REDESIGNING
SCHOOL LIBRARIES
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

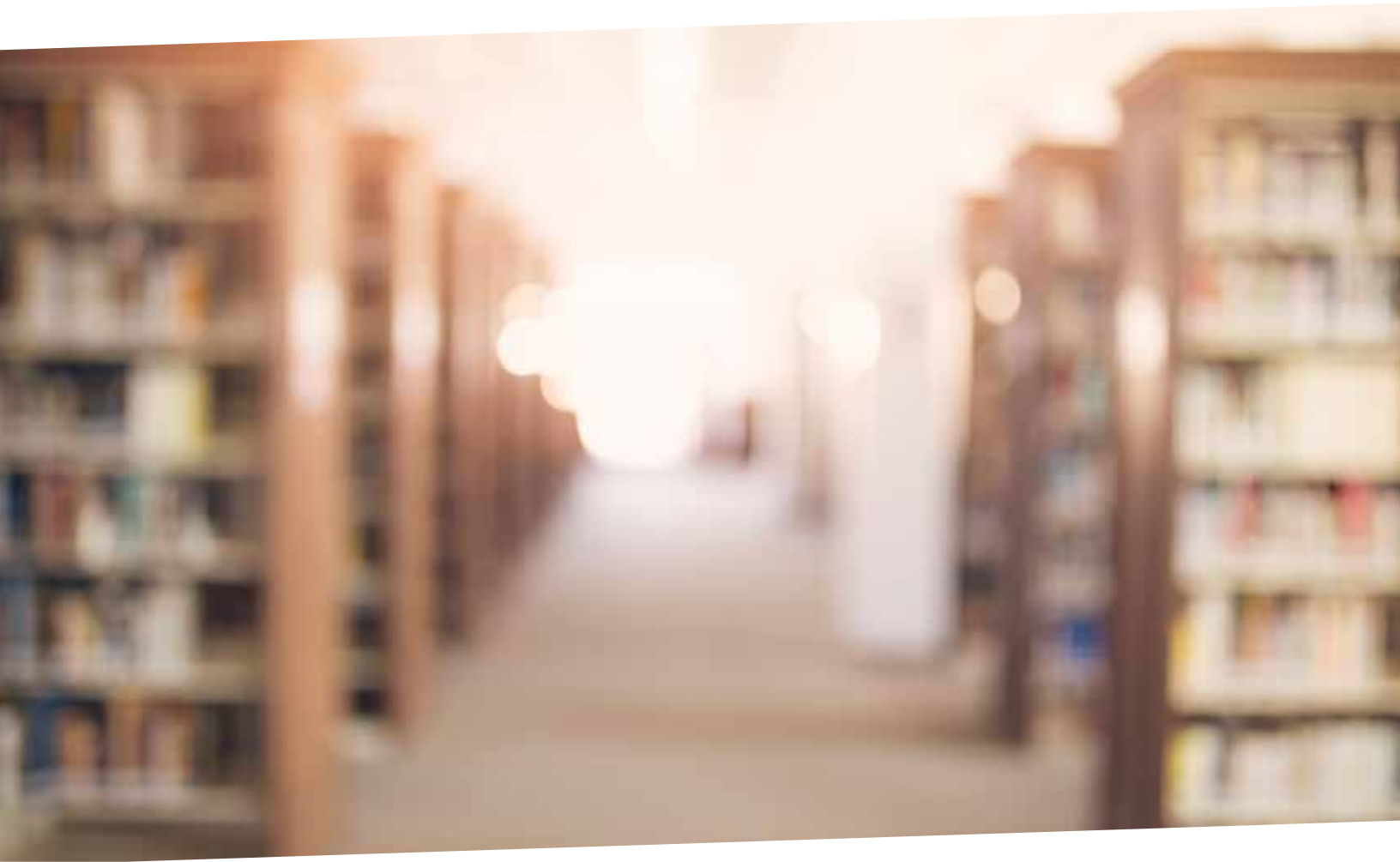How to transform traditional school libraries into vibrant 21st century learning centers

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Introduction

Close your eyes and picture the school libraries you spent time in as a youth.

