DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS 2.0





DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS

The Background

In early 2022, three years and one pandemic after our original teacher survey, Corgan tapped into the power of design research methodologies and Hugo, the firm's research team, to understand how teacher perspectives, needs, and pain points related to school design have evolved. With 36 in-depth interviews and a survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers nationwide, the survey allowed for both longitudinal comparison to the original 2019 study as well as new insights into how design can better support teacher satisfaction, performance, recruitment, and ultimately, student outcomes. Below is a summary of the insights that came out of our research, each of which we dive into detail on throughout this report.

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Introduction Top 5 Lessons from Teachers and What They Want from the Classroom

Few professions were upended by the past two years as much as teachers. Met with immediate school shutdowns, social distancing, technology inequities, and learning gaps, the urgent responses to the pandemic introduced new challenges and exacerbated old ones. The pressure on teachers, however, extends beyond direct, temporal challenges to meet the moment. Instead, accelerated shifts in pedagogy, technology, as well as student and teacher expectations demand teachers also navigate our new normal and the enduring changes in how we learn and work.

For an already strained profession, it means adjusting to leaps in student-centric improvements and new responsibilities with relatively little progress in the support available to teachers. The resurgence of personalized learning, for instance, intensifies the limitations of school and staff resources. Heightened fluidity escalates and magnifies around-the-clock teacher responsibilities. New technology sharpens the disconnect and distractions. While school design, programs, and policies are designed to support the needs of students, without the right support, these postpandemic pivots threaten the sustainability of those charged with shaping a positive school experience, improving student outcomes, and delivering quality education for tomorrow's leaders. So, what do teachers need? In a follow-up study to the firm's 2019 survey, *Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0* explores the challenges, needs, and preferences of teachers and the impact it has on their ability to teach. In a survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers from across the country and 36 in-depth interviews, the research provides new insights into how their pain points, relationship to the environment and students, and expectations have changed since the pandemic. Since discovering the impact of the school environment on teacher satisfaction, engagement, loyalty, and even employment decisions in 2019, Corgan's 2022 study underscores the increasing importance of design in their ability to be a good teacher.

As national headlines call attention to a pipeline predicament, surging departures, worsening staff burnout, and glaring disparities in learning, schools have both an opportunity and challenge to activate their campus as a powerful tool to recruit and keep top talent as empowered partners in student success.

Take note — Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0 combines data-driven insights with practical interventions and design solutions teachers need most — extra credit for the perks it provides students, too.



Summary of Finding

01 — Teacher Wellbeing

IS YOUR SCHOOL SICK?

With an increasing importance on wellness, companies have been driven to re-evaluate their workplaces to ensure it's providing employees the support they need. But what about teachers? With growing demands and limited support, teachers need their workplace to take an active role in improving their health and wellness on campus. When teachers need a moment to themselves — to take a difficult phone call or work through a stressful interaction — many resort to their car (34%), the bathroom (32%), or even stay in their classroom (42%).

More prevalently adopted in traditional offices, the WELL Building Standard offers a data-driven design framework to help elevate teachers' health and wellbeing through ten concepts: air, water, nourishment, light, thermal comfort, materials, movement, sound, community, and mind.

02 — Two for None?

PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

While the sudden transition to virtual platforms during the pandemic — from on-demand healthcare to Facetime happy hours with friends — uncovered the promising potential of technology, it couldn't do everything. Forced to navigate a new world of virtual learning, the past two years worsened the learning gap between students, increased rates of depression and anxiety, and intensified equity issues. Rather than replacing physical spaces, the virtual platform uncovered new values and expectations of these spaces. Surveyed teachers rate technology-ready rooms to be of high importance but are only moderately satisfied with how it is currently integrated into classrooms (3.35/5). From creating opportunities for connection to allowing personalization not available on a singular platform, the physical space has the opportunity to meaningfully engage and integrate these new tools to offer students and teachers a more dynamic yet more human experience.

03 — Flexibility

THE PROBLEM WITH FLEXIBILITY

A testament to the value of flexibility, the number of teachers reporting they want more flexibility from their teaching environment has stayed largely the same from 2019 to 2022 — 85% and 82%, respectively. But the number of surveyed teachers that find their current teaching environment to be flexible has decreased over time indicating that these spaces are unable to meet increasing demands and that teachers may desire not only more flexibility but a different kind of it.

Where schools have responded with large spaces showcasing infinite possibilities and versatility, these open-ended solutions may be creating dead-ends. Rather, a more strategic approach that combines modular furniture, innovative storage solution, and tech integrations that provide the right affordances can activate these spaces with the options teachers need for the various ways they teach and students learn.



When teachers need a moment to themselves, many resort to their car (34%), the bathroom (32%), or even stay in their classroom (42%).



04 — Personalization and Choice

RE-TUNING THE CLASSROOM

For students, virtual learning was not without its challenges, however, the opportunity to select the right setting for the task at hand — taking advantage of the comforts and dials available when learning from home accelerated the pedagogical emphasis on personalized learning. Student-led curriculums were increasingly designed to position teachers as facilitators to connect students to the resources and support they need. A little extra help on a math problem or a quiet space for more introverted students. But what happens when teachers don't have the controls they need to adapt the space for students — or themselves?

According to the study, surveyed teachers indicated they found the poor quality of their physical environment, including light, air quality, distractions, and inability to personalize the space limiting — while also generally disagreeing (2.36/5) that they had the ability to make better choices to regulate these parts of their environment for themselves and their students. Opportunities to adapt the space not only expands the potential of the classroom but also articulates its value of its greatest assets: the teachers and students inside.

05 — Schools as a Workplace

THE BROKEN BREAKROOM AND HOW TO FIX IT

The office is so much more than a desk, but for many teachers, there are often few spaces outside of their classroom desk that provide a reliable, desirable, and dedicated work surface. In a comparison between 2019 and 2022, teachers have remained dissatisfied with the design of teacher-focused spaces. It's why so few of them reported using the teacher workroom (15%) for responsibilities outside of teaching. Typically, these spaces lack the ownership and quiet teachers need for focused work, including grading papers and researching lesson plans. While trends from corporate workplaces to attract and retain talent while boosting productivity and engagement may not be replicable on school campuses, they provide inspiration for small interventions from the right ergonomics and professional settings to a variety of spaces and thoughtful amenities that can improve the work and learning environment for teachers.

01 — Teacher Wellbeing

Is your school sick?



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Sick Teachers Mean Sick Schools

Here's why: school health depends on more than preventing the spread of disease and viruses. It means supporting the mental and physical ability of teachers to provide a quality education, without which there is no school.

On the heels of a global call to attention on our collective health, schools are tasked with not only responding to an emphasis on how the campus experience makes us feel and supports our overall well-being but also with protecting and promoting the health of its lifeline. At risk: continued staff shortages from teacher illness and worsening burnout, further disruption to learning, and ultimately student outcomes.

The Symptoms

While schools have often prioritized student results and experience, they have been, generally speaking, less successful in providing spaces that support the well-being of those responsible for facilitating those outcomes. Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, Corgan's most recent survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers across the nation, explores how teacher pain points have changed since the firm's initial 2019 study on the topic and how design can help. The survey, in combination with in-depth interviews, finds that for teachers, largely unsupportive work environments intensify the pressures of the job and exacerbate common pain points, including not having enough resources and the psychological demands of around-the-clock responsibilities. The multiplied pressures of chronic underfunding, mounting stress from education reforms and nationwide staffing shortages are forcing teachers out of schools and taking their toll on education.

