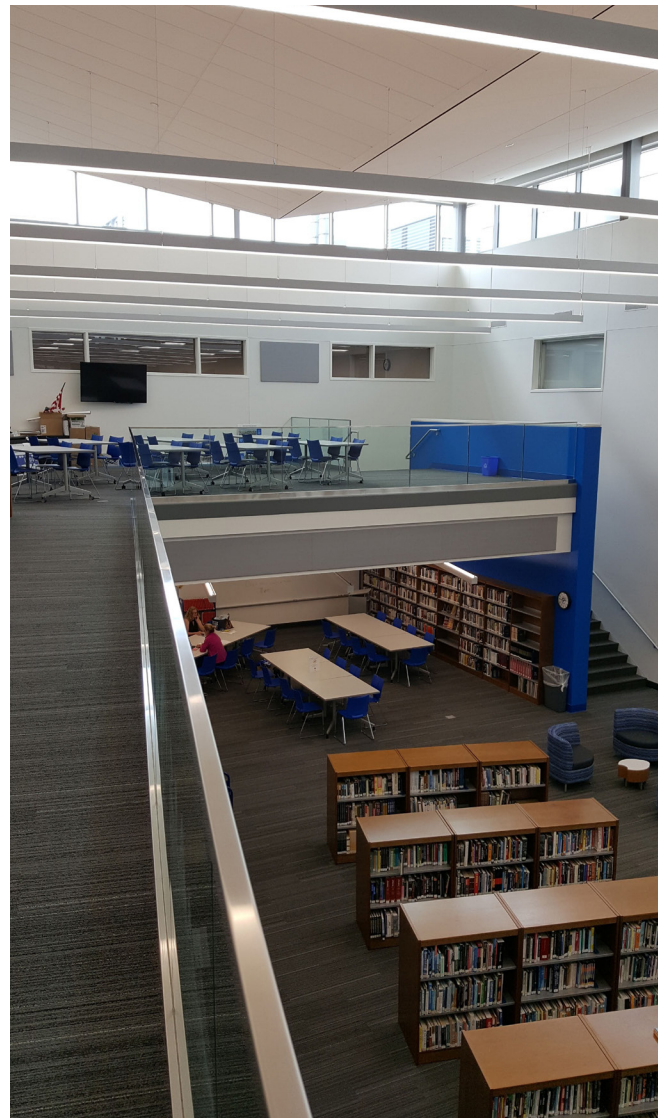
Clockwise: Teaching balcony at Ladue Horton Watkins High School media center, view of second and first floor of LHWS media center; view of first floor workstations and breakout areas.

A unique solution for project-based learning that Bond Architects developed for the new South Point Elementary in Washington, MO was to create several mini-libraries in addition to the main school media center. The satellite libraries are at the center of grade-level classroom suites and offer age-appropriate materials for use in class projects. These small libraries are also a convenient break-out space for groups of children.

INTEGRATE TECHNOLOGY — BUT DON'T LET IT DOMINATE

"The integration of emerging technologies is fundamental to the transformed library."

Students value both digital and physical media—work with faculty and students to find a healthy balance between the two.

"The integration of emerging technologies is fundamental to the transformed library," writes Gregory K. Raschke in *Library as Platform: The Transformed Library's Impact on Teaching, Learning, and Research.* "It signals the availability of resources for multi-disciplinary collaborations and a shared set of advanced tools for the user community. New spaces must be built with the adaptability to change technology as formerly emergent tools become commonplace and new technologies come forward to the market." [7]

New audiovisual system in this flex area at Clayton High School Library supports large classes, as well as district meetings and training sessions. Plug-and-play outlets in columns, walls, and the floor expand technological capacity.

A new recording studio and makerspace, visible in the back, are features in the new Washington Middle School Library.