If we could take snapshots of every reader's memories and compare them to each other, chances are they'd look pretty similar: Rows of thick wooden shelving piled high with books. Students sitting quietly at tables, reading independently or perhaps working together in hushed tones.

The school library was a place you came to check out books, or look up information in encyclopedias or other reference materials as you compiled a research report. Younger students would have story time, and older students might use the library for studying.

With a few notable exceptions, the advent of the Internet changed this picture only slightly. Banks of computers replaced some of the reference collections, but the basic design of school library spaces remained the same.

A Powerful Shift

Now, that has begun to change. Networked mobile devices have given students limitless access to information in the palm of their hands. With a world of information now just a click or finger swipe away, the teacher's role is no longer just to impart information, but to have students co-construct new knowledge—often in collaboration with each other. Learning is becoming more active and engaging, with students in charge of their own learning.

As teaching and learning have shifted in these fundamental ways, school libraries are transforming as well. **Consider the following examples:**

- At Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, Mass., where all students use laptop computers for learning, the school has transitioned to a "bookless library." A database with millions of digital texts replaced its 20,000-volume collection of books, and a café replaced the circulation desk. Instead of being a quiet place for students to study individually, the library is now a vibrant hub for digital learning and conversation.[1]

- Chicago's Francis W. Parker School has redesigned its traditional library—with its cubicles and stacks that hindered collaboration—into one that fosters communication and cooperative learning. The school constructed a flexible, multipurpose space with moveable chairs, desks and even bookshelves to support group projects, and students can write on the sides of the bookshelves with dry-erase markers.[2]

- At the International School at Dundee, a magnet elementary school in Riverside, Conn., students aren't told to keep their voices down in the library. In fact, the room can become quite noisy as students question guest speakers or give presentations to their classmates. In a maker space area of the library, students use a 3D printer to bring their creations to life. The school's library is no longer a place for students just to check out a book or read; instead, students come for a variety of activities. They visit more often and stay longer as well.[3]

More Important Than Ever

In today's information-rich society, with the Internet at our fingertips, students and teachers no longer need a library for access to information. But that doesn't mean school libraries have become irrelevant.

On the contrary, it can be argued that school libraries are more important today than ever. They serve as a focal point for helping students and teachers navigate the flood of information available online and distinguish fact from fiction. In many school libraries, teachers and media specialists are teaming up to teach classes together, with the media specialist focusing on the technology and information literacy skills that students need to become effective citizens in the Digital Age.

As learning becomes more participatory, requiring a co-construction of knowledge from many sources, school libraries are transforming from archives of information into "learning commons," where students come to learn key 21st-century skills and construct new knowledge together.

This new model is changing the design of school library spaces. Printed books are still important, but library spaces are no longer consumed by rows of shelving. For instance, there are more open spaces and common areas that allow students and teachers to get together for creating, sharing and collaborating.

As school libraries evolve to meet the changing needs of staff and students, K-12 leaders are charged with designing library spaces that can support these emerging needs. This guide is intended to help you do this effectively.

Within these pages, you'll find a list of steps ushering you through the redesign process, a bevy of ideas to inspire you, and a catalog of issues to consider as you seek to transform your own school libraries into dynamic 21st century learning commons.

Chapter 1
THE REDESIGN PROCESS

Redesigning your school library requires rethinking how you want the space to function—and what new roles you would like it to serve. As technology becomes an increasingly important part of education, and as teaching and learning continue to evolve, how will these shifts affect the use of your library space?

Through the website DiscoverDesign.org, the Chicago Architecture Foundation offers a series of design challenges for students. One of the these challenges is to redesign the school library space.[4] Although this challenge is intended for students, the advice it contains applies equally well to K-12 leaders.

According to DiscoverDesign, here are three key steps to follow in the redesign process.

