



*Restroom and handwashing station at South Point Elementary, School District of Washington.*

*Authored by Susan Pruchnicki, FAIA, LEED AP ID+C, Bond Architects, Inc.*

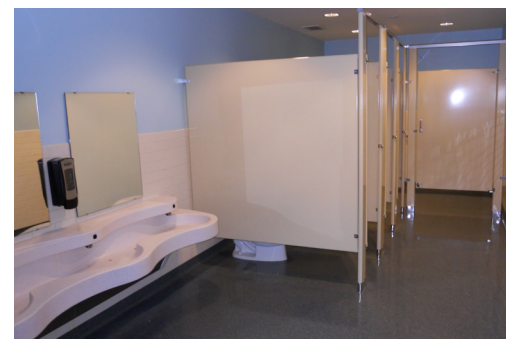
Restrooms are often “forgotten spaces” in school design, but putting thought into students’ restroom experiences can reap benefits for school districts.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

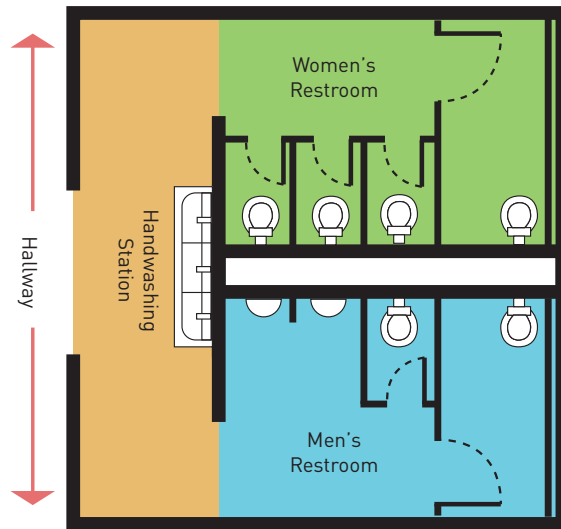
No part of a building elicits a stronger gut reaction than restrooms. When we show clients before & after photos of our renovation projects, we get instinctual cringes out of people with pictures of neglected restrooms: dark, cramped, and with badly outdated finishes and fixtures. We get strong impressions about a facility, and its owners, based on these intimate spaces: is the restroom clean? Is it well-lit? Well-ventilated? Does everything work? Can you move around easily? **Restroom design is powerful — so why are they so often an afterthought in school design?** School districts are heavily invested in creating welcoming, healthy learning environments for students and faculty, but they often ignore this vital part of the building which receives daily use.

**Our team uses restroom design to support a school districts’ goals by emphasizing the following priorities:**

- **Health and hygiene.**
- **Saving costs with durable, easy-to-maintain finishes and fixtures.**
- **Supporting mental and emotional health.**
- **Student safety and security.**
- **Inclusivity.**



*Before (top) and after (bottom) of Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center restroom renovation.*



*Floor plan for "airport-style" restrooms at South Point Elementary. Removing door handles and other touch points improves hygiene by reducing potential sites for transfer of infectious bacteria and viruses.*

## PRIORITY 1: HEALTH AND HYGIENE

*A school restroom must use design to ensure good hygiene among the student body and reduce risk of infectious disease.*

Restrooms for pre-K and elementary school buildings have the added challenge of being designed for very young children who are still learning proper hygiene — the architect must incorporate design elements that will teach lifelong healthy habits. Signage can support initiatives to reinforce good hygiene. In their list of suggestions for preparing schools for a post-COVID world, the American Restroom Association recommends that schools use signage to remind young students about the importance of flushing, handwashing, and putting away their trash <sup>1</sup>. Working with your architect to design and install signage in a restroom area is easy and inexpensive.

**Airport-style restrooms, with no doors and a shared handwashing station between the restroom areas entryways, are becoming more popular in school facilities.** This style of restroom is an excellent option for young children because it gives ready access to sinks for handwashing on the go. Bond Architects designed airport-style restrooms for South Point Elementary School in the School District of Washington. This style of restroom design decreases risk of infectious disease by keeping the facility as hands-free as possible: no doors to the bathrooms, automatic hand dryers, sensor-activated sinks and soap dispensers.