Compared to the number of educators in our public schools before the pandemic, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports 567,000 fewer educators working in our nation's schools today (Jotkoff, 2022). These staff shortages can add up to heavier workloads for already strained teachers. In fact, 53% of surveyed teachers in 2022 cited increasing workload as a primary source of stress.

Pandemic aside, the expectation that spaces and experiences consider our wellbeing has been a growing trend especially for more recent generations. Each successive generation of both students and educators has a higher expectation for wellness support in their schools and workplaces than the generation before and will likely become increasingly more important for future ones. (McCrindle & Fell, 2020).

Traditional offices have responded to the growing expectation for human-centered spaces that promote our total health, and students have benefited from the healthier food options, encouraged physical fitness, and opportunities for mindfulness on school campuses. For teachers, though, the response has been slower. Rather, the spike in postpandemic responsibilities and plummeting staff resources comes with little progress in supporting their additional mental and physical needs — especially for the 12% of surveyed teachers who identify as having one or more mental or physical disability that affects their experience with physical space.

During an in-depth interview, a high school teacher shared:

"I just hope that the education system adapts to changes in the same way that corporate America has."

The Next Generation of Healthy Schools

The popularization of corporate gyms, wellness rooms, and biophilic materials that connect to nature comes as employers realize the connection between the health of their staff and productivity, engagement, and retention. While some office perks may be difficult to mirror on a school campus, the benefits remain the same. Considering teacher wellbeing in the same way the school considers it for students provides an opportunity to meet everyone's needs more sustainably and meaningfully while better preparing it for the next generation of students and educators.

The evolution to healthier schools doesn't require a campus design overhaul or mean adopting the same corporate office interventions. The real estate, cost, and practicality of on-site juice bars and fitness studios may be prohibitive to schools that have strict budgets, adhere to different regulations, and keep the needs of students first. However, because the benefit of healthy teachers extends beyond the temporal threat of school shutdowns, small interventions can help recruit top talent and add up to a more consistent workforce with a deeper investment in the students' success.

The in-flight message from the attendant to put your own oxygen mask on first before helping those around you provides a helpful analogy. For teachers who are likely to find it counter-intuitive, ambient wellness and solutions that make it easy and encourage wellness are especially important.

59% of teachers reported the pressure to catch up from COVID-related learning gaps and provide educational equity as a primary source of stress.

Enter: WELL Building Standards

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More prevalently adopted in traditional offices, The WELL Building Standard is a performance-based system grounded in ten scientifically proven concepts to measure and monitor the impact of the building on occupant health and well-being. A framework for data-driven design strategies, WELL provides a comprehensive approach founded on the principles of keeping people first, resiliency, and research focusing on: air, water, nourishment, light, thermal comfort, materials, movement, sound, community, and mind. Teacher wellness extends beyond traditional notions of physical and emotional health and includes real and perceived safety for themselves and their students and a sense of community and belonging to the campus and their colleagues. However, drawing inspiration from the WELL concepts, schools can start to activate the campus as a partner in improving the health and performance of teachers, stabilizing their talent pipeline and recruiting new talent, and enhancing the experience for everyone.





Lessons in WELLness

AIR AND THERMAL COMFORT

For teachers who spend the majority of the day indoors, attention to air quality and temperature in built environments can mean more than added comfort. Recent studies have correlated the performance of nine cognitive functions to higher rates of ventilation that removed volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and CO2 from the air. The pandemic also highlighted the role of air quality in mitigating the spread of pathogens and other chronic respiratory diseases. Practical interventions can help improve the classroom's air quality and thermal comfort. For instance, many schools have plans for yearly maintenance, however, a plan to check and clean the air filtration system every six months or quarterly combined with CO2 sensors can help better monitor, prevent, and respond to potential air quality issues. In addition to maximizing ventilation, evaluating the presence of chemicals in materials such as paint or floor wax or standard maintenance protocols such as pesticide management and cleaning identifies opportunities to reduce VOCs with nontoxic, minimally invasive, and healthier alternatives.

Thermal comfort presents a common distraction and frustration for teachers. Operable walls and doors can welcome the circulation of fresh air while adding a layer of temperature control that combines roller shades, fans, and window treatments. New building materials such as electrochromic glass that automatically tint windows to adjust for heat gain while still maintaining views of the outdoors. Checking and balancing HVAC levels can also help optimize heating and cooling to create comfortable spaces for teachers and students — minimizing distractions and the unnecessary frustration of being too cold or too hot to focus.

LIGHT

Harsh lighting, which is rarely tuned to the distinctions our body needs to signal alertness in the morning or prepare for better sleep later in the day, can exacerbate the strain of long hours for teachers who are already stretched thin. These typical classroom lighting programs can disrupt sleep patterns, contribute to eye strain and headaches, and generally lack the settings to adjust to the activity or energy of a room. In addition to providing optimal light levels and temperature to facilitate the task at hand — for reading or considering glare and competing screens, natural lighting can tap into the power of biophilia to provide a more restorative experience as teachers and students move through the campus. And, when considering ebbs and flows in the amount of daylight, it provides the added benefit of helping teachers and students adjust to change in time while preparing them for transitions inside and outside the classroom.

In campus or classroom configurations where flooding the space with natural daylighting is not possible, consider checking light levels in classrooms and maintaining an average of 175 lux (16 f.c.) at 30 inches above the finished floor. Customizable lighting to match the task at hand, shades and layered lighting, including individual task lights and dimmable options, for example, can create calm or help facilitate the use of multimedia technologies and screens. Meanwhile, brighter lights can help reinvigorate a space or add extra lighting for particular tasks. Not only do these interventions add a layer of wellness and personalization, but they also collectively encourage a more pleasant experience.

WATER AND NOURISHMENT

Too often, teachers spend the bulk of their breaks trying to make it across campus to the only designated teachers' space. When asked which facilities enhancements teachers most wanted, those related to refueling through the day or easing access to food, such as complimentary snacks and beverages (58%), or catered lunch (34%) topped the list. While stocking a pantry may not always be feasible, smaller destinations, including coffee bars or micro-kitchens with refrigerators, microwaves, and utensils throughout the campus, can create intentional and casual gathering opportunities and become convenient nodes to refuel closer to classrooms. Placing a filtered water station at strategic points throughout the campus and trading traditional vending machine snacks for fresh fruits and vegetables keeps healthy options front of mind and easily accessible. Setting a culture of health and well-being encourages teachers to stay hydrated and make better nutritional decisions throughout their day - swapping coffee for water, for instance - improving their cognitive functioning and helping maintain the energy they need for the day.

MOVEMENT — TIME TO GET MOVING!

Students aren't the only ones who stand to benefit from physical activity. It can help break through mental fog, foster inspiration, or serve as a welcome break in the day. Attractive landscaping at walkways, distance markers, or signage on central staircases can activate large circulation paths for intentional fitness and encourage teachers and students to rethink how they navigate the campus.

When asked about the impact the physical environment has on their bodies, a 52-year-old middle school teacher replied during an in-depth interview:

> "Are you talking about how you're standing on a hard floor all day? And how you are usually given a crappy desk — a small desk, (if you get a desk) and a very old, uncomfortable chair and that you're, you know, walking on hard floors all day? So yeah, that gets very tiresome on your legs."

