

CULTURALSHIFT :

THE VISION OF INNOVATIVE CLASSROOMS OF TODAY HAS BECOME REALITY

By David A. Stubbs, II

When you enter one of our school facilities, you must know that you are in someplace different, you are no longer in your grandfather's school. The environments must be fun, inviting and engaging, they must say something specific about the instructors and learners who will occupy the facility."

Mission statement, CulturalShift.

Barrow Elementary School of the Clarke County School District in Athens, Georgia, opened its doors for the first time on August 6, 2013. The extensive efforts of all designers, administrators, teachers, parents, students and community members as well as the accompanying professional development has resulted in an actual cost effective design solution that responds to a multitude of 21st century ideas and beliefs that include the following notions:

- Furniture is an integral part of the three dimensional educational environment and is responsive to all 21st century ideas.
- Environments are completely fluid and mobile.
- Spaces are responsive and adaptable to a multitude of learning and teaching styles and strategies.
- Tools in educational environments must enhance the usefulness of a learning space. Tools must also be multi-functional.
- Technology is integrated and transparent.
- Untethered technology integrated into a learning environment allows for increased flexibility in a learning space.
- Facilities must be responsive to the "transitional period" of digital immigrants and natives.
- Spaces must be adaptable to an ever-changing marketplace by designing "systems and processes" to replace "products and brands"
- Every space is a learning opportunity.
- Environments are safer and healthier.
- FFE can be sustainable.

Our Approach

From our perspective, the focus on the conversations and questions about Classrooms of the Future, 21st Century classrooms and Innovated Classrooms needed to be redirected. In our opinion, an entirely different set of questions needs to



be asked. Yes, it's true that the classroom may be the landing pad or a place of basic organization for the sake of following mandated benchmarks and assessments. However, if we are to create learning environments that respond to a vast array of learning and teaching strategies, we need to broaden our approach.

Therefore, our conversations and questions that we followed in this process to create a new vision for learning environments, appeared more like "What are the educational needs of the 21st century learner", "What direction is the 21st century educational community taking" and "What does the school "facility" of the future look like?"



Our Journeys

In numerous instances in the past few years, we would hear conversations or read documentation defining the possible solution of the “Classroom of the Future.” In total excitement, we would travel by car and/or plane to find out about this new idea and or solution that has been pulling on the design community for over a decade in some circles. Upon arrival we would generally see some great ideas but the total solution was missing. Many times the solutions presented would solve some of the questions that our instruction and curriculum folks were presenting. However, the solutions would ultimately fall short of complete.

Our Decision

We decided to stop waiting on designers and manufactures to create a solution that solved the broad range of 21st century needs that were defined within our school district and create our own set of tools.

Our Standards

As we set out on the journey of creating the set of tools that fit today’s learners, we determined that we also needed to develop a set of standards. The following list is representative of the strict guidelines and principles that were established to keep us on task:

- A mission statement was adopted.

“When you enter one of our school facilities, you must know that you are in someplace different, you are no longer in your grandfather’s school. The environments must be fun, inviting and engaging, they must say something specific about the instructors and learners who will occupy the facility.”

- A set of guiding principles were created. These were created in order for us to establish a finish line.

We were very aware that during this process we needed to keep our focus on the completed task. We did not want to go down “rabbit holes” and never return. These principals are not specific to any tool or component within the environment, rather they were intended to be a guide for all decisions in the design of our new facilities. The eight guiding principles in specific order are:

1. Change the Environment
2. Reduce the Clutter
3. Integrate Untethered and Transparent Technology
4. Respond to Multiple Learning and Teaching Styles
5. Develop Mobility
6. Create Adaptable, Flexible and Recoverable Tools
7. Design Multi-Functional Tools
8. Create Fun, Inviting and Engaging Environments

- Multiple teaching and learning strategies were analyzed.

We understood that effective teachers use a vast array of teaching strategies because there is no one, single approach that adapts to all situations. We recognized that various strategies used in various combinations with various groupings and combinations of students will improve learning outcomes. We knew that the solutions that were created had to be extremely unique in order to adapt to a variety of styles. The solutions needed to be simple upon first glance, but at the same time extremely complex.

- A challenge to the designers with a new set of goals was mandated.

We created a 38-point instrument that we delivered to our architects, designers and engineers that advised the stakeholders that this venture would embrace a new energy in architectural design not unlike the work that was performed some seventy years ago in great examples of astute school design. We were fully aware that the hard work of thoughtful design, at least in our area of the country, had taken a back seat



for a large percentage of the new facilities being constructed. And, we were particularly aware of the factors that generated this sort of perceived complacency with cost leading the pack.

- Input was required from or community stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, support services and administrators.

Every single person that was part of the educational community was given an opportunity to be heard on a level playing field. All ideas were listened to and evaluated.

- Buy-in was established from all stakeholders.