Proximity is a key priority for restroom design. When our firm was renovating Ladue Horton Watkins High School, one observation that came up repeatedly from students was that existing restrooms in the school were spaced too far apart, making it difficult to use the facilities between classes while still making it to class on time. The younger the child, the more important proximity is. Early childhood centers need to accommodate the needs of very small children who don't have the bladder control of older children, and therefore need restrooms directly adjacent to their classrooms. Jack-and-Jill style restrooms shared between classrooms are practical solutions for our early childhood facility clients. This larger style of restroom is also easier for monitoring during use, a necessity since pre-K students often need help and supervision from an adult.



*Jack-and-Jill style restroom for Pattonville Briar Crest Early Childhood Center. These are a practical restroom solution for Pre-K students.*

## PRIORITY 2: DURABILITY AND MAINTENANCE

*Restrooms receive a lot of wear-and-tear from heavy, daily use and constant exposure to moisture and harsh cleaning chemicals. Because of this, it's important to make sure you are using your budget wisely to select durable materials.*

Our design team works with school districts on life-cycle cost analyses to find the proper balance between short-term costs of installation against long-term costs of ongoing cleaning and maintenance. Epoxy flooring is a popular choice among our clients for school restroom flooring — the lack of seams on the floor combined with an integral covered floor base removes the hard to clean tile grout and sharp inside corners.

### → KEY TAKEAWAY

Working with your design team on life-cycle cost analyses will help your district extract the best long-term value from finishes and fixtures.

Vandalism is always a significant threat to the longevity of school restrooms. Our approach to reducing vandalism is to show respect to students by giving them a pleasant, clean, well-designed space to call their own. Good maintenance from the facility owners leads to good maintenance from students in return. **This concept is known as “territorial reinforcement” —the nicer the space, the less vandalism occurs.** The more students have a sense of ownership and personal investment in a space, the more likely students are to treat the space with respect. **Putting the time and effort into create a pleasant space for the students will cut down on maintenance and custodial costs resulting from trash or vandalism.**

### PRIORITY 3: MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

*A school restroom needs to also demonstrate care for students’ mental and emotional wellbeing.*

PreK-12 students don’t have as much autonomy during the day as adults, and the school restroom is one of the few places available to them

to take a break and collect themselves when they feel anxious, upset, or overwhelmed.

**Trauma-informed design** is an architecture and interior design approach that blends design, psychology, sociology, neuroscience and cultural factors to create spaces that generate feelings of safety, belonging, respect and dignity

**Restroom interiors can use the tenets of trauma-informed design to improve psychological wellbeing of occupants.**

The restroom design impacts the overall wellness of the school building by making the restrooms open, safe, comforting, clean, and readily accessible when urgently needed. Equipment and supplies such as soap, hand towels, or hand-dryers should be easy to find and intuitive to use. This approach to

design decreases student anxiety and stress by creating a learning environment that puts them at ease, allowing them to focus more on their own personal growth and development.

**When someone goes into a restroom, their top priority is almost always privacy.** Visual privacy can be created in restroom stalls with tighter seams and taller panels. Floor to ceiling panels are becoming more popular options, especially since they can be used to easily convert existing restrooms into all-gender restrooms. Auditory privacy can be established with white noise from exhaust fans or background music.

Lighting makes restroom feels safe and reassuring. **Everything should be brightly lit and easily visible— users should be able to see right away that the restroom is clean and well-maintained.** Lighting should also be designed to make restroom users look good while attending to personal grooming. People feel better when they look better, especially insecure adolescents. Color temperature of lighting is an important consideration when developing interiors — an interior designer can guide you through the process of selecting fixtures that cast light that feels warm, bright, and welcoming instead of cold and sterile.