Inside and during traditional school hours, sit-to-stand desks, wellness mats, ergonomic chairs can alleviate leg pain and more intuitively support the physical health of teachers. After school, programming a yoga class in the school gym or offering stationary bikes can invite teachers to take advantage of more convenient amenities that prioritize and improve their health. Bonus points for the extra team building!

MIND

Fifty-four percent of surveyed teachers feel their main source of stress is the pressure they put on themselves to help students succeed — this has risen by 23% since 2019. Moreover, as the list of responsibilities grows — creating differentiated lesson plans, grading papers, responding to parents and administration — the gap between what teachers must accomplish in a day and the amount of resources they need continues to grow. Teachers are always "on." Seldom are they able to go to the break room or their car without being stopped for a question by a student or colleague.

A more mindful and supportive environment not only helps make their work from facilitating learning to promoting campus safety easier, but it also considers their total health and mental wellness. While school design has adopted the power of spaces that prioritize mental health and refuge for students, it often overlooks incorporating these same elements into teacher spaces.

When teachers need a moment to themselves — to take a difficult phone call or work through a stressful interaction — many resort to their car or a bathroom.

In addition to affording teachers moments of mindfulness in a small wellness room or carving out tech-free zones of the school, residentially inspired finishes and views to the outdoors in these teacher spaces replicate the sensory effect of familiar settings that trigger a response of ease and comfort. Artwork, softer textiles, colors, and biophilic elements such as plants and wood can complement respite pods, aromatherapy, and white noise features to offer intentional "me moments" for teachers.

LOOKING AHEAD

Teachers need spaces that prioritize their well-being. By tapping into workplace design strategies, WELL building standards, and using insights from teachers, educational facilities can challenge the environment to take an active role in improving the health and well-being of our teachers.

WHERE'S THE TEACHER?

Top 3 spaces teachers currently use when they need a moment to themselves:



Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, 2022

02 — Two for None

Physical and Virtual Spaces



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Physical and Virtual Spaces



TWO FOR NONE

Physical and Virtual

The looming threat or possibility that schools may face shutdowns similar to those of the past two years reminds us just how devastating remote learning was for students. Missing friends, falling behind and through the cracks, and spiking rates of depression and anxiety — we learned that while the virtual distribution of everything from school and doctor visits to team huddles and FaceTime with the grandparents uncovered the promising potential of technology, it couldn't do everything.

We're too complex for a singular platform — individual preferences, differences in ability, the task at hand, a need for direction and monitoring, inequitable access, and unforeseen weather or technology issues require options that are physical, digital, and somewhere in between. But where the singularity of physical or virtual platforms are restrictive to a variety of teaching and learning styles, the duality of the two introduces new complexities that increasingly fall on already strained teachers to navigate.

In a 2022 survey: Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, Corgan explored the challenges teachers face and how design can help. The result? Teachers want and need technology-ready spaces — rating them of high importance (4/5), however, how these new tools are integrated into the physical environment may prove more problematic.

Emerging education technology gifts us with on-demand conveniences and windows into new worlds, but in practice, the open frontier presents limitations for some ability types and in resource and economic disparities among others. As technology collapses on top of physical, in-person experiences — sometimes working in tandem with each other and other times in competition, the challenges and benefits of each modality bring to bear new frustrations.

For students who rely on laptops and Wi-Fi in the classroom, battery life and bandwidth are lifelines without which even in-person learning comes to a halt. And, where teachers struggled to maintain the attention of young adults, cell phones, messaging, and personal devices add new layers of distraction. The disillusionment with hybrid learning isn't exclusive to the classroom. When was the last time you were in a meeting without laptops? Equally frustrating: in-person meetings where all other colleagues are remote or when conference room technology calls it quits. The seemingly infinite avenues to communicate and collaborate — files that are saved and shared in multiple ways, real-time pop-up notifications, and toggling between even more channels with little time in between, for instance, can create confusion and disrupt workflows. Teachers and students, vulnerable to the same challenges, are faced with navigating this new normal — one that not only requires schools to balance competing preferences, needs, tasks, and users but also finds harmony between the physical and virtual stages.

No longer is there an either-or option. Rather, teaching and learning happen all at once across virtual and physical platforms.

Complex and layered, without the appropriate design considerations and interventions, the convergence of the two risks losing the benefit and highlighting the pain points of both. The new possibilities, however, have invited us to rethink how we engage with our built environment and how design responds to the evolving marriage between physical and virtual experiences to multiply and not divide their individual potential.



Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, 2022

New Challenges

EQUALIZING THE EXPERIENCE

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for school design and teachers has been to level the playing field. A growing reliance on technology exacerbates pre-pandemic gaps in accessibility and equity. In the classroom, the amount and type of technology available differs from district to district and sometimes even school to school and at home. Assumptions of resources are confronted with the reality of unequal distribution of technology, domestic support and settings, and a range of tech literacy. As schools move to in-person models while incorporating technology into both on-campus and at-home activities, teachers become guides and ambassadors in bridging the growing divide.

2 SHIFT IN PEDAGOGY (Teacher-led vs. Student-led)

Though a shift to more personalized, student-led curriculums began prior to the pandemic, the virtual hiatus returned teachers to their dated roles as a "talking head on a screen." The disconnection not only distanced students from their teacher and each other, it also eliminated access to classroom amenities and spaces students needed to tailor their learning. Virtual lessons moved students from active partners in their education to spectators and limited teachers ability to monitor progress and adjust accordingly. Since the return to in-person teaching, new technologies have flipped the role of the physical classroom — serving as a platform for subject matter discussion during traditional hours and hosting content intensive lectures on virtual channels. For teachers, this means meeting higher demands for personalization amid a hyper-fluidity that constantly shifts their relationship to students and their environment.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

Teachers also play a critical role in connecting students with the social, emotional, and psychological resources they need, which can be difficult to do behind a screen. In addition to the challenge of identifying when a student may be having extra difficulties with a subject, victim of a trauma, or wrestling with mental health issues, the influx of new virtual channels has ushered in a different kind of campus community - one that lives online and everywhere. From gaming chat rooms to social media trends and everything in between, the idea of connection or even "being somewhere" is blurred by the proliferation of social, digital tools and experiences. While making the idea of field trips, international friendships, or mentorship opportunities from educators across the globe more accessible, the stewardship of these social experiences has become more difficult for teachers as they increasingly move to and become more inclusive of online and hybrid platforms.

Solutions

Right-Sizing Technology

Remember when schools searched for almost invisible design solutions that seamlessly integrated technology into the classroom? Since the pandemic, we've traded involved, hardwired technology programs that were typically associated with an elongated deployment process and obsolete technologies by the time they had been equitably rolled out for more agile solutions. The goal of tech integration in classrooms prioritizes lightweight products that can easily be moved depending on the need. It emphasizes the proper equipment over the newest ones - asking instead that the design include the right AV capabilities to mitigate external noise and lighting issues while supporting focus and enhancing the task at hand. In addition to making the physical and virtual experiences (and the transitions between them) easier, it understands where the value of technology ends and where physical design interventions may be better suited.

Teachers report limiting learning environments as a increasing source of stress, **up by 10% since 2019.**

For instance, Corgan's study found the number of outlets (45%), space for group work or collaboration (37%), lack of technology or problematic technology (32%), lack of writable surfaces (24%), and lack of access to resources (20%) to be limiting for teachers — reinforcing the shift away from shiny gadgets and toward more purposeful design.

