As schools play an increasingly larger role in their community, here are four keys to designing school facilities for success.

Schools play a pivotal role in their community. High-quality schools offer so much more than just an education for their students; they also help strengthen the community by providing enrichment, health, and nutritional services for both children and their families.

When schools become community learning centers, everyone benefits—including students, teachers, parents, and the general public. But how schools are designed, equipped, and furnished can have a big impact on the success—or failure—of these initiatives.
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Good schools serve to energize their communities. They attract businesses and encourage community investment. They make communities a place where families want to live and stay.

Savvy school leaders know that students do better academically when they feel safe, comfortable, nourished, and inspired to learn. That’s why many K-12 leaders see the role of their institution as not just teaching students, but making sure students are happy, healthy, and secure.

What’s more, school leaders also know that students have a greater chance of success when their parents are engaged and informed.

As a result, a growing number of schools are open to the community outside normal hours to provide additional services such as adult classes, afterschool enrichment activities, student tutoring, breakfast and dinner, and even medical care.

This practice has led to a movement called “community schools,” in which school systems enter into partnerships with city agencies or nonprofit organizations to provide wraparound services that benefit the entire community.

There is evidence to suggest this approach is working. Community schools can be a successful strategy for improving schools under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, according to a June 2017 report from the National Education Policy Center and the Learning Policy Institute. The report, Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement, reveals that community schools are strongly supported by research, based on an examination of 125 peer-reviewed studies and program evaluations.

For instance, a 2003 study from Blank et al. found that community schools are making notable improvements in four key areas:

- **Student learning**: including both academic achievement and nonacademic growth.
- **School effectiveness**: There are stronger parent-teacher relationships, higher teacher satisfaction, a more positive school culture, and greater community support.
- **Family engagement**: Families are more stable, show more involvement, and take more responsibility for their children’s success.
- **Community vitality**: Communities are safer and show more civic pride.
KEY DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Whether schools have formal partnerships with community organizations in place, or they've simply embraced a larger role within the community, these additional activities typically involve opening facilities for public use outside regular school hours.

And the design of a school facility—including how it is equipped and furnished—plays a key role in these efforts.

To achieve the greatest impact, school facilities should serve a variety of community needs. According to Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizen’s Guide for Planning and Design, from the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, schools that serve as community learning centers should be accessible to people of all ages, for a wide range of purposes.

Here are four key design considerations that support this approach.

1. Involve The Community In Design

“Development must begin with a planning and design process that includes community members and reflects their needs,”

The National Clearinghouse Report

To make sure the design of a facility reflects the community’s needs, school leaders should solicit input from all stakeholder groups, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, and even community organizations. Send out surveys, convene focus groups, and form public committees or task forces to make the design process as inclusive as possible.
2. Include Shared Public Spaces That Are Accessible Year-Round

The design of a facility helps communicate your values as an institution. If the design is open and user-friendly, it serves to welcome community involvement in the school. A closed-off design sends a very different signal.

When designing a facility, think about how you can make shared spaces such as auditoriums, sports facilities, cafeterias, libraries, media centers, computer labs, and maker spaces more open and accessible to the public. For instance, if you want these spaces to be used by students or members of the public after school hours, they should be located in a way that is easily accessible from outside, with plenty of parking if possible.

“In the past, most schools were built as stand-alone instructional facilities that restricted—rather than encouraged—community access,” In contrast, today’s schools “must be designed to be more open.”

The National Clearinghouse Report

3. Embrace Flexibility And Adaptability

“The best school designs allow for spatial flexibility,” the report says. Flexible, open structures that allow spaces to be reconfigured for different types of uses expand the range of activities a school can support.

This applies to the furniture in a school as well. Tables, desks, and chairs that easily can be arranged into different configurations—and furniture with power supplies integrated seamlessly into the design—help make school facilities adaptable to several uses by students and the community.

4. Inspire Community Pride

Aesthetics matter as well. “In fulfilling these roles, schools should manifest the high standard of design appropriate to public buildings,” the report says. “They need not be costly, but they should add a sense of beauty, interest, and permanence to the community. By capturing the noble character of public architecture, they should serve as a visible symbol of community pride.”
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

The National Clearinghouse report provides several examples of these principles in action.

For instance, Michigan’s Gaylord High School was built in 1996 with the community in mind. Its performing arts center serves the entire community, with a 600-seat auditorium that is accessible from a large public entrance. Classrooms are designed to accommodate public use as well, with departmental offices where staff can securely store their personal items and valuable materials.

“School officials believe that community involvement in this project enabled passage of the school bond referendum; two previous referendums had failed,” the report says.

“The entire Gaylord community has developed a strong vested interest in its school, and students interact daily with a broad range of community members.”

At Noble High School in North Berwick, Maine, the school’s design supports project-based learning. Each of the school’s 15 academic communities has two classrooms, a large multipurpose room, a science lab, a project room, and offices for administrative and small-group use. The rooms vary in size and function, and their design creates plenty of flexibility.

“Movable partitions can be rearranged to create larger spaces,” the report explains. “In the science rooms, gas and water lines are located on outside walls to accommodate mobile lab tables. Multipurpose spaces have built-in display areas to highlight student projects for peer review, (and) more than 2,000 data ports are located throughout the learning complex.”

The entire community has equal access to the school’s resources as well.

“A large library and media center, an audiovisual center, television studio, and editing room, two gymnasiums, and a fitness center are open for community use,” the report says. “Students enrolled in the two-year culinary arts program can practice their lessons while cooking for patrons dining at the Round Table, a 50-seat restaurant with a separate entrance and access to the town square. The restaurant—its kitchen stocked with commercial cooking equipment—is open to the community during school hours, but is separate from the school cafeteria.”

By involving the community in the design process; including shared, publicly accessible spaces; embracing flexibility; and paying attention to aesthetics, K-12 leaders can inspire civic pride and enable their facilities to serve a wide variety of needs and purposes within the community for years to come—resulting in better student learning, school culture, family engagement, and community vitality.

RESOURCES