*Restroom designed for Cape Girardeau Junior High School. Colorful tiles and other visually interesting finishes add liveliness and warmth to a restroom designing without sacrificing practicality.*

Interior design has undergone an overall shift to less institutional and more residential approaches to public spaces in recent years. Traditionally, customer experience-driven markets such as hospitality and retail have been more successful at designing appealing restrooms. Most schools don't have the budget to create a restroom as luxurious as a five-star hotel, but **small touches that show thoughtfulness towards the user, such as hooks to hang personal items on, or full-length mirrors, are simple and inexpensive ways to create a more pleasant user experience.** Creative applications of tile, a durable and easy to clean finish which comes in a panoply of colors and textures, are an economical way of adding some cheer and warmth to a space without compromising function.

#### → KEY TAKEAWAY

Creating a pleasant restroom experience increases feelings of wellbeing and improves mental and emotional health throughout the school population. Visual and acoustic privacy, good lighting, and small touches that show thoughtfulness towards the users' experience are all cost-effective, high-value ways of enhancing feelings of safety, calm, and well-being.

### PRIORITY 4: SAFETY AND SECURITY

*Curbing bad behavior is also essential to promoting feelings of safety and security in school restrooms.*

Restrooms are one of the few spaces in a school building where students are away from the eyes of faculty. This is a cause for concern for school administrators: they need to know that students will not get up to vandalism, bullying, or other bad behavior while out of sight. Architects have a few methods for addressing these safety and security concerns. Location is key — it's important to place restroom entrances in highly visible locations within the school building. **The “eyes on the street” approach to security is highly effective for restrooms – the more faculty, staff, and other students have oversight over who is coming and going through the restrooms, the less likely bad behavior is to occur.** Airport-style doorless restroom entrances are even easier to monitor.

#### → KEY TAKEAWAY

Restroom entrances must be in highly visible, easily monitored locations in the school building to discourage bad behavior.

### PRIORITY 5: INCLUSIVITY

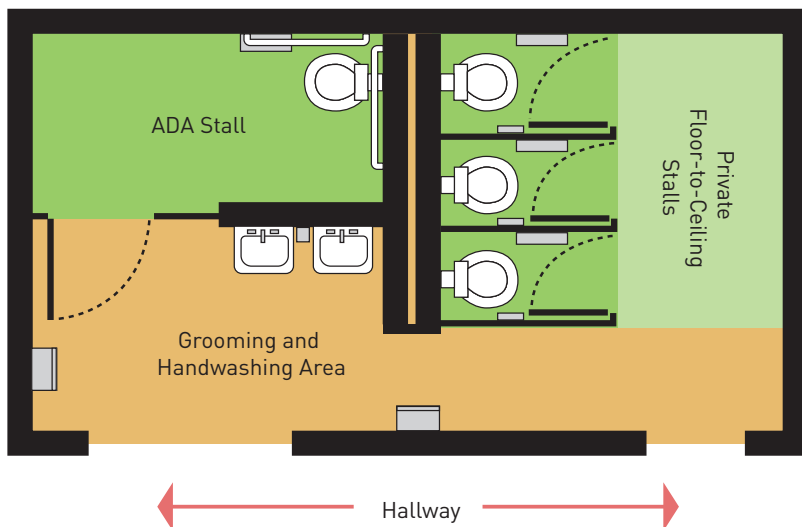
*An important conversation happening in school districts is how to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ students in restroom design. Many school districts are adapting to new norms by installing new all-gender restrooms in their school facilities.*

All-gender restrooms are becoming more standard throughout all facilities, not just schools. In 2018, the International Plumbing Code (IPC) updated signage requirements for single-user restrooms requiring them to be identified for use for all users, regardless of gender. The IPC also added an amendment allowing for multi-stall bathroom designs, with private compartments for each toilet and shared sink areas, with the intention of improving accessibility and inclusivity.

