

Designing healthy schools our children deserve.(planning)

Lackney, Jeffrey Long, Christian

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During a one-year period, James Madison Memorial High School in Madison, WI, a school of 2,200 students, received multiple bomb threats from anonymous students.

In an effort to reinvent itself, the community and school leaders divided the campus into four groups of 500 students that included "backyards" of 25 multi-grade students spanning all social groups.

In addition to academic benefits, bomb threats disappeared overnight. Where students once felt disconnected, the community removed the barriers of isolation by building communities based upon trust.

Reclaiming School Design

The recent pattern of tragic school stories challenges school planning and management leaders to face a crucial decision--will we allow such events to inspire educational fortresses based on fear that unintentionally divide, or will we rise to the higher mission of creating learning environments that welcome, unify, and inspire?

To this end, we propose a three-layered strategy; a) using the principles of environmental design, b) moving away from monolithic and impersonal school citadels of "cells and bells," and c) developing small learning community models.

Environmental Design Principles as a Starting Point

As recent stories of tragedy echo in schools around the nation, we remind our professional teams to use environmental design principles (such as CPT-ED) as a starting point for developing campuses that inspire ideal behaviors. Through unobtrusive environmental design strategies, designers and school leaders use natural surveillance, natural access controls, and territoriality to support safe communities.

Seeking subtle environmental shifts in campus design limits outside dangers and inspires better behavioral outcomes by our own community. Rather than simply committing to overt security technology--cameras, metal detectors, electronic ID cards--we are challenged to use lighting patterns, outdoor landscaping, and awareness of relationships between the indoor and outdoor settings to encourage a pattern of desired behaviors, thus minimizing crime.

Tear Down that Fortress

Beyond environmental design solutions, we must challenge ourselves to design beyond rare occasions of tragic violence. Furthermore, we must face the underlying consequences of designing large institutional school facilities that isolate our students on a daily basis. Impersonal institutions require significant investments in security while minimizing the very community they seek to protect.

Educational planner **Prakash Nair** reminds us in "School Safety--Problem or Goal?" that we must ask if "the safety measures adopted by schools improve feelings of security, enhance morale, and improve productivity?" It seems too easy, yet unavoidable at times, to compare the design of prisons with schools in many of our communities.

"Like prisons, schools are also built like fortresses to prevent outsiders from gaining unwarranted entry and students from leaving without adult consent," warns Nair. This challenges each of us to either fuel an increase of such fortress schools or to develop design strategies that move us forward as a society.

Build Communities of Learning

The James Madison Memorial High School example demonstrates that small learning communities become safer communities through connections and enhanced awareness. As Malcolm Gladwell stresses in *The "Tipping Point,"* individuals who move beyond a community of 150 immediately begin to lose connection.

Likewise, four decades of small school research demonstrates that human-scaled learning environments foster not only academic gains, but also dramatic drops in delinquency, vandalism, and violence.

This is further echoed in the past year by a study out of the Albuquerque Public Schools (NM) demonstrating all the positive outcomes evidenced in the small schools literature.

Our schools buildings and campuses are cultural artifacts demonstrating the heart of our collective beliefs and dreams. By fostering a culture of monolithic, impersonal school citadels and fortresses, we risk losing the very soul of our communities and the trust of our children. We must move beyond the shortsighted design of intimidating security strategies and towards developing learning environments that inspire.

It is the very least our children deserve.

Jeff Lackney, Ph.D., AIA, REFP is the senior consultant, Fielding/Nair International. He can be reached at jeff@fieldingnair.com.

Christian Long, M. Ed, is president & CEO, DesignShare.com. He can be reached at christian@designshare.com. Both are members of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International.

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