Where children learn matters. This continues to be at the heart of the learning experience for all students. Teachers, schools and communities all play an essential part in making sure kids are surrounded with the best possible learning environment. Classrooms that support students by allowing them to feel comfortable and cared for are essential, but it is important to make sure that all classrooms are designed to support modern learning. This includes having the right instructional model, flexible furniture, the best technology tools to serve learning and having a deep intention to the learning space design as well, because when these areas are in sync, the where of learning magnifies the experience for all students. Let’s take a look at eight ways all teachers can shift and influence their learning space for optimal student performance.

**Designing spaces that support modern learning.**

By Dr. Robert Dillon

Focus on the actions that are central to the learning in your space. Ask yourself the question: what are the verbs that dominate your classroom? Is your class focused on thinking, designing, and collaborating? Could other verbs include discover, question and investigate? With this answer, you have a chance to build instruction, find technology tools and furniture, and design your space in an optimal way to support students.

Take time to slow down and examine your space. So many things get put on the walls of classrooms that clutter the room and create visual noise. Make an honest assessment about whether the items on your walls are positively impacting learning. No one wants a stark space, but clutter inhibits learning. The more purposes a single piece of furniture can serve minimizes idle time and maximizes space available. Teachers who have found this strategy effective are seeing students with more focus and less distracting behavior. This can begin with reducing the items near the visual display in the classroom that could draw focus away from this type of instruction.

Start a feedback loop. Rarely are we asking students often enough about their learning experience. We need to regularly (at least every two weeks) ask our students what is working in the classroom and what is inhibiting learning. Without this loop, we are designing solutions for students and not with students. Consider forming a student design team that can help guide your decisions around learning space design. Ask them about potential additions to the classroom. Have them consider what is distracting and taking away from learning.

Begin to subtract. It is hard to reenvision the space in a new way when all the items remain in the room. Inertia and momentum are difficult barriers to overcome, and it often takes starting to remove items from a learning space to really see it through a new lens. Even the process of stacking chairs or nesting tables can help you envision the space in a new way.
Think about the available positions in the room for students to learn. We are often trapped in a cycle of thinking we need a 1:1 student-to-desk ratio. At first, teachers may have to rotate or assign students to maximize success, but as students learn where they learn best, they can self-select the best location for their learning in the moment. Think in positions, and this opens us up to more student choice and supporting students learning where they learn best. Positions can be created with cushions and pillows as well as standing desks. Other teachers have found ways to vary the heights of their tables and desks to support choice and flexibility. One creative teacher found ways to really maximize their space by using window sills, countertop space, and even an old heater that had gone out of service but remained in the room. Taking these steps provided students more options and ownership in the classroom, and this led to less anxiety, more comfort and greater academic growth for many students.

Use your visual display in creative ways. Many teachers are now using their visual display to show images that anchor the learning of a unit. Research tells us that students need visual images to anchor concepts. Displays should be used to support students in all subjects. Elementary teachers might show images of parks and green space in the community to build background knowledge. Middle and high school teachers could use images to anchor units of study or novels that are being read.

Quiet matters. Our students live in noisy worlds that are filled with screens. We need to make sure that our classrooms have space and time to decompress and lower the stress level. This can look like a few desks where the norms set the expectations for quiet or soft seating strategically placed in the room. If we don’t provide this space, students will escape to the bathroom, office or clinic in pursuit of quiet. Choose not to lose this instructional time.

Find more spaces for students to draw and sketch. Research continues to point to the fact that the act of sketching and drawing help to cement learning. This means giving back writable space on interactive whiteboards and adding more writable spaces. There are many ways to be creative with these solutions, but the effort will definitely bolster the learning.

The best schools and districts are coming together to make intentional decisions that are in sync. Technology purchases support the design of the modern learning environment, and optimized learning spaces support best practices in instruction that provide for active learning for all students.

About the author:
Dr. Robert Dillon has served as a thought leader in education over the last twenty years as a teacher, principal and director of innovation. He has a passion to change the educational landscape by building excellent engaging schools for all students. Dr. Dillon has had the opportunity to speak throughout the country at local, state and national conferences, as well as share his thoughts and ideas in a variety of publications. He is the author of five books on intentional design in learning.