**Lack of safe restroom access has been linked to medical problems such as kidney infections, urinary tract infections, and stress-related conditions.** (The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, National Center for Transgender Equality). More than half (59%) of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey's respondents avoided using a public restroom in the past year because they were afraid of having problems, and nearly one-quarter (24%) said someone had challenged



*All-gender restrooms designed for the School District of Clayton. The district installed these new restrooms to protect student safety by reducing bullying. Photographs courtesy MR & Associates, Inc.*



Floor plan for an existing restroom redesigned into an all-gender restroom for Clayton High School. Instead of gender-segregated water closets, each user is provided with a private stall completely enclosed with floor-to-ceiling panels. The sinks and dispensers for soap and towels are in a shared handwashing area. The doorless entrance keeps the handwashing area highly visible from the hallway, making the restrooms easier to monitor.

their presence in a restroom in the past year. These statistics show why access to safe restrooms during the day is such a priority for trans and non-binary students.

**By showing consideration for student’s mental health and respect for students’ dignity, a district creates a more positive experience for all students.** A student can’t reach their full potential if they are distracted during the day by worrying over if they will be harassed for which restroom they use.

The fastest, most economical way to convert restrooms into all-gender restrooms is to install floor-to-ceiling panels around toilet stalls. Many students actually prefer this design to traditional “gang-style” bathrooms because of the increased privacy. Occupancy is signaled by a indicator on the lock, or a color-changing light above the stall. Since the toilet stall is completely hidden from view, the sink area can be opened up and doors to the restroom area can be removed. This has added benefits of increasing visibility (a plus for safety and security) and less touch points, meaning less vectors for infectious disease to spread. All-gender restrooms also have the added side benefit of balancing parity between restrooms, since all genders have access to the same number of restroom facilities.

For more information on all-gender bathrooms, we recommend reading the excellent *Stalled!*, an online hub of resources for designing safe, sustainable, and inclusive public restrooms, and Mijksenaar’s white paper “*Beyond the Binary: Setting the wayfinding standard for inclusive restrooms.*”

### TIPS FOR ADDING ALL-GENDER RESTROOMS TO YOUR SCHOOL

- **Preferred nomenclature among advocates:** “All gender” is preferred to “gender-neutral”, because the term gender-neutral is felt to erase gender identity instead of embracing its diversity
- **Preferred iconography for wayfinding:** a simple toilet icon gets the idea across without reinforcing gender binaries.
- **When converting existing pairs of gender-segregated bathrooms into all-gender facilities, it’s important to make sure there’s parity between the restroom features:** for example, both new all-gender bathrooms should have trash receptacles inside their stalls.
- **Whenever possible, design for inclusivity from the beginning instead of waiting for someone to push the issue** — this will save you costs further down the road on building new facilities.<sup>2</sup>

#### ➔ KEY TAKEAWAY

Designing restrooms that are inclusive of all students’ gender identities is important for reducing bullying and keeping students physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy.



All-gender restroom designed for Clayton High School. Photographs courtesy MR & Associates, Inc..

## IN CONCLUSION

*Because of their importance to student health, safety, and psychological wellbeing, restrooms deserve as much attention as any other aspect of a school building's design.*

Modest, cost-effective renovations such as upgrades to finishes, lighting, and fixtures make a huge impact on restroom experience, and deliver high value to school districts. Tangible returns on investment after restroom upgrades include lengthed life-cycle of materials and lower custodial costs because of easier and more efficient cleaning processes. The resulting improvements to students' mental and emotional health enhances their cognition, retention, and overall academic performance.

**Bond Architects' skilled team of architects and interior designers can easily work with you to assess your facilities and develop a strategic plan to improve your schools' restroom facilities in a cost-effective manner. Give us a call at 314-863-4994 to start a conversation.**

## SOURCES & FURTHER READING

<sup>1</sup> *Ten Things To Do Now To Get Your School Ready For Students In A COVID-19 World*, American Restroom Association and Project CLEAN, <https://americanrestroom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Ten-Things-for-Schools-re-COVID-19-ARA-Project-CLEAN-July-2020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *A restroom for everyone*, Building Design + Construction Network <https://www.bdcnetwork.com/blog/restroom-everyone>

*Stalled!*: <https://www.stalled.online/>

*Beyond The Binary: Setting the wayfinding standard for inclusive restrooms*, Mijksenaar:



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