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Designing Healthy Schools Our Children Deserve

[Originally published in School Planning & Management, November, 2006](#)

Designing Healthy Schools Our Children Deserve

We must, however, move beyond the short-sighted design of intimidating security strategies and move towards developing learning environments that inspire and speak to the best in our communities."

By Jeffrey Lackney, Ph.D., A.I.A., R.E.F.P. & Christian Long, M.Ed.

Over a year's period, James Madison Memorial High School in Madison, Wisconsin, a school of 2,200 students, received multiple bomb threats from anonymous students. In an effort to reinvent itself, the community and school leaders divided the campus into 4 groups of 500 students that comprised of "backyards" of 25 multi-grade students spanning all social groups. In addition to academic benefits, bomb threats disappeared overnight. Where students once felt disconnected, the community removed the barriers of isolation by building communities based upon trust and multi-

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aged relationships.

Reclaiming School Design from the Enemies at the Gate

The recent pattern of tragic school stories in Wisconsin, Colorado, and Pennsylvania challenge school planning and management leaders to face a crucial decision ahead: will we allow such events to inspire educational fortresses based on fear that unintentionally divide or will we rise to the higher mission of creating learning environments that welcome, unify and inspire our students and communities?

To this end, we propose a 3-layered strategy a) using the principles of environmental design, b) moving away from monolithic and impersonal school citadels of “cells and bells,” and c) developing small learning community models that inspire learning and healthy communities.

Environmental Design Principles as a Starting Point

As recent stories of tragedy echo in schools around the nation, we remind our professional teams to use environmental design principles (such as [CPTED](#)) as a starting point for developing campuses that inspire ideal behaviors. Through unobtrusive environmental design strategies, designers and school leaders use natural surveillance, natural access controls, and territoriality to support safe communities.

Seeking subtle environmental shifts in campus design limits outside dangers and inspires better behavioral outcomes by our own community. Rather than simply committing to overt security technology – cameras, metal detectors, electronic ID cards – we are challenged to utilize lighting patterns, outdoor landscaping, and awareness of relationships between the indoor and outdoor settings to encourage a pattern of desired behaviors, thus minimizing crime.

“Tear Down that Fortress, Mr. Gorbachev!”

Beyond environmental design solutions, we must challenge ourselves to design beyond rare occasions of tragic violence. Furthermore, we must face the underlying consequences of designing large institutional school facilities that isolate our students on a daily basis. Impersonal institutions require significant investments in security while minimizing the very community it seeks to protect. The outcome? Often our schools begin to reflect less desired institutions.

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Educational planner Prakash Nair reminds us in ["School Safety – Problem or Goal?"](#) that we must ask if "the safety measures adopted by schools improve feelings of security, enhance morale and improve productivity?" It seems too easy, yet unavoidable at times, to compare the design of prisons with schools in many of our communities.

"Like prisons, schools are also built like fortresses to prevent outsiders from gaining unwarranted entry and students from leaving without adult consent," warns Nair. This challenges each of us to either fuel an increase of such fortress schools or to develop design strategies that move us forward as a society.

Build Communities of Learning, Not Institutions of Anonymity

The James Madison Memorial High School example demonstrates that small learning communities become safer communities through connections and enhanced awareness. As Malcolm Gladwell stresses in *The Tipping Point*, individuals who move beyond a community of 150 immediately begin to lose connection. Likewise, four decades of small school research (starting with Barker & Gump, *Big School, Small School*, 1964) demonstrates that human-scaled learning environments foster not only academic gains but also dramatic drops in delinquency, vandalism, and violence. This is further echoed in the past year by a powerful study out of the Albuquerque Public Schools (NM) demonstrating all the positive outcomes evidenced in the small schools literature.

Our schools buildings and campuses are cultural artifacts demonstrating the heart of our collective beliefs and dreams. By fostering a culture of monolithic, impersonal school citadels and fortresses, we risk losing the very soul of our communities and the trust of our children. Recent school tragedies certainly demand that we are ever-vigilant in protecting our students. We must, however, move beyond the short-sighted design of intimidating security strategies and move towards developing learning environments that inspire and speak to the best in our communities.

It is the very least our children deserve.

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