We did not move forward to the next level of design until we were satisfied that the specific stakeholder groups accepted the work that had been performed to date.

- We started from scratch.

We took nothing for granted. We took everything that we knew about our facilities, regardless if it worked or not, and put those ideas behind us. Then we systematically brought one idea, component or system in at a time and evaluated it against our principles and our architectural instrument. When these items did not fit our intent we either searched for new items or created our own solutions.

Our Discovery

As we went through the process we learned and reinforced our theories and ideas. We also tested these ideas with various sets of tools. The following is a list of our findings:

- We learned that we needed to simplify.

We discovered that less is truly more. We understood that we needed to create systems and processes that replaced products and brands. For example, when technology is introduced

into an environment without subtracting or replacing the older, antiquated set of tools from the environments, the environments become more cluttered and cumbersome.

- We learned that “less paper” is more realistic than “paper less.”

At this point in time, there are going to be instances where paper and books coexist with technology and we needed to provide solutions that adapt to this concept or idea.

- We learned that we must create simultaneous professional development with instruction and curriculum as we move forward with ideas. This was paramount.

- We learned that if we were to accomplish change, we needed to change the environment.

- We learned that an entire new set of tools must emerge into the educational landscape.

- We learned that we needed to create a paradigm shift, a cultural shift.

Our Results

- We designed a multitude of new systems, processes and tools.

- We eliminated numerous parallel and redundant systems, doing more with less.

- We reallocated hundreds of thousands of dollars of savings from infrastructure, technology and casework to other systems such as operable walls and mobile furnishings.

- We created systematic and purposeful storage solutions.

We meticulously examined all needs within specific classrooms, asking such questions as what do you need in your space today, this week, this month and this year to teach? We then designed purposeful systems and/or spaces within the environment to satisfy the today and this week needs; additionally we created opportunities outside of the actual educational environment for items that fell into this month and this year categories.

- We designed adaptable environments.

Within the walls of a school community, we sought the solutions for creating learning opportunities for grouping that ranged from 1:1, an entire grade level, an entire school community and everything in between. Most importantly, our tools not only needed to respond to these situations but they need to support these opportunities of organization.

- Opportunities of perches, campfires, learning studios, teams, professional development, labs and collaboration spaces emerged.

Our Classroom

We have only been active in our new environments for a short time, but are beginning to already see rewards from our efforts. Below is a summary of ideas that are being reinforced.

- Examples of teaching strategies that “can” function within our environments
 - Personalized
 - Active
 - Student-centered
 - Student-directed
 - Inquiry Based
 - Flipped
 - Teal
 - Scale Up
 - Problem-based
 - Project-based
 - Collaborative
 - Interdisciplinary
 - Hands-on



- Transparent and untethered technology solutions that are integrated into the furniture systems allow for a multitude of learning environments, teaching strategies and are responsive to individualized learning styles.
- Mobility of the furniture and wall solutions is paramount.
 - Mobility can be a descriptive need for an entire set of tools or simply as a single piece within a system.
 - As a system, mobility is a major characteristic or underlying theme that responds to documented 21st century ideals. The need to repurpose our set of tools within educational environments, typically occurring numerous times throughout the day, requires ease of change in this set of tools.

- Examples of mobility reinforce the desired stakeholder direction from passive to active learning, mobile teaching and project based learning to name a few.
- The more options that each component has only enhances the adaptability, mobility and flexibility of a specific environment.
- Another benefit gained from a multi-functional set of tools is the ability of stakeholders to do more with less; supporting the principle to reduce clutter.
- As a response to numerous guiding principles to streamline the learning environments by creating a reduction of the amount furnishings and equipment, the critical need for creating tools that are multi-functional becomes paramount.
- Out of approximately 100 examples in three separate facilities, we have not observed one classroom arranged in rows facing a perceived front of the space.
- If the marketplace does not provide appropriate solutions to fit your individualized needs, it's acceptable to create your own solution.

About David Stubbs, II

David Stubbs serves as director of facilities planning & construction for Clarke County School District, Athens, Georgia. David received his Bachelor of Science degree in Architecture from The Ohio State University and has more than 18 years of experience in education facility design, planning and construction. His passion to improve the design of school facilities is being realized in the constant evolution of school facilities in Athens, Ga. He manages a five-year budget of about \$103 million dollars from a SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) revenue stream. This voter-approved referendum authorizes a 1 percent sales tax on purchases in the county, providing funding for the district's capital outlay projects. David recently was cited as a champion by the EPA for leading the charge to host a regional EPA, IAQ Symposium in Athens, Ga. Other accomplishments include a 2012 ACC Water Conservation Award as well as a 2013 USGBC Water Efficiency Award for creative design solutions at Fowler Drive Elementary School, which included grey-water retention systems providing water for flushing water closets, irrigation and rain gardens.