1. Gather Information

You can't propose a new solution until you have fully assessed your needs.
To do this effectively, you should involve all stakeholders in the process,
so you are getting input from multiple perspectives.

Here are some action steps to guide you.

- Articulate an overarching mission or purpose for your school library. If its
  purpose used to be proving access to information, what is its purpose today?
  This could be helping students make sense of the information around them,
  making sure they know how to find the information they need or preparing
  them to be effective digital citizens, to give a few examples.

- List all the needs you would like your school library to serve. Include every
  function you can think of that would advance the mission or purpose you
  have just articulated. Don't be afraid to be creative or expansive; you'll
  have a chance to whittle this list down later. For now, let your only limit
  be your imagination.

- List all of the features you like about your existing library setup. Then, consider
  all the ways your current library is not very well designed or doesn't meet the
  needs you outlined in the previous step.

- Survey or interview students, teachers and library staff to get their feedback
  on these questions. What new features or functions would they like to see in
  their school library? What changes would they make to the current space if
  they had the chance?

- Measure the dimensions of your current library. Take photos of the existing
  space. Consider how many students it should be able to accommodate during
  a given class period, as well as how many books and additional resources you
  will need to make space for.

- Research how other schools have redesigned their library spaces.
  This guidebook is a good start, but you can also search online and visit
  neighboring school districts to get additional ideas.

2. Brainstorm Ideas

Once you have gathered this information, the next step is to think about the implications of your findings. Then, you can begin sketching out some rough ideas for how to approach the space.

Here are some suggestions to guide you.

- Form a design committee that includes students, teachers, library staff and parents. This will ensure that all stakeholder groups are represented in the design process.

- Prioritize your needs and goals. Consider which uses of the space are most important to you. Make separate lists for the functions that are non-negotiable, those you'd like to accommodate if you can fit them into your budget, and those you can live without.

- Think about the design elements that will enable you to meet the goals you've deemed most important. For instance, if one of your goals is to make the library an inviting place where students will want to gather, might a café make sense as part of the design? If a goal is to foster creativity and technology skills, should you consider adding a maker space?

- Identify the design elements you like from libraries in other schools or districts, and consider how you can incorporate those ideas into your own project.

- Sketch out a rough floor plan of your redesigned library space. Start thinking about where the various design elements you'd like to include might fit.

3. Develop A Solution

Once you have some rough ideas in mind, you can begin establishing a final plan. At this stage, it might make sense to bring in an architect to help you with your planning.

Here is some other advice as well.

- As you're designing the space, consider what types of furniture would be most appropriate, based on how you envision the space will be used. Also, consider what kinds of media you will need, such as large screen monitors or interactive whiteboards, "huddle stations" to support collaboration or video conferencing equipment.

- Think about the role that lighting plays in the space, and how you can bring more natural lighting to bear.

- As you are drafting your plans, consider what kind of budget you have, and how this might impact the final design.

- Run your initial ideas by students and staff for their approval. Ask for their input, and incorporate this feedback into the final design process.

Chapter 2

IDEAS FOR INSPIRATION

K-12 leaders who have transformed their school libraries are finding that students are naturally drawn to these vibrant new centers of activity.

"One of the first things that I see when people create a learning commons is that kids come in, and they really want to be there because there's so much going on," said David Loertscher, a professor in San Jose State University's School of Information. "It's a space that turns over to the user, rather than the user having to adapt to the space."[5]

Here are some ideas from school library redesign projects around the country.

A 'Think Tank' For Solving Key Challenges

At Swan Valley High School in Saginaw, Mich., "our library is the hub of the school," wrote Library Media Specialist Kay Wejrowski. "Each year, our library morphs itself into what the school needs."[6]

Wejrowski and her aides help teachers plan lessons, such as developing probing questions encouraging students to compare historical slavery with today's human trafficking. Library lessons for all incoming freshmen lay the groundwork for their success in high school, teaching them about the resources that are available, how to be safe online and how to create a digital footprint they can be proud of.

