

Director's Dispatch

SCHOOL DESIGN STANDARDS

Spring 2018



As the teaching and learning environment of the 21st century continues to evolve in order to meet the needs of today's learners and tomorrow's work places, the importance of thoughtfully developed and carefully implemented guidelines for new builds and renovations of schools is an engaging, timely topic for decision makers in public education.

In a recent edition of its [Capacity Building Series](#), the Ministry of Education Ontario highlights the teaching and learning environment as “the third teacher”...an environment that can either enhance the kind of learning that optimizes students' potential for creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation, or, detract from it (*Capacity Building Series: Special Edition #27, The Third Teacher*, Ministry of Education Ontario, July 2012).

“A classroom that is functioning successfully as a third teacher will be responsive to the children's interests, provide opportunities for children to make their thinking visible and then foster further learning and engagement.” ~ Fraser (2012) in *Capacity Building Series: Special Edition #27, The Third Teacher*, Ministry of Education Ontario (July 2012).

As Chief Education Officer of the Renfrew County District School Board, I am keenly interested in the impact and influence the teaching and learning environment can have on the achievement and well-being of students, staff and school communities. As such, a key action of our [RCDSB 2017-2020 Strategic Plan](#) involves the establishment of a set of standards to guide future school designs in support of the guiding principles of ‘Excellence in Teaching and Learning’, ‘Safe, Caring, Inclusive and Respectful Environments’, and ‘Wise Use of Resources’. Aging infrastructure, finite resources and a desire to support emerging pedagogies over time are primary drivers behind the formation of these standards.



With this in mind, a School Design Standards Committee (SDSC) was created in the Fall of 2017, tasked to review and make recommendations regarding the spaces within schools, with the dual goals of supporting effective pedagogical approaches (including the nurturing of 21st century competencies in addition to knowledge and skills in the areas of literacy and numeracy) while providing responsible stewardship with respect to resources and funding. The SDSC's mandate over a two-year period includes: conducting an environmental scan of school designs elsewhere in provincial, national and international contexts; collecting feedback from stakeholders in the system; developing a 'scope of work' to obtain the services of an architect; and, working collaboratively with the architect to establish a final version of the guideline.

“Quality teaching is the biggest within school driver of student outcomes. As there are a variety of teaching and learning programmes delivered within learning spaces, academic research has traditionally struggled to isolate the impact of space on learning. The evidence, however, does demonstrate the importance of a teaching and learning programme suited to the space. It suggests that the learning space must be explicitly considered as part of planning and delivery to leverage the full potential of its impact on student outcomes.” ~ *The Impact of Physical Design on Student Outcomes*, Report of the Government of New Zealand, 2016

The '[Summary of Key Findings](#)' of the SDSC, to date, emphasizes the value of durability, flexibility, variability, and ergonomics – the study of people's efficiency in their working environment – as key elements of a guideline for new builds and renovations of the future. More specifically, the SDSC highlights the following key points in its summary:

- furniture and equipment needs to suit the requirements of the classroom and the age and size of the students therein, and, may have multiple purposes and uses in support of the needs of learners;
- classrooms need a variety of spaces for learning, play and/or study including quiet spaces for independent work, circular seating for group discussion, and break-out places for collaboration;
- schools need to be warm and welcoming, including open spaces/atria at entrances, for instance, while ensuring the safety of students and staff (inclusive of lines of sight to/from offices and/or entrances);
and,
- natural light (with window treatments), dim lighting (for variability of use if/as appropriate), multiple communication stations (e.g., phones and/or video screens), mobile and reliable technology (including sound Wi-Fi connection and multiple charging outlets), acoustic/noise-absorbing materials, and storage areas as essential aspects for consideration.



Of note, a report from the University of Salford (2015), entitled “*Clever Classrooms*”, underscored the impact that well-designed classrooms can have on student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. In fact, researchers found that differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms can boost student performance by up to 16% in one year. Examples of the characteristics studied in the report include: light, temperature, air quality, colour and flexibility (room design, display, furniture).

The work of the SDSC builds upon the work that is currently taking place in a number of schools across the district related to New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL). This initiative helps students develop the global competencies of creative and critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, character education and citizenship, both locally and globally. The work also supports educators in expanding experiential learning opportunities for their students, in addition to leveraging digital in their teaching and learning environments. Further, the SDSC acknowledges that all buildings and properties – whether new builds or renovations – must be AODA compliant by 2025. All of our district’s facilities, rightly, will be required to meet the needs of persons with disabilities in the near future.

“Look at your learning space with 21st century eyes: Does it work for what we know about learning today, or just for what we know about learning in the past?” ~ Sir Ken Robinson, *The Third Teacher*, 2010

I am excited about the work this fine committee has produced to date, led by its co-chairs – Superintendent Steve Blok and Manager Bill Murray – and look forward to the final version of the standards for school designs. This forward-thinking, innovative document will undoubtedly serve us well as a guideline in deliberations related to effective instructional practices in the short-term, as well as accommodation planning in the long-term.

Sincerely,



Pino Buffone

Director of Education

