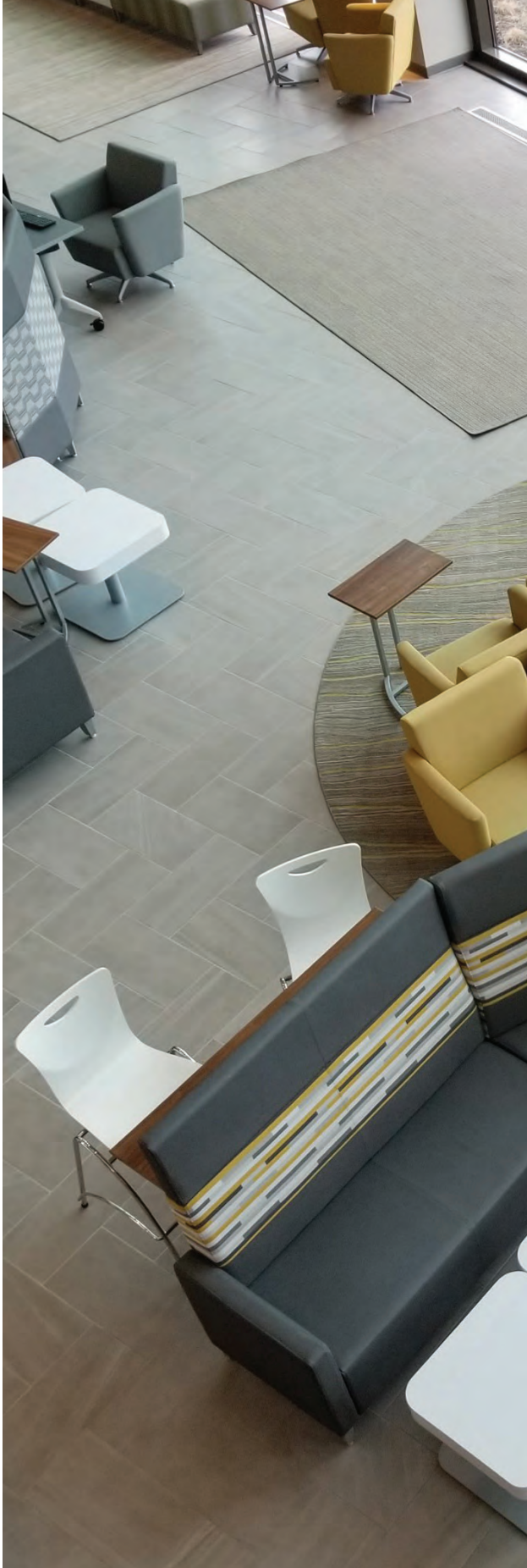
LEARNING IS AMPLIFIED IN SPACES DESIGNED FOR STUDENTS TO FEEL BELONGING.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

Dr Robert Dillon, an expert on the design of the education space, suggests six ways in which we can showcase the positive impacts of learning environments.

In education, it would be great if every instructional decision that we made had a direct and clear impact on the academic achievement of students, but it is rare that we can isolate a variable, especially individual decisions of teachers, and its effect on test scores. The realm of classroom and school design is no different. Design is an intentional act of hundreds, if not thousands, of micro decisions based on research and best practice that happen in real time each day. This can make it easy for educational pundits to question why we should be spending money on where students learn, but the reality is that a proper environment can create the conditions needed for excellence, and it is our role to explain this reality in six, clear, powerful ways that resonate with our families and communities. These six ways of intentionally designing learning environments will set students up for success.



1. Space as a place of belonging

The world in which our students navigate can be confusing and disorienting at best, and one that creates loneliness and isolation for most. Although these emotions and feelings emerge in our older students in ways that are expressed in words, all students are feeling these waves in our complex and uncertain world. With these increasing realities, it is essential that students know that they have a welcoming, belonging place in their classrooms. This happens when the colour palette is coherent, the messages – both verbal and non-verbal – speak to kindness and compassion, and students can see themselves on the images on the walls and displays in the space. Learning is amplified in spaces designed for students to feel belonging. This level of design can't be left to chance or it will put a drag on even the best instruction.