The school has turned part of its library into a maker space, and students also use the facility to videoconference with authors, Holocaust survivors and people from other parts of the world. Each spring, library staff help students research their senior projects and give constructive feedback on students' presentations.

When the Swan Valley School District cut bus funding to take preschoolers to the public library, the high school created an early childhood center in its library, with teens developing and teaching weekly reading lessons for these children. When the school went 1:1 with tablets for all students, a library workroom was converted into a technology troubleshooting and repair station.

In short, it is the school's library—which received the 2013 Library Program of the Year award from the American Association of School Librarians—that "often serves as a think tank for evolving ideas and programs and finds solutions to local challenges," Wejrowski noted.

A 'Barrier-Free Space'
For Learning And Innovation

When Westlake High School in Austin, Texas, redesigned its library, Librarian Carolyn Foote saw this as an opportunity to think beyond the traditional confines.

"I knew that I wanted the library to be a campfire space where students could gather, a collaborative space where they could work together in small groups, a transparent space where learning in the school could be 'seen' through the windows, a more barrier-free space in terms of student use and an innovative space where the design would reflect the innovations that are going on inside our campus," she wrote.[7]

To achieve these goals, the Westlake library includes glass walls, an outdoor courtyard area and a "juice bar" that encourages students and teachers to congregate, communicate and share in the learning process.

Foote took inspiration from how other public spaces, such as coffee houses, were designed to be both comfortable and attractive. She hoped for a place where students would want to gather and hang out as they learned or studied together. So, she paid attention to small details such as the lighting fixtures, seating options and colors in her own library's design.

Her advice for other K-12 leaders as they redesign their library spaces?

"Watch how students are using your current space. Watch what is giving them problems or causing confusion. Watch what their preferences are. Try to identify those key things about the space that do—or do not—work for your customers."

For instance: "Why not use bookstore signage to help students navigate [the Dewey Decimal System] better? Can bookcases be more mobile for rearrangement, so the library can be used for different gatherings?"

Moving From A 'Transactional' To A 'Transformational' Space

In transforming the library at Pomperaug Elementary School in Southbury, Conn., Media Specialist Jane Martellino began by changing the way she taught information literacy skills to students.

"The focus should be … on the shift libraries must make from transactional to transformational. I believe this shift occurs first in mindset, and then the physical transformation of the library space follows," she said. [8]

"By changing both the way I taught, as well as the expectations for student learning, the results were obvious. Students were collaborating, creating, communicating and dropping in any time they had moments to spare. In no time at all, mindset shifted."

However, changes to the physical space had to be made incrementally, owing to budget constraints.

Martellino began by making simple changes, such as cleaning out her librarian's office and transforming it into a "green screen" room and recording studio. She also enlisted the help of custodians to move furniture in order to create larger spaces for specific learning needs as they arose.

Her vision going forward includes...

- More flexible, agile furniture that can be moved easily without the help of custodians;

- Portable dividers with writeable surfaces, such as Plexiglas walls on wheels;

- Comfortable seating with built-in electrical outlets to welcome students and teachers to gather informally and chat; and

- Collaboration hot spots where students can connect their mobile devices to flat screens for group collaboration or Skyping with experts.

2

A. A&D® Student Desk

Available in seven work surface shapes, height adjusts in one inch increments from 24"-34", also offered in elementary heights that adjust from 16"-24"

B. READY™ 4-Leg Chair with Casters

Available in child, youth and adult heights (14-inch, 16-inch and 18-inch) in 16 shell finishes, stacks 6 high

C. INFORMATION COMMONS™ Series Double Face Shelving

Hidden cantilever shelving offers clean lines and superior structural strength, frame structure supports 3/4" shelving, integrated wire management in base of unit allows for future addition of technology and lighting options, four heights available

D. BLENDER®

Stand alone, or blend into an existing configuration, available in hundreds of fabric options with or without button decoration on seat

Library 2

A. **READY™ 4-Leg Chair with Casters**

Available in child, youth and adult heights (14-inch, 16-inch and 18-inch) in 16 shell finishes, stacks 6 high

