Teacher Workspaces

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities

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October 2010

Well-designed and -equipped teacher workspaces provide the opportunity to improve student achievement at every step of their K–12 education. Shared workspace enhances communication among teachers as they evaluate student performance individually and collectively, and share insights with one another.

In elementary school, where children generally tend to have one primary classroom and teacher, the year's curriculum within a given class is fairly homogenous. As a natural off shoot, each teacher tends to use the classroom as his or her home base, conducting supplemental discussion with other faculty and administrators elsewhere.

As students grow older and diverge in their abilities and pursuits, most often beginning in middle school and becoming more pronounced in high school, teacher workspaces reflects that divergence. More discussion among teachers is necessary to track the progress of any one student or group of students, and a teacher's primary workspace moves from the classroom to areas shared with other faculty or a separate office.

Educational Trends

Classroom-based workspaces traditionally consist of a teacher's desk, shelving, and storage. Office-based workspaces traditionally include individual planning spaces and a group work area. In addition, some teachers may have individual offices or share an office with another teacher. The commonality among all office arrangements, it seems, is that teachers never feel they have enough storage space. (Bissell 2004)

In a classroom-based workspace, teachers often use their desks to demarcate a corner as their *de facto* office, which some teachers may even embellish with personal items. In these instances, the teachers' desk is typically at the front of the room slightly to one side or the other of the wall-mounted writing surface (which side most often depends on existing immovable fixtures such as cabinets or outlets). Behavioral observation indicates that the boundaries of these imaginary offices are respected as private by other teachers who will not step into that space (although some students seem to feel comfortable doing so). The feeling is so subconsciously set that other teachers using the classroom temporarily will only tenuously encroach on the home-base office space and take pains to return it to the original condition when finished with the room. (Bissell 2004)

For the Cougar Elementary School in Manassas Park, Va., completed in 2009, VMDO Architects created a hybrid variation on separate and classroom-based offices, which reflects the school's practice of having students change classes periodically during the day. Enclosed teacher workspaces there are long and relatively shallow, along the hallway, outside the classrooms, with the office doorways at right angles to the classroom doors. Featuring a kitchenette, desk, and storage area, each of these offices accommodates two teachers. By moving the ~~"t~~eacher-owned" space outside the classroom, the Manassas Park school effectively returns the learning space entirely to its intended purpose.

Office-based workspace design in general is influenced by the move toward alternative school schedules and the professionalization of teaching. A large number of secondary schools now use alternative forms of scheduling—often called "block" or 4x4 plans—to allow for more effective use of time, space, and resources (Canady and Rettig 1995: 4–6). In many middle schools, a "~~h~~ouse" or "~~f~~amily" of maybe 125 students moves among a collection of classrooms based on the subjects being taught in each. Likewise, one room may be used by two or three teachers as they migrate among several classrooms in the course of one day. For teachers to maintain their interdisciplinary communication with one another, the office-based workspace becomes their home for planning the curriculum, preparing for classes, and grading. Whether teachers are grouped in offices based on a single discipline or based on cross-discipline sets is often a matter of school policy (Brown 2010).

Either way, research shows that shared workspace does foster professional communities and promote networking and collaboration among teachers (Lieberman 1996: 51). This interaction, in turn, has been shown to affect students' academic achievement positively. Furthermore, areas dedicated for group use by teachers builds cohesion both within and across disciplinary boundaries (Duke et al 1998: 166).

Key Elements of Teachers' Workspaces

It is important to note that classroom- and office-based workspace uses may overlap. Teachers may have a classroom-based workspace and make use of both the teachers' workroom and lounge. Alternatively, if teachers lack a permanent classroom, they should have an individualized workspace either in or adjacent to the teachers' workroom. In general, the square footage requirements for areas related to teachers' workspaces are:

Classroom-based workspace	
desk and storage space	100
Office-based workspace	
Private office	
without storage capacity	150
with storage capacity	300
Teachers' workroom	
main workroom area	200-400
teacher planning space/workstation	50-75 each
breakout room	150
large conference room	300-400
Teachers' lounge	10-20 per faculty and administrative staff; 300 minimum
Faculty restrooms	120-180

Classroom-based workspace. Classroom-based workspaces should be designed for use by an individual teacher, as a shared space for several teachers, or as a temporary place for teachers who carry their materials with them. In general, a classroom-based teacher workspace should include wiring for an intercom/ telephone and a computer. Controls for lighting and ventilation should be easily accessible, as should control panels for equipment, such as a closed-circuit television or projection system. Adequate storage should be provided in the form of file cabinets, closets, and cupboards. Because teachers engage in a wide variety of activities that demand some level of privacy, storage spaces for teachers and students should be designated and clearly marked. One-on-one tutoring, parent meetings, collaborative curricular planning, computer-based work, personal tasks, phone discussions, reading and grading of assignments, and reflection are all facilitated by a range of privacy-enhancing designs, such as movable partitions. Classroom-based workspace should be away from high-use areas and, if possible, be located next to an external window. Moving the teacher's desk away from the front of the room permits greater flexibility in designing classroom space.