Resetting traditional paradigms uncovers opportunities to better allocate equipment and resources of both the physical and virtual variety. From proper equipment and utility interventions such as display screens and audio enhancements to strategic outlet location, increased writeable surfaces, and glare-free media sharing, improving technology programs begins with an understanding of space function and parameters.

Teachers were also least satisfied with the reading/study rooms (1.96/5), computer labs (2.27/5), and science labs (2.12/5), however, interrogating the common uses of these spaces gives insight into how the right tools and ratios may increase functionality and decrease frustration. Reading and study rooms, for example, may currently be limited by the enclosed nature of these spaces, especially when content is available on the go. No longer anchored to a library, students and teachers may benefit from more casual spaces punctuated throughout the campus. Similarly, the popularity of personal and portable devices such as tablets and laptops means schools may be able to reallocate space from traditionally hardwired computer labs with stationary tables, which are usually underutilized, and instead create spaces that can flex with the needs of the campus. Incorporating technology that helps to facilitate group learning and connection in the classroom - such as interactive polling and gaming - can augment the physical environment to be more engaging and broaden participation. The flexibility of makerspaces and STEM labs may offer a viable option to the comparatively rigid and expensive utilities and fixed casework of typical science labs.

An increased awareness of space and virtual experiences may also encourage teachers to move away from a "one-wall" focused classroom and consider an additional teaching wall with two or more podium locations to allow for movement through the space and a more engaging experience for remote students. Investments in lighting and acoustics can also improve the quality and value of remote learning offering a more attractive and engaging experience that more closely mirrors in-person connection.



Elsewhere, spaces like math rooms may have additional needs such as more teaching walls or displays for small and large group sizes. Improved physical and virtual integrations depend less on adding new technologies and more on identifying the value and function of it. Technology-rich affordances, physical equipment, and ratios of the two that accurately reflect the needs of the classroom can support a healthier, more sustainable ecosystem and experience.

Physical and Social Connections

Teachers have returned to classrooms fraught with learning gaps, resource disparities, anxiety, and depression. For them, the emotional and mental aftermath of the pandemic is in some ways as challenging the logistics of school shutdowns and changing COVID safety protocols. With increased demands, dwindling resources, and a leaking talent pipeline, teacher burnout is even more concerning as schools work to avoid the shutdowns seen over the past two years. However, as the functional and symbolic markers of safety and stability, teachers are charged with the education and overall development of students while helping them navigate the fallouts of the pandemic and major curriculum changes.

And while their responsibilities extend beyond the classroom, their jobs inside it are complicated by delivering content in different modes, which have disrupted projectbased or student-led learning. Always on, the day-to-day responsibilities and obstacles can take a mental toll — a likely driver of the severe shortages of professional, paraprofessional, and administrative staff. As teachers struggle to provide the educational, mental, emotional, and social support students need while serving as a partner to colleagues and parents, the convergence of physical and virtual worlds can become overwhelming. Managing in-person and remote classes, moving quickly between modalities, and accommodating the mix of student and colleague preferences can contribute to an unrelenting day.

Allowing spaces that encourage users to fully engage tech-rich environments or mindful tech-free spaces, for example - relieve teachers and students of the added mental load of bouncing from one platform to another, distractions, and the expensive illusion of multitasking. Interactive technologies in classrooms activate students as drivers of their learning as opposed to passive onlookers. As an alternative to tepid science and history class experiences behind a screen, projectors can simulate the wonder of metamorphosis or the struggles of colonial life. TV studios and makerspaces allow students to test-drive real-world skills. Conversely, outdoor spaces, wellness rooms, and tech-free zones mean teachers and students can unplug to be more fully engaged with one another. A dedicated space for mindfulness, focus, and connection, teachers are empowered to better respond to the mental and social needs of students, provide a space for private virtual parent conferences, or find time for personalized mentorship.

Tech for Teachers

Teacher satisfaction with technology depends on several factors, such as integration with student learning, the facilitation of their own professional responsibilities, customability, how seamlessness the execution, and the ease it affords. While accommodating the totality of the schools needs and diversity of its preferences is impractical, strategic dials for personalization and clear communication can encourage engagement and satisfaction.

Providing teachers with plug-and-play options in the classroom and in nodes throughout the campus, such as breakout spaces, hallway nooks, or lounges, can help them find convenient, personalized places to work or support organic collaboration between staff. Expanded device connectivity in a phone room, for example, requires a relatively small footprint, but with the right affordances such as a screen, outlets, comfortable seating, ample surface area, good audio and noise mitigation, and appropriate lighting, can have significant impacts in easing teacher responsibilities outside the classroom. Ergonomics that adjust to needs, such as differences in vision, posture, height, and more, allow students and teachers to more comfortably move around the classroom. For example, adjustable screens, glare mitigation, and rotating chairs, empower students and teachers to move from classroom whiteboard to screen and back more seamlessly. These lowtech solutions can activate more attractive and appropriate spaces on campus for parent-teacher conferences and one-on-one training.

Clear guidelines across the growing number of channels as well as agencies to select the preferred modality can also help teachers more confidently manage their responsibilities and their communications. Should this be an email or meeting? This is an age-old dilemma complicated by the introduction of digital messaging platforms and personalized devices that keep us connected around the clock. With 53% of teachers reporting their amount of workload as a main source of stress, understanding the expectations of each communication channel or suggesting which audiences and purposes are best suited for each can help alleviate the toll of managing them all at once. Just as students have a range of preferences and discrepancies in tech literacy and access, educators may have also developed strong habits in how they like to work, relate to their students, or communicate with each other. Working with technology departments, schools can offer programming solutions that allow for tailoring and customizations within these platforms. Because how teachers engage with and use the same technology may also be different, providing a mix of spaces can help to reduce individual friction points.

"Every student has a different case, so flexibility not only benefits me as a teacher, but it benefits my students' progress, learning, and their connection to the campus."

- HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER



DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS

LOOKING AHEAD

Teachers agree that the inflexible design of their classroom and teaching spaces makes it difficult to integrate new technology (3.3/5). While some design interventions, like providing pathways, conduits, and input plates, can help accommodate future technology, technology enhancement of schools requires primarily an understanding of the functional needs of the space. As teaching and learning race toward models that are equally physical, virtual, and somewhere in between, the role of technology becomes complicated and more nuanced. But with rapid advancements, identifying baseline needs, evaluating those needs as they evolve, and focusing on functional solutions that provide some levels of customization is perhaps the most powerful tool to future-ready classrooms and enhance the teacher experience.





03 — Flexibility

The Problem with Flexibility



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THE PROBLEM WITH FLEXIBILITY

Losing Sight of the Purpose

So much ink has been committed to the boom of flexibility that perhaps some of its benefit has been diluted — reduced to debates about remote work and the return to the office, bemoaning the challenges of virtual learning, and, of course, finding a new object to accessorize with casters.

The problem is that in the midst of saturated conversations about what flexibility looks like or why it does or doesn't work, we've lost sight of its purpose. Rather than an add-on or some nice benefit, it is an expected part of how we work, learn, and connect with each other. That's because flexibility, at its core, hinges on activating and empowering us for the task at hand. For teachers, it means considering their goals, challenges, needs, and preferences as they deliver constantly changing curriculums, evolve with shifts in pedagogy, incorporate new technologies, and juggle administrative, student, community, and personal needs.



DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS



The Flexibility Paradox

Where previous approaches to flexibility seem overwhelming and resort to an "infinite possibilities" tactic, a recent Corgan study reveals that teachers are looking for a more purposeful flexibility. Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, Corgan's national survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers exploring their most pressing challenges and how design can help, reveals how teacher expectations have changed since the firm's initial survey in 2019. Findings suggest it is less about having the longest list of versatile options and more about thoughtful interventions for specific use cases and what affordances those require.

Does the room have the right number of power outlets? If I move these desks around, will I still be able to reach them? Can I easily access the supplies or technology I need for class or to adapt a lesson plan?

Eighty-two percent of teachers reported they wanted more flexibility from their teaching environment. Surprisingly, the desire for more comes even after a majority of teachers — 63%, in fact, indicated their classroom affords some level of flexibility. So why the need for more? The desire for flexibility is less about a need for more of it and more about a different kind — an indication that teachers are still unable to adapt their classroom in the way they need.

POST-PANDEMIC TEACHER INSIGHT



With increasing demands, fewer teachers find their current teaching environments to be flexible. Some frustrations can be attributed to temporal restrictions related to COVID-19 — with 36% of teachers reporting they find pandemic safety policies limiting. A contributing factor: the increasing number of teachers using traditional, lecture-style classrooms (76%, up from 60% in 2019), many of whom turned to the setup out of necessity but found it least desirable and most limiting. Instead, teachers reported they would prefer to teach through "hands-on" activities, with technology, through collaboration or one-on-one interaction over traditional classroom instruction.

The sustained limitations of the classroom are both an indicator of the prevalent pre-pandemic gap between design and function as well as the ways education has progressed over the past several years. The past two years have exacerbated and highlighted the mismatch between the flexibility teachers have and the flexibility they need.



Open-ended is Dead-ended

Already stretched thin, educators are also expected to create experiences that are tailored to fit the diverse needs of their several students, counteract the limitations of virtual settings to win engagement and connection, and fill in for even wider learning gaps. Though the list of teacher demands gets longer, the appropriate and most effective response is not always met by a longer list of gadgets or customizations. Additional needs do not necessitate more things. A spectrum of student progress and preferences in a classroom does not require an equally high variance of supplies, settings, and customizations.

Recent notions of flexibility have celebrated hypercustomization where anything is possible at any time.



Perhaps mirroring our on-demand culture, speculation on the future of flexibility has often pushed for spaces that can quickly move from one extreme use to another or serve several age groups and sizes at once. It welcomed the idea of large open multi-purpose rooms and an obsession with casters. It justified the trend of popularizing the blank canvas.

But, the idea of designing for limitless possibilities or a space that is all things to all people is effectively void of design itself. Open-ended leaves spaces dead-ended. Uber-flexibility that is lacking a guiding framework typically doesn't provide the adaptability it promised. It lacks what is inherent to activating and empowering users: **purpose**. The focus needs to be on the quality of that space and it giving teachers what they need. Surveyed teachers had the lowest satisfaction with adjacent enclosed breakout spaces (2.3/5).



Teachers had the lowest satisfaction with adjacent enclosed breakout spaces.

While they have a strong desire for group-based activities, the supporting spaces aren't meeting their needs. Teachers also agree that the inflexible design of their classroom and teaching spaces makes it difficult to integrate new technologies (3.3/5). Not having functional furniture that can be reconfigured (29%), that is not easily movable (25%), or does not meet needs or teaching style, activities, or grouping (24%) also limited the environment's ability to adapt.

Too little direction though, risks teachers becoming overwhelmed, missing opportunities to customize, while spaces become ambiguous and chaotic. And still, too few opportunities create rigidity that leads to frustration, which could increase teacher dissatisfaction, disengagement, and ultimately affect student outcomes.



The Solution: Strategic Affordances

So, what do teachers want? It's no surprise that flexibility tops the list. Upended teaching paradigms, however, have redefined what that flexibility means — favoring strategic affordances matched for specific use cases. It is a marked shift away from endless versatility toward smart, modifiable spaces that make possible personalization and choice and welcome different teaching and learning styles. With the right planning and accommodations, it provides predictability to optimize and activate spaces and clarity to focus on the things that matter most.

KIT OF PARTS

The goal is to create standardized, replicable, and equitable classrooms that overall meet teacher needs and integrate technology. However, these spaces still need to be adaptable, evolve with changing pedagogies and technology, be context-specific, and meet student and teacher needs. The Kit of Parts approach describes a method to create flexibility in the design process itself.

For instance, in healthcare, a kit of parts creates identical spaces with predictable and interchangeable parts so that providers can manipulate it for a variety of cases — adding efficiency and opportunities for personalization. Similarly, in addition to providing specific classroom types such as science and computer labs, classrooms that function as a predictable template with elements that can be reconfigured supports a more change-ready environment. The modern classroom requires the kit of parts consider multiuse learning/display walls instead of one-wall focused classrooms, variation between display, ideation spaces for students, movable furniture, and thoughtful integration of technology compatible with the right range of expected uses to empower educators to join in the design process of their classroom.

Bonus: A kit of parts can help lower cost for development and speed project delivery while supporting the evolving needs of teachers and students.



MODULAR FURNITURE

Moveable furniture is about more than putting everything on casters — it's about ease of use, adjustability, storage capabilities, and a strong mix of furniture types that accommodate a spectrum of activities and group sizes. From furniture that functions as a kit of part itself with easy assembly and storage to tech compatibility, maximizing the utility of furniture includes offering a variety of postures and rotations, minimizing disruptions during transitions, and encouraging ease of use with lightweight but durable materials. Rethinking storage that is more seamlessly integrated into the function and design opens the possibility of storage being incorporated into the wall with writeable surfaces on the exterior - push to open or grab some markers to display materials for today's lesson plan. Right-sizing furniture, considering how pieces work together and the range of activities they support, and including a mix of more permanent options help to identify the right options and right uses for the space.

FURNITURE: DOES IT WORK?

Top reasons furniture lack functionality according to teachers:



Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, 2022

STORAGE

At home or at school, there's never enough storage. And, things always work better when they have a "home." Storage carts for classrooms translate another healthcare design trend for the classroom to maximize space and provide additional flexibility to spaces; instead of rooms that are tied to single-purpose or identity because of built-ins, supply carts activate new parts of the campus — art class in the courtyard, anyone? More storage isn't always the answer, as additional shelves and cabinetry always manage to become full and poorly utilized. Supply carts, however, provide teachers a clearer picture of inventory which in turn, increases ease and likelihood of use. When integrated into the furniture, the sometimes frustrating and intrusive parts of design can instead define zones, add functionality, or at minimum reduce visual clutter.





"Every student has a different case, so flexibility not only benefits me as a teacher, but it benefits my students progress, learning, and their connection to the campus"

- HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

ZONING AND REDISTRIBUTED SPACES

Breakout rooms have enjoyed popularity as the default solution for flexibility, but the location and affordances of these spaces can significantly impact whether or not they are used and whether or not they work. Teachers prefer maintaining a line of sight to their students, so these zones should be approached as adjacent classroom spaces to offer more space and support setups that cannot be accommodated in the classroom.

