



A Student-Eye View

When planning for your new school, you may want to listen to what your students think about the design. What they say might surprise you and help to build a better school

We students spend at least six hours a day and 180 days a year within the four walls of school buildings, where we learn academic lessons and also socialize with friends. As a result of spending our teenage years inside a school, we share a special perspective on how schools should be designed, and how they should function.

Last year, I was a senior at Washington's Marysville-Pilchuck High School. During my sophomore year, the Marysville School District began

plans to build a new high school. I am in a wheelchair. As I looked at the plans for the new school during a public forum, I realized small, simple changes could make the campus more accessible to those with mobility impairments.

I pointed out a few issues to the designer, who asked that he and I meet to go over the plans more extensively. A few days later, I met with the design team and my ideas and suggestions were welcomed.

For example, I noticed the bathroom mirrors were placed very high on the wall. As a teenage girl, this is a problem, and one the designers might not

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have realized had I stayed silent. The designers listened to my suggestions and placed the mirrors at a more accessible height. From that experience, I have become very passionate about getting students involved in the design process.

Involved from the beginning

Students can raise awareness about the need for renovations or for a new school, especially if they feel invested in the project. Involve students in pre-bond activities such as evaluating existing buildings, developing goals, and analyzing polling and surveying data. At the very least, a diverse group of students should be involved in a design and goal-setting session.

Matthew Harris, a former student, was involved in the design meetings of the new Marysville-Getchell High School.

“During the Marysville project, it felt great to help the community. The school board was very welcoming to my ideas about what the students would like to have done to their school. It was a great learning experience,” says Harris.

Sheri O’Brien, an architect with the DLR Group, told me: “It’s amazing how people tend to like a space more if they feel that they had the opportunity to have their voice heard and provide input.”

Even the quiet kids

Schools are a melting pot of opinions and ideas. The outspoken student body president may have some good input, but the shy, quiet student may also have good ideas, if you ask. These kids will not always come to you; you have to go to them.

At my school, DLR Group designers asked students what they wanted in a new school, as well as from renovations to the existing school. Interviews took place in diverse classes such as advanced art, science, German, math, and special education. Designers videotaped the sessions, and I viewed the tapes. I saw students speak up and provide valuable suggestions. Students who normally walk to class with their heads hung low became engaged in the conversation because they felt their opinions were valued.

Some administrators and designers might believe that students’ ideas will be unreasonable and therefore a waste of time. However, the ideas I heard from the interviews/sessions were simple, yet innovative. Kids were not asking for fast food and rocket ships, just for comfortable chairs.

Craig Mason, a designer with the DLR Group, raves: “I continue to be amazed at how serious students are when given the opportunity to provide their input, and how perceptive they are regarding their education and environment.”

Discussions with students should be informal so that they feel comfortable sharing ideas. This is why the classroom setting works to receive input.

“We tried a few strategies to get more student voices in the process,” says Loretta Boerger, a teacher at Marysville-Pilchuck High School. “We had conversations with student focus groups and also brought DLR Group designers to our classrooms to explain the process and ask for input. Those conversations were invaluable and should definitely be continued.”

Try it on for size

As design nears completion, students can provide feedback on what we like or don’t like. Together with designers and administrators, we can help weigh the pros and cons of each design idea, and ultimately create a project that everyone likes.

Once designers grab students’ attention, they must keep it. Let us help pick materials, fixtures, and furnishings. Many times my taller friends complain that they have to scrunch to get into their desks, while my shorter friends complain because they can’t reach something in an overhead cabinet. Challenges such as these can easily be fixed with a little collaboration.

In one of my classes, my desk needed to be raised because it was too low to accommodate my chair. After it was raised, my teacher said, “I know where all the basketball players will want to sit now.”

After the school is open, students can help with post-occupancy reviews. Since they “live” in the school, they know what works and what doesn’t. If you incorporate student input from the beginning, you may find students are generally happier with their school environment and fewer adjustments need to be made.

In the history books

Future students of the new Marysville-Getchell High School recently participated in a beam-signing ceremony. Eighteen students were selected to sign the final beam of one of the school’s five buildings.

“I’m so excited to be here. This is my future high school,” says student Louie Vital. “I can’t wait to go here. I’m going to bring back my old friends and say, ‘Look, this is what I wrote. It’s my name.’ I’m a part of this school.”

By getting and keeping students involved in the design and construction process, administrators and designers allow students to have a voice and make changes they feel are necessary to improve the learning environment for future generations. So often, the student perspective is overlooked. I challenge you to involve students in your design process. Our feedback and desire to help will prove invaluable. ■

Shelby Hintze is a graduate of Washington’s Marysville-Pilchuck High School.