Office-based workspaces. Components of office-based teachers' workspaces generally include private offices; a teacher workroom with workstations, a breakout room, and a conference room; a lounge area; and restrooms.

- **Private office.** A private office is often necessary for Title 1 specialists, speech pathologists, and special education teachers. It may also be used as a departmental center or as a common office connecting classrooms of similar use. Because private office spaces may serve as a resource and storage center for some teachers, they should contain adequate storage (particularly for department heads who are often responsible for the department's textbooks) and be wired to accommodate phone, computer, intercom, and cable technology. Private office space may be used for one-on-one meetings and consultations (with students, parents, administrators, and other teachers) and should provide adequate privacy, comfort, and space to facilitate such interactions. Additional space and technology may be necessary to conduct learning activities and tutorials if the office is used for student "pull-out" programs, such as reading or math enrichment.
- **Teacher workrooms.** Teacher workrooms should serve as a focal point for teams or clusters (elementary and middle schools) and departmental or interdepartmental units (high school). These workspaces can be placed at the hub of a cluster of classrooms, adjacent to classrooms sharing a common space, or overlooking high-use interior and exterior areas—such as restrooms, student commons, and courtyards—for added supervision.

Electrical wiring and spatial configurations should accommodate multiple phone lines, a copier/printer/fax machine, computers, an intercom, a worktable, and specialized equipment (e.g., a laminator or typewriter). Teachers' workrooms should also have mechanical ventilation to remove chemicals and fumes produced by materials and equipment and provide ample open shelving and lockable cabinets.

Individual workstations or planning space should be placed either at the periphery of the workroom or directly adjacent to it. It is important for individual teachers to have a permanent base from which to plan, reflect, and make preparations. An alternative to individual spaces may be combined or shared planning spaces. Shared spaces for four to six teachers can promote flexibility and increase spatial efficiency.

The teacher workroom should be adjacent to a conference room or breakout rooms. Activities within such rooms may include one-on-one consultations, small-group brainstorming sessions, committee meetings, and faculty meetings. Both rooms should have whiteboards and bulletin boards and be able to accommodate multimedia and video presentations.

- **Teachers' lounge.** The teachers' lounge may be part of the teacher workspace, adjacent to the teacher workspace, or deliberately placed in a less trafficked area to promote a more relaxed atmosphere. More than one lounge/teacher workroom may be needed depending on the size of the school. The lounge should have a kitchenette with a microwave and two refrigerators, comfortable furniture, a phone in a quiet spot, and a television with cable access. A dishwasher and vending machine are also useful. Windows or outdoor access to the outside fosters a restful environment.
- **Faculty restrooms.** Faculty-only restrooms should be located adjacent to each teacher workroom.

Principles of Teacher Workspace Design

Teacher workspaces should be seen as a critical element in the success of the academic program of the school. Without adequate space, teacher preparation and innovation may be negatively affected. When designing teacher workspaces:

- Consult all teachers regarding their needs before completing the design of a school. Teachers may want very different forms of spaces depending on the type of curriculum being implemented.
- Consider additional purposes—such as promoting interdisciplinary planning—that can be served by group workspaces. The importance of a strategically located space that facilitates cross-disciplinary interaction cannot be overstated. Discussion of curricular issues, student progress, and school goals are all enhanced by a well-placed workspace.
- Consider the benefits of locating group offices in areas where teachers can monitor unsupervised student activity (e.g., across from restrooms or stairwells).
- Balance the needs of privacy and collaboration. Teachers need privacy, time to reflect, and space to conduct personal and school tasks. The need for privacy, though, should not override a teacher's connection to the department or school. Designing individual spaces in close proximity or adjacent to the main workroom or lounge area promotes easier interaction among faculty.

The teachers' lounge that serves as a place in which to relax with coffee and exchange gossip is being transformed