In reimaging the zones of classrooms or the larger campus, redistributing space and room ratios to reflect the current and future relationships teachers and students have to their environment can maximize square footage and also provide educators a mix of settings that more effectively meet their needs. A mix of room sizes outfitted with affordances such as glass walls for connectivity, outlets, mindful acoustic and lighting, allocated wall space for teaching, and well-matched furniture can transform a counseling room into a room for after-school homework help or small group study.

TECH FLUID

Spaces need to be designed to work in-person and with technology simultaneously and individually. Tech-readiness is largely dependent on the right number and location of data ports and power outlets — requiring creative applications beyond the walls, such as suspending ceiling outlets, or wifi extenders that extend the plug-and-play capabilities of breakout areas, alcoves, and other areas teachers and students may want to go for quiet work and focus.

Change and technology readiness needs to also support universal accessibility adjusting to differences in domestic resources, physical and mental disabilities, and location. Fortunately, emerging technology is typically easier to incorporate, however, on a more dated campus, schools may need to update and standardize infrastructure. Tech fluidity requires the design to not only consider more common or new technologies but also understand the larger lifestyle shifts and trends that articulate how we engage with the virtual world and which technologies will reshape how we learn, teach, and connect with each other.

DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS

LOOKING AHEAD

Flexibility that works means taking account of as many parameters as possible and solving for many problems as possible with as few design elements as possible. It means finding what is in conflict with what is common. The campus experience provides several opportunities to add functional variation for teachers — from where they park and eat their lunch to having the right number of writing surfaces in the room. However, a deep understanding of the school's several users can help navigate often competing interests and challenges to provide more strategic solutions that empower students and teachers — because even the great outdoors need a perimeter, shade, and seating before it can become an outdoor classroom.



04 — Flexibility and Choice

Re-tuning the Classroom



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The Case for Personalization The Challenge of Personalization: It's Personal

Design Solutions

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PERSONALIZATION AND CHOICE

The Possibility of Something New

Silver lining of remote learning: we all learned a lot about ourselves. In the process of exposing the faults of virtual learning — inequitable access and singular solutions that failed to provide monitoring and adaptability, many students fell through the cracks. They fell behind, lost interest, and many became depressed and anxious. Still, the moment of pause calling attention to those things students lacked also called to attention the possibility of something new.

In the wake of testing hybrid and remote models, we've seen a reinvigorated demand for a return to school that's more than in-person, it's personal. Though challenged in many ways, the home offered students the comfort of choice. Social studies on the dining table with enough surface area for projects and easy access to at-home labs, also known as the kitchen. Devouring The Bluest Eye in bed and for the first time enjoying the wonders of literature. Shooting hoops outside or playing with the family dog, they found a rhythm to the day that fluctuated with them. These familiar stomping grounds permitted students and parents to customize the learning environment, observe differences among siblings and subjects, and refocus on not only how we learn but what it feels like.

The past two years accelerated the prioritization of personalized learning that responds to the several and sometimes competing needs, strengths, challenges, and preferences of students. If a student excels or struggles in a certain subject, is visibly distraught because of a known household issue, or if a student prefers minimal distractions over group learning, the school experience is expected to meet them where they are. We now expect school campuses, philosophies, and curriculums to intuitively and uniquely connect us with what we are learning and who we are learning it with. It is fundamental to the quality of teaching and learning, to teacher and student sentiment and satisfaction, and to removing distractions and frustrations so that we are freed up to focus on what matters most. It can also be a source of stress for teachers, who are ultimately responsible for shouldering the responsibility with little room for personalization of their own according to Corgan's recent survey, Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0. For nearly 40% of teachers, providing students a personalized and emotionally supportive environment is a main source of stress.

"Students learn differently — whether verbal, auditory, tactile, kinesthetically... We need to meet students where they are...Teachers also have different ways they interact with students."

- MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

The Case for Personalization

In schools, design has celebrated the options available for students to self-select their natural preferences or for teachers to adapt the environment for students. Playful stools for a kinesthetic learner to wobble on or sensory supplies for more tactile learners individualize their experience. Students learn differently — and each subject or day could add a new dimension to the considerations a student may need in a day. As a response to the direct benefit on student outcomes, recent trends have continued to advocate for environments and curriculums that can be personalized for individual student progress and needs.

The benefit of personalization and choice, however, isn't exclusive to students. Employees, or in this case, teachers, need it, too. It's why many employers have opted to provide staff sit-to-stand desks, a variety of room sizes, a robust selection of tech tools, retractable doors to let in a breeze, and a mix of furniture options that include everything from ergonomic dials to lounge seating. However, for teachers, the options are usually more limited. While the student experience remains the primary priority of educational spaces, schools have an opportunity to optimize teacher performance and, consequentially, student outcomes by offering teachers similar agency in tuning their surroundings for different abilities, teaching and learning styles, and emotional needs. From adjustable desk heights to dimmable lights, these design interventions are about more than personal comfort; rather, they signal the value and expertise of teachers, activate the space as a supportive partner in the education of its students, and serve as powerful tools to recruit and retain the top talent — providing a space where they and their students can be their best.

40%

of teachers indicated they found the poor quality of the physical environment limiting.



The Challenge Of Personalization: It's Personal

Prefer the window office? Natural light and views to the outdoors of these privileged seats are often associated with positive outcomes such as higher productivity and wellness. But, during peak summer afternoons, the overheating and glare might be a turn-off. Centrally located collaboration spaces that put innovation on display are great until you need a place for a sensitive one-on-one conversation. Open a window and let in the fresh air — and the noise. You get the point. The reality is that there is seldom a singular setting or one-size-fits-all solution.

Rather, teachers need and expect a mix of thoughtful customizations that meet them where they are. It's the ability to slide between quiet, distraction-free spaces when they or their students need focus and connective hubs that invigorate and feed their energy. It means the option to choose between more ergonomic workstations and more comfortable spaces for smaller conversations or to dial-up or down the light, noise, and stimulation according to their preferences.

Teacher ownership, or their sense of alignment with their work and influence over the where, how, and what it feels like, can be complicated by regulations, cost, management, and building codes that limit personalization in the classroom.

However, design interventions that consider the classroom's several influencing factors and permit even small adjustments are associated with several positive outcomes, including improved teacher satisfaction, accountability, creativity, motivation, and investment — which can add up to a significant improvement in how someone receives and performs in their space.



Teachers report that providing an environment that offers personalized learning and emotional support is a primary source of stress.

Design Solutions PHYSICAL COMFORT

The war over the thermostat's most enduring battleground may be the school. Instead of overhauling campus-wide utilities and infrastructure, smaller, more cost-effective solutions, including dimmers, operable windows for natural ventilation, and even fans, can adjust light and temperature as needed. If students are feeling the heat, blinds help keep classrooms shaded and cooler — bonus points for the added focus it provides. Teachers disagree (2.86/5) that they currently have the ability to make choices to better regulate the environment for themselves and their students. For 40% of surveyed teachers that currently find the poor quality of the physical environment to be limiting, choice may be able to improve environmental quality.

We've embraced smart homes — characterized for their intelligent and intuitive fluidity. Interpreted for the classroom, this opens the possibility of chairs and desks that are not only ergonomic and adjustable but also equipped with multimedia technology and controls for the classroom. Automated presets mean a classroom may provide alerts for poor air quality or allow for teachers to adjust the temperature, lighting, angles of screens, sound, and desks at the press of a button. As we move toward a more humancentered classroom, it removes barriers that typically discourage the use of these controls.

