

Architects Hear Benefits Of The Future's Classrooms

Katy Rent

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GRAND RAPIDS - Schools of the latter 20th century have been institutional learning centers made up of hallways trimmed on either side with classrooms.

The school building generally included some administration offices, a gymnasium, a lunchroom and a library.

Today, schools are multi-level buildings, some housing a computer for every student and offering interactive learning that prepares students for college like no other experience.

Jeff Lackney, self-titled "trans-disciplinarian and Renaissance man," spoke to a group of architects and school officials at URS Corp. in Grand Rapids recently about "classrooms of the future."

It's a topic Lackney knows well. He consults nationally as an educational facility planner, advocating innovative, visiondriven approaches to education.

Lackney has conducted extensive research on a host of related topics:

- *The influence of the physical setting on learning
- *Assessing the fit between educational programs and older buildings
- *Community-based planning
- *Action research and reflexive practice in educational facility planning and design
- *Environmental defensibility in schools
- *Small schools' research
- *The role of the physical setting in mediating school climate and culture
- *Post-occupancy evaluation in schools
- *Neighborhood schools' planning

As an assistant professor in the department of engineering and professional development at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Lackney currently develops and conducts continuing education courses focused on architecture, engineering, construction, and facility management in educational, workplace and health care settings. He also holds an appointment with the department of interior design within the school of human ecology at the university.

"There must be a shift in the paradigms of thought," said Lackney. "There are breaks occurring between the 20th and 21st century; it just takes people time to get used to and actually take the initiative."

One example Lackney cited was the idea of "green" buildings. While building green is a relatively new idea, the rules and paradigms that go along with it are not. "We have to accept what will always be while allowing change to come into our work."

He said this includes moving away from the industrial model of schools and into the knowledge-age model and learner-centered model. If all works well, he said, teachers will not only have a new place to teach, but a new method of teaching.

When building a new school, and along with it a new learning process, Lackney has five suggestions of things that must be kept in mind:

- *See new paradigms.
- *Listen to the small voices.
- *Solve the whole problem.
- *Suspend disciplinary boundaries.
- *Maintain a beginner's mindset.

In seeking new paradigms and "thinking outside of the box," architects must actually see how learning takes place in

the classrooms. "Architects need to understand what is going on in the room and be able to see where the teachers are coming from," said Lackney. "They also need to ask the right questions. Maybe instead of, 'What do you need for science class?' the question should be, 'How can I design for experimentation?' They need to get an idea of what practices are going on in the space."

Lackney said the second point, listening to small voices, is extremely important.

"We (architects) need to listen to what the youth says. Even try to remember when you were in school - how did you learn?" He gave one example where the students picked their favorite teachers, and those teachers were chosen for the building advisory board.

Solving the whole problem can often be difficult. Lackney reminded the architects that there are many people involved with the project, including teachers, students, superintendents, etc. "It also has to be realized that there is more to architecture than just the building. We have to also be concerned about everything that will be inside and outside of the building and think how we will plan for that."

Lackney also suggested suspending disciplinary boundaries. "It is necessary to think you can do other things besides what is in your job description. Teachers must see the value in what is being created and be able to adapt and change. Also, as architects we must become the educators and educate the teachers and administrators on how to use their new learning area."

Finally, by maintaining a beginner's mindset, Lackney believes risks will be taken and dumb questions will be asked, which he sees as being positive. "When architects don't ask the stupid questions, that is sometimes where they get in trouble. Sometimes risks need to be taken in order to push the boundaries."

It is good to see numerous new concepts and ideas, he said, but the true test is whether they work. Lackney discussed several examples, including a zoo school where students learn in an open environment full of plants and animals, and an IT school where there are no bells, all walls are glass and learning takes place interactively. All students have hand-held computers and do their work electronically.

"It takes time to change a teaching culture," Lackney said. And with so much focus on learning in the new world of schools, skeptics may question what happens to what some students refer to as the most important part of school - the social life. Without traditional aspects such as gymnasiums, sports teams, dances and art and music classes, some might be discouraged. However, Lackney has the answer - schools within schools and "home" schools.

He said schools within schools and home schools preserve traditional social functions while still allowing new paradigms, such as specialized schools, to be carried out. Schools within schools are those with a large student body where the building is quartered off for different areas of focus.

For example, he said, one corridor might host IT and ecommerce classes while another focuses on science. With this model, Lackney said, students are able to interact with each other, no matter what their individual focus, and participate in sports and extracurricular activities.

This is a college model, however, housed within one building.

With home schools, students would attend classes at separate facilities depending on their individual focus, and then one or two "home" schools would be provided where students could go for sports and extracurricular activities.

"Maybe the idea is to have school buildings with different curricular focuses, (but) all have the same name and develop regional sports teams," suggested Lackney.

A representative from Forest Hills Public Schools was present for Lackney's speech and stated that Forest Hills is considering something new - possibly one of these options - for a third high school currently in the planning stages.

The question of funding was something that was raised by many educators present. Lackney said there are a variety of needs and philosophies that aren't currently being met by public schools. Therefore, many parents are turning to private schools, charter schools and home schooling. By correctly marketing the "new schools," this money can be brought back in.

By creating new partnerships and adding certain elements to your school, it will become more attractive to those who have gone elsewhere," said Lackney. "With precise marketing, home-schoolers may come in for one or two classes like art or theater, and by counting those students as a percentage, your school will receive money from the state. This is a good alternative to cutting programs."

Lackney also added it is not always necessary to build brand new buildings; sometimes a new idea can start in a reconstructed school.

"These are all tools and ideas we must begin to look at as the future of our schools," said Lackney. "Not only are they the future of our schools, but they are the future of our students."

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