The increasing shift towards project-based learning requires access to a broader range of tools, equipment, and resources. Instead of just reading out of a textbook and then writing a paper, students now can create multimedia presentations involving interactive maps and timelines, video, audio, websites, and more. School librarians are often the go-to experts in digital literacy for both students and other educators. Librarians educate students on technology skills, and how to use critical thinking and research skills to find reliable information online. Despite their reputation as "digital natives," students still need oversight and guidance when learning how to use digital resources.

Librarians also assist fellow faculty with integrating new technology and digital tools into their teaching techniques. Libraries are "truly the center of their skill, and a place where learning and the digital world come together."[8] Because of their important role as technology hubs, school libraries are transforming to accommodate expanding digital resources. A library designer needs to be able to "future-proof" a space for the next generations of technological evolution, creating an environment that has the capacity to adapt to rapid changes.

The new library at Washington Middle School in Washington, Missouri is an excellent example of integrating new technology into the school library. Bond Architects worked with the School District of Washington to create a library that would support STEAM learning. The new library is a rich multimedia experience. A recording studio supports project-based learning by giving students the option to synthesize information they've learned into video and audio presentations. They also gain insights into possible future careers in digital media. A new makerspace encourages students to explore STEAM concepts with hands-on tinkering. An IT desk gives students the necessary guidance they need to successfully incorporate technology into their learning.

High bookshelves surrounding library users add to the warm ambiance of this "cozy corner."

Many schools consider stashing books away in high-density shelving or other hard to access storage to make more room for digital resources. Our experience suggests that this idea is misguided. One of the most surprising revelations our team uncovered while interviewing students for the Clayton High School Library renovation was just how valuable a "traditional" library experience is to young people. Students told us that because they spend all day surrounded by digital screens, unplugging for a moment to pick up a physical book helps them ground themselves. Students also appreciated the opportunities for discovery presented by browsing bookshelves or looking over themed displays put together by librarians.

Our team's approach is to find a balance between physical and digital media environments. We integrate new technology in a way that supplements and enriches the traditional library without displacing it. The everyday users of the space — librarians, teachers, and students — are always the best guide to finding the right balance. Listen carefully to their first-hand experiences with how they use technology, and don't make assumptions!

IN CONCLUSION

The school library serves a vital role as a shared resource between all members of a school community. The modern approach to school library enriches the traditional school library with layers of expanded functionality, such as support for mental health, opportunity for choice, collaborative teaching, project-based learning, and new technology. By gently adapting the design of a library space to support these educational trends, the school library can reassert its role as the energizing heart of a school.

Key Take-Aways

- Get input early from your librarians, teachers, and most importantly, students — these are the people who use your school library every day and know it the best!

- Use furniture and interior design to create a restorative space for stressed students.

- Offer areas with different levels of activity and socialization to support diverse work styles.

- Keep your library's design flexible to support collaborative and project-based learning.

- Embrace digital technology — but don't let it take over.

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The Modern School Library *Expanding Functionality*

The shifts in school library design shouldn't be thought of as a replacement for a traditional library, but as extensions blooming outwards from the core of the existing library, expanding and enriching the library's traditional functions.

Traditional School Library

Book storage

Quiet study space

Static furniture layouts

One large space for everyone

Restorative Space

- Tactile materials
- Games and puzzles
- Spaces for socializing and hobbies
- Residential style furnishings
- Student art displays
- Building community
- Areas of refuge

Access to Nature

- Images of nature
- Natural materials
- Natural daylight
- Views of outdoors
- Plants
- Outdoor spaces

The Future ... ?

- What can you imagine?

Collaboration

- Focus & study rooms
- Breakout spaces
- Flexible furniture layouts

Project-Based Learning

- Plug and play outlets
- Makerspaces
- IT help desk
- Recording studio
- Audiovisual systems
- Access to digital media
- Materials storage

Opportunity for Choice

- Options for levels of sensory stimulation
- Diverse workspace options
- Options for active and quiet zones
- Adjustable lighting
- Multiple ways to use space
- Group and solo work