2. Space as experience

Experiences make learning sticky. Many of our students get these learning experiences through their lives beyond school, but there is a growing set of students that don't experience life in a robust way because of the impact of poverty, stress and/or trauma. When we look to serve these students, it is more important than ever to design our spaces so that students are gaining experience from our spaces. What spaces do this well? Museums are a great example of learning spaces that provide experiences. Although classrooms can't be museums, there are a number of aspects of experiential learning that can be a part of classroom design. This includes zones and activities in which students can participate and interact. This may mean allowing our space to showcase new ideas through rotational displays that include visuals that are engaging and relevant to students. Students should have experiences in all classrooms based on the instructional activities that are designed, but they should also be able to activate and transfer their learning based on impactful stimulus provided in the classroom design.

3. Space as inspiration

When we are surrounded by beauty, our chances for unique thoughts and inspiration rise. Our sense of awe grows, and our brain gets turned on to new connections. This should provide us with inspiration and is a reason to design with intention. Not all of our students are surrounded by beautiful things during the other hours of their lives, and this makes it essential that our spaces provide students with inspiration to learn. When our students get to see art and artifacts, it can create a sense of wonder and curiosity. When our students can interact with furnishings that aren't old, tired and worn, but showcase a dignity for learning, there is a greater opportunity for our students to find their passion. Allow your design to not only be functional, but also inspirational if you want your instruction to be magnified.

4. Space as comfort

Learning is hard, and the schedule demands that we make upon our students can accelerate these issues. Moving from space to space to learn on a schedule, at times during the day when the brain isn't always primed, creates troughs of energy and engagement. Content can be difficult even when the morning goes smoothly, deadlines aren't approaching or there isn't stress at home, but when these things exist, students need a comfortable space to learn. This doesn't mean that students are lying on a couch or having a nap during class. It means that students have the choice to move throughout a learning period, choose where they learn best and not get bombarded with light and sound that distracts them. Control the elements that you can through your design, so that students can pause life, prime their brains and prepare for maximum learning.

5. Space as healing

Our spaces will never be counsellors or social workers, but they can supplement the support through their design. Does your space increase student stress or reduce it? This question can only be answered when we co-design with students. Are we getting feedback about how our space impacts their work and lives? Great classrooms are malleable to the students that are learning in them. This doesn't mean that everything needs to shift every hour of the day, but it does mean having spaces in which students can slow their bodies and minds, reflect and get some additional quiet.

Stark classrooms or their polar opposite, visually noisy classrooms, both enhance stress. Find a middle ground that showcases organisation and orderliness. This will allow your student to take a breath and feel supported in their struggles in life and learning.

6. Space as a teaching palette

Most of our focus on classroom design should remain on crafting a learning experience for our students, but it should be noted that how space is designed and furnished deeply impacts the level of instruction in our classrooms. Teachers in many cases facilitate learning despite their space, not because of it. Classroom environments should empower teachers and let them have easy access to the technology that they need, the configurations of seating that they need (to complement their daily lessons) and the conditions that allow them to be mentally sharp to make the best decisions that they can, in real time, based on student readiness for learning. ■

WHEN WE ARE SURROUNDED BY BEAUTY, OUR CHANCES FOR UNIQUE THOUGHTS AND INSPIRATION RISE. OUR SENSE OF AWE GROWS, AND OUR BRAIN GETS TURNED ON TO NEW CONNECTIONS.

Dr Robert Dillon is a Doctor of Education (EdD) focused in educational leadership and administration. He is also the author, along with Rebecca Louise Hare, of The Space: A Guide for Educators, The Space: A Guide for Leaders *and an upcoming book* Creating Space: A Reflective Journey.