B. **A&D® Student Desk**

Available in seven work surface shapes, height adjusts in one inch increments from 24"-34", also offered in elementary heights that adjust from 16"- 24"

C. **MOTIV® Stool**

Available at 15" or 20" height with casters or glides

D. **INFORMATION COMMONS™ Series Single Face Shelving**

Hidden cantilever shelving offers clean lines and superior structural strength, frame structure supports 3/4" shelving, integrated wire management in base of unit allows for future addition of technology and lighting options, four heights available

E. **BLENDER®**

Stand alone, or blend into an existing configuration, available in hundreds of fabric options with or without button decoration on seat

F. **A&D® Crossfit Teacher Desk & Podium**

Features storage with adjustable shelf and a locking door, optional magnetic connecting side table

G. **READY™ Task Chair**

Adjustable-height, mobile task chair available in 16 shell finishes

Library 3

A. READY™ 4-Leg Stool with Glides

Available in counter and café heights (25-inch and 30-inch) with three glide options and 16 shell finishes

B. MOTIV® Occasional Table

MOTIV® Occasional Tables are complementary to MOTIV® Soft Seating, tables come in a laminate top and are offered in round, rectangle or square shapes

C. MOTIV® Highback Sofa

Available with or without power on right and left, front and back, with or without shelf

D. INFORMATION COMMONS™ Series Single Face Shelving

Hidden cantilever shelving offers clean lines and superior structural strength, frame structure supports 3/4" shelving, integrated wire management in base of unit allows for future addition of technology and lighting options, four heights available

E. MOTIV® Single Chair Armless

Available with or without tablet and/or power on right or left

F. MAKER™ Idea Board

Features double-sided dry erase finish that is both a writing surface and magnetic

G. Meeting & Café Table

Available in rectangle, round and square shapes in both sitting and standing heights

H. READY™ 4-Leg Chair with Casters

Available in child, youth and adult heights (14-inch, 16-inch and 18-inch) in 16 shell finishes, stacks 6 high

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Chapter 3

FIVE KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The learning goals you have for your library will dictate the kinds of activities that will take place there—and these, in turn, will influence the design of the space and the tools, resources and other materials that will equip it.

Here are five additional aspects to keep in mind as you rethink the design of your school library.

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1. Flexibility

Creating a flexible space, with furniture and shelving that easily can be moved and rearranged into different configurations, expands the range of activities you can support in your library. It also prevents you from being locked into a limited number of uses for the space, should your needs continue to grow.

2. Openness

Make sure you include open spaces in your design, to allow for students and teachers to gather together for learning and collaboration. If the space is too cluttered, it will inhibit collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. Also, consider how you can improve sight lines and make the space seem more open and inviting, such as by using open shelving or glass walls.