Elsewhere, restorative, tunable environments provide a reprieve from stimulation, privacy for mental and emotional health needs, and articulate the value of teacher and student wellness. For instance, pilot programs that repurpose underutilized spaces into peaceful meditation rooms or gardens have demonstrated the transformative benefits of conservative interventions such as hanging plants, largescale artwork, sound and aromatherapy, and the addition of therapeutic furniture. Residentially inspired window treatments, seating, and lighting add the comforts of familiar spaces that encourage a sense of ease, safety, and comfort.

MINIMIZING DISTRACTIONS

Campuses are loud. The class bell, lockers slamming shut, noisy hallways, and recess add up to noise pollution that is difficult to manage — and is almost always poorly timed. Whether teachers are seeking heads-down time for focused work or struggling to minimize distractions for an important class exam, mechanisms that empower teachers to dial down the disturbances are vital.

A comprehensive approach that incorporates new sound absorption products into the décor and functional elements such as pinboards as well as sound barriers that minimize sound leaking in help to mitigate auditory interruptions. Visual noise can be just as disruptive. The busyness outside a window, construction, students involved in a different and more enjoyable activity, or even clutter can draw your attention and interrupt the flow. For the 77% of teachers who reported completed non-teaching tasks at their classroom desk, it means competing against the classroom's bright colors, patterns, animations, and themed bulletin boards to hold their attention for grading and lesson planning. These student-centric spaces are designed with visual complexity and theme that is intended to stimulate particular student behaviors and are typically less suited for professional needs.

While teacher lounges and workstations can carve out spaces that are distinctly for educators, they present their own challenges — serving double-duty for collaboration between colleagues, its own share of visual clutter, and the common pain points associated with shared spaces.

Adding individual focus pods that cocoon a workstation or punctuating the campus with a mix of micro-spaces that function as phone rooms or offer a mental, visual, and auditory reprieve serves as spokes to a teacher hub. Complemented by small meeting rooms, collaboration incubators, outdoor areas, and breakout spaces, zones dedicated to "heads down" time allows teachers and students to select the appropriate environment depending on their individual preferences.



TEACHERS RATE THEIR SCHOOL



Teachers disagree that they have the ability to make choices to better regulate the environment for themselves and their students.

OWNERSHIP

Teachers often have little control or ownership over their day's schedule or space.

Yet, when a dedicated teacher workroom is available, **only 15% of teachers indicated using it for their non-teaching tasks.**

That's because it is fraught with a trail of frustrations that come from shared spaces, like misplaced supplies, abandoned clutter, occupied outlets, and not enough surface area — making the home an attractive workplace for many. Need to make a quick call to the doctor or take a moment to regroup after a difficult conversation? When not turning to their classroom, teachers indicated they end up in the restroom or car to address personal needs. What's left of a teacher's ownership over the environment may be small when factoring standard classroom orientation, technology, regulations, codes, and student behaviors, which most strongly influence their ability to customize their space but providing a space that is their own can reinvest trust and agency while adding muchneeded predictability and control.

The classroom is an ecosystem that requires balancing teacher and student needs. Standardized classes with dedicated bulletin boards or zones where teachers can take ownership, for instance, encourage a sense of pride, inspire creativity, and promotes accountability. These small moments not only recognize the cultural importance of these platforms but also allow for autonomy and freedom within the guardrails education design requires. Offering opportunities to personalize décor, influence over design finishes, dedicated storage space, or choices of preferred furniture or rugs, fixed or flexible whiteboards, and lighting options, gives back some control over their day and environment.

CUSTOMIZABLE TECHNOLOGY

Our experience of spaces is informed by more than how the physical environment makes us feel. It also includes what that space permits us to do and how easy it is to do those things — how it facilitates our connection to our work, others, and to new ideas. The proliferation of technology, though, means these things seldom happen strictly on one platform.

Just as teachers need dials to personalize their physical environment, embedded technology requires similar considerations and clear communications that make customization and choice possible. For example, guidelines around how to use embedded technology and emerging channels of communication promote confidence to intuitively self-select how and when they manage these touchpoints. In addition to providing teachers the technology they need, affording physical alternatives empowers teachers and students to choose the most appropriate modality. Intentional access to nature, sunlight, sensorial experiences, and mobility balances the emphasis on technology while more thoughtfully integrating it into the physical platform helps enhance and not overtake the overall experience.

LOOKING AHEAD

Schools don't exist without teachers. In honoring their work and their role as educators, designing interventions that give back agency and control not only activate them to do their job but also demonstrates care for the school's greatest asset: its teachers and students.

05 — Schools as a Workplace

The Broken Breakroom and How to Fix It.



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Does your school work? Like, really work? A Day in the Life

Design Solutions



SCHOOLS AS A WORKPLACE

The Best Option Isn't Always Great

According to a recent Corgan survey of 1,000 K-12 teachers across the nation, only 15% of surveyed teachers use the workroom to complete their non-teaching tasks. That's all those things teachers are responsible for before students file into the classroom: grading papers and tests, inventing new ways to bring to life the Pythagorean Theorem, and prepping for the week of parent-teacher meetings. They'd rather use the desk in their classroom — not because they enjoy it, but because it is the best option.

Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, exploring what teachers need from their workplace and how design can help, is an extension of the firm's initial study in 2019 and sheds light on how teacher pain points have evolved since the pandemic. The survey results in combination with in-depth interviews including one with a middle-school teacher who described her work environment as a "crappy desk...a small desk and a very, old uncomfortable chair" provides insight into how she like many teachers across the county find their school design inadequate for their job.

Others in the survey took to the bathrooms or their cars to take a moment for themselves or their homes to complete work because the school campus failed to provide the spaces, equipment, and setting they need for personal and professional needs. Teacher frustration isn't just about functionality either. Spaces that are currently intended for collaboration, innovation, or socialization, such as the breakroom and teacher lounge, are similarly underutilized.

Meanwhile, recent years have invited a transformation of the corporate workplace: dog-friendly policies, kitchens brimming with gourmet snacks and local kombucha, gyms that rival prestige spas, and furniture that is both ergonomically designed and cool to look at. The office changed our notion of what it feels like to be at work, recognizing that where we work shapes our culture, productivity, and even the talent we attract. Since the pandemic began, many of us were welcomed back to offices that are hyperflexible, stocked with amenities that not only help us work better, but also support the rhythm of our lives, encourage well-being, and seize the moment to rethink decades-old design and policies for something more intuitive, more engaging, and more human.

While schools introduced new teaching paradigms, increased personalization for students, and explore emerging technology applications, education design has been slower to respond to the role of schools as workplaces for teachers. Like their corporate counterparts, a teacher's workplace can influence the way they feel, their satisfaction at work, their employment selections, and perhaps, most importantly, their performance. If the primary goal of the school is to foster the academic, mental, emotional, and social development of its students, approaching education design as not only a classroom but also as a workplace for teachers unlocks the possibilities of improving their performance and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Does your school work? Like, really work?

In education, the past two years highlighted the strain and discrepancy between design and what teachers need from it. It seems as if the working world has found the ability to zoom forward — literally — taking advantage of remote and hybrid technologies and adding new flexibilities that personalize the workday so we can work better and feel better doing it. The school as a workplace, however, has remained relatively unchanged. Workspaces outside the classroom are not typically designed with the same consideration as student-centric spaces and, in turn, become uninviting and hinder the work they are intended to assist. It's why a majority of surveyed teachers reported being moderately dissatisfied with teacher-focused rooms in the school, such as their break rooms (2.84/5) and work areas (2.78/5).

While suggesting upgrades to these spaces mirror corporate counterparts would be both impractical and unnecessary, understanding how meaningful design interventions that reinforce best practices from workplace design offer a powerful opportunity to shift the relationship between teachers and their environment.





Your Workroom Doesn't Work

Spaces teachers use for responsibilities outside of teaching:



A Day in the Life

Where most employees now have the expectation that they would have some controls to customize how or where they work depending on their personal and professional needs, teachers have fewer options. Most can't Skype into a class, choose to peel away to a more remote corner of the campus when they need, or control the volume of their workspace or the height of their desk.

Limited teacher controls become especially frustrating when those needs are constantly changing and in competition with each other. Asked to quickly adjust for modalities, meet the increasing demand for more personalization, and fill in for learning discrepancies and inequitable access to resources caused by the pandemic, the pressure on teachers continues to build without additional support.

Strained on time and resources, teachers were already stretched thin — a pain point that is also reflected in the profession's talent pipeline. 53% of surveyed teachers indicate that the amount of workload they are expected to complete is a main source of stress.

Now, juggling new technologies, helping students catch up after the lost years, and managing behavioral and mental health issues worsened by the pandemic only complicates their day-to-day responsibilities. From preparing differentiated lesson plans, study guides, and tests to after-hour homework help and meetings with parents, the functions of a teacher extend beyond teaching the content. All this is balanced with their multiple roles across the school community as athletic coaches, extracurricular liaisons, and collaborators with other teachers about student behaviors, best practices, crossover subjects, transition preparation, and professional development. "I wish there was a nicer way to separate church and state — when it's your prep time and your work time..."

- ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

A teacher's day is marked by exceptional variety. The mix of tasks oscillates from extremes with little control about when or where it happens and little distinction or separation between them. Their work requires more than a desk in a classroom. Like other professionals, they need environments that match their purpose and preferences, offer a mix of settings, and the meaningful, strategic considerations that empower them to succeed.

Design Solutions

Investigating education design through the lens of the workplace reveals opportunities to activate the space to better support teachers and, in turn, their students.

PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

Outfitting the school for teachers is less about replicating corporate office spaces and more about including settings that reflect the purpose behind those accommodations — offering a professional space for their work and filling the void for teachers who may be handicapped by their environment.

Imagine losing the most critical spaces in your office. When teachers are appointed a desk, they fail to meet the typical workstation expectations. Sometimes, the one copy room on campus is the only destination for teacher supplies, privacy, and focus. Teachers who work primarily at their in-classroom desks are asked to conduct their work with overlapping tasks and no change of location or pace. These spaces are also usually not intended for those tasks — too small, inadequate equipment, outdated technology coupled with the several other concurrent users, which takes a toll on teacher mental fatigue and exhaustion. Conversely, providing the same features we see in professional workplaces such as sit-to-stand desks, ergonomic task chairs, and personalization distinctly activates it as an attractive, functional tool for teachers. Elsewhere, elevated materials that include calming colors, comfortable furniture, residentially inspired finishes can carve out dedicated spaces that signal focus and encourage productivity. A departure from the bright colors, branding, and installations for students, these areas are markedly designed for professional educators an acknowledgment of their responsibilities and the environment they need to do them.

VARIETY OF SPACES

Giving teachers the agency to choose their work environment depending on their task type or personal preferences reflects some of the same benefits a variety of zones and seating options provides to students: an increase in focus and productivity, higher satisfaction rate, and better retention. Dedicated staff courtyards or updated spaces that have the right affordances, such as plug-and-play compatibility, large surface areas, and inviting seating, for example, add functional opportunities for teachers to intentionally and casually connect. Centralized workstations offer an alternative to the classroom and encourage the collaboration possible in open offices but difficult to achieve on school campuses.

When teachers need a moment to themselves, they report looking for privacy or a space where there is a degree of anonymity. The go-to spots? Their classroom (42%), their car (34%), the bathroom (32%), the teacher's lounge (29%), or outside (26%). Small respite spaces or phone rooms located near classrooms instead could allow teachers an opportunity to regroup, touch base with their child's pediatrician, or take a moment for their mental wellness.

As important as a variety of spaces is the strategic location of them. Teachers are more likely to make use of these areas when they maintain a line of sight to students and are easy to get to versus being tucked into a more remote administrative suite.

WHAT TEACHERS WANT

Top 3 spatial qualities teachers desire for focused work:



Design Lessons from Teachers 2.0, 2022



PRIVATE AND QUIET VS. SHARED

While teachers can appreciate spaces for collaboration with peers, mentorship from more established educators, and opportunities to socialize and build connections, they are most often lacking in the areas they need for focused work.

According to survey respondents, in the mix of spaces available to teachers for work, teachers were more satisfied with spaces that offered ownership, privacy, and quiet. Where and how much space a teacher has for their personal workspace is less important than the quality of that space and who is present (or not). The top three spatial qualities teachers reported looking for when completing focused work and taking a moment for themselves were quiet (74%), being isolated from students (73%), and being isolated from other teachers and staff (48%). In a comparison of a teacher's designated workspace and their level of satisfaction with that space, teachers who have their own designated workspace (whether it's a desk or an office) were more satisfied overall than those who share their workspace.

Prioritizing design solutions that minimize distractions balance the energy of the classroom and shared collaboration spaces to afford teachers focus areas to regroup, complete heads-down tasks, deal with stressors, or hold sensitive conversations. For instance, adding smaller, enclosed spaces adjacent to shared workrooms creates "hoteling" opportunities for focused, individual work while glass doors keep the connection to colleagues and leadership.

AMENITIES

Most traditional offices have started to understand the office is an amenity. While the breakroom on campus may have once signaled a notion of hospitality for teachers, they are now typically notoriously neglected and ill-fitted for what teachers need to succeed. Instead, providing the strategic flexibility and amenities that support evolving curriculums, wellness considerations, technology, and opportunities to personalize their décor or physical comfort offer meaningful assets to our schools' most important asset: teachers.

When asked what facility enhancements they would most like to have, the majority of teachers (58%) indicated that they would like complimentary tea/coffee/beverages/snacks, followed by catered lunch (34%), wellness rooms (32%), a gym (27%), and outdoor spaces (25%).

Instead of ping-pong tables and wine bars, spaces that make work easier and more pleasant are the most transformative amenities for teachers. Planning for convenience to refreshments with a nearby fridge, microwave, and coffee/ water station can save teachers the time-consuming walk across campus and give them a moment for a mindful meal or break. Or, a dedicated courtyard can facilitate casual connections between colleagues to trade ideas while also taking advantage of the biophilic benefits of the outdoors.

LOOKING AHEAD

Teachers need spaces that, because they are invested in the success of their students, also invest in them. Tapping trends from the corporate office, shifts in how we approach education, and insights from teachers reveal why the school design doesn't work for teachers and how to activate it to better meet their needs not just as teachers but as educational professionals.

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FULL DATA REPORT AVAILABLE BELOW



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DESIGN LESSONS FROM TEACHERS, 2019

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