3. Comfort

Your library should be a place where students and teachers want to drop in, hang around, have conversations and learn. Providing soft, comfortable seating options, using warm colors and adding unique design touches will help ensure that students spend time in your library and explore the many resources you have to offer.
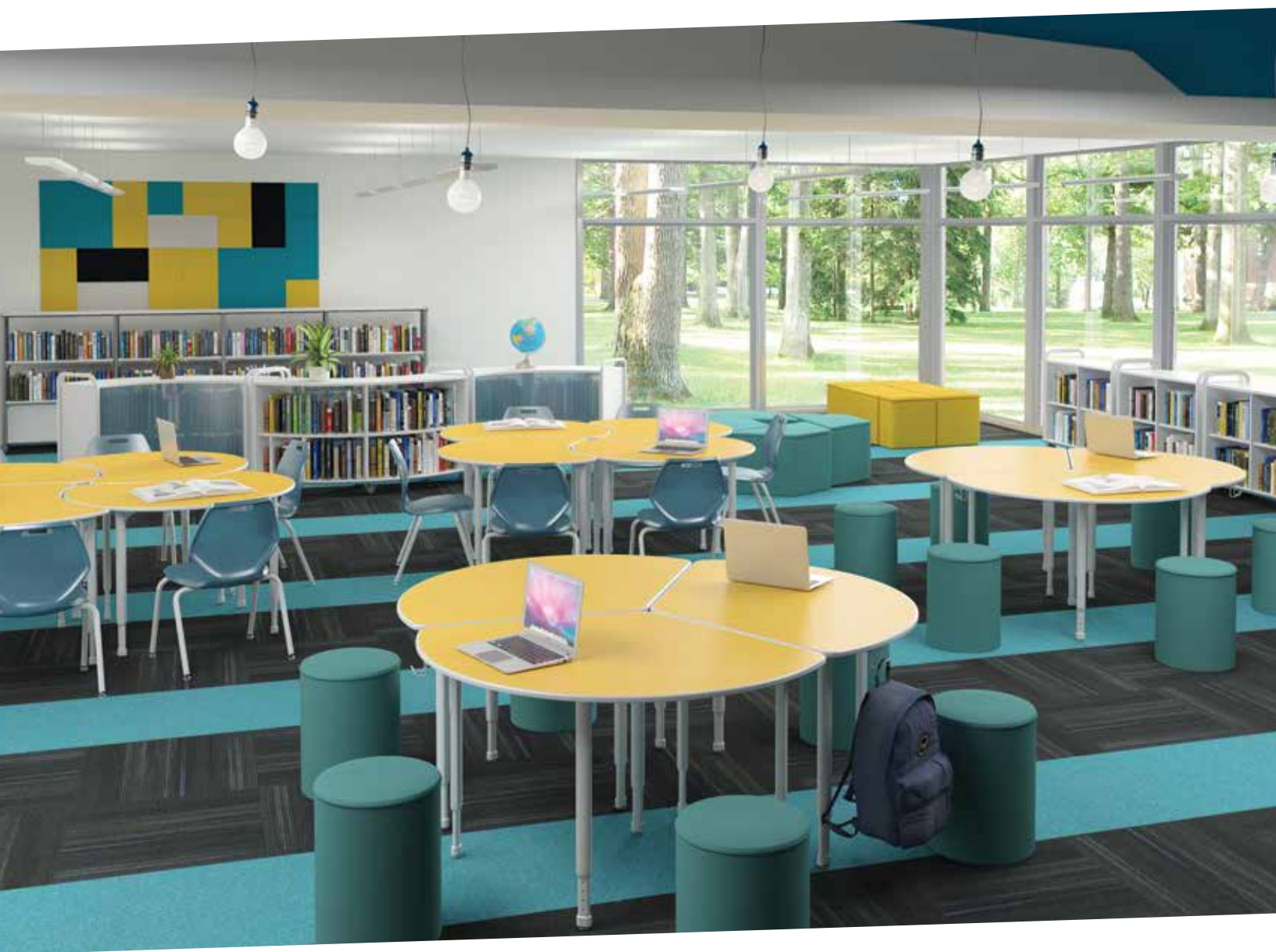
4. Infrastructure

Make sure your library includes enough power outlets to support the ever-increasing assortment of electronic devices that students come to school with. Power outlets should be made liberally available throughout the space, and one way to do this is to use tables and soft seating options with embedded power supplies—so students can charge their devices as they research or learn.

Also, make sure your library offers secure wireless Internet access throughout the facility. Students and teachers should never struggle to get an Internet connection, or they won't use your library for learning—so make sure you have enough Wi-Fi access points to accommodate their needs.

5. Access

When redesigning your library, consider whether you would like to make the space open and accessible to the public, because this will affect the design of the space as well. For instance, if you want your school library to be used by students or members of the community after school hours, it should be located in a way that is easily accessible from outside, with plenty of parking if possible.

Conclusion

As the purpose and function of school libraries evolves, transforming the physical space to accommodate these changes becomes imperative. With some thoughtful planning and a touch of creativity, you can design vibrant, 21st-century library spaces that serve as a central hub for digital teaching, learning and research in your school community.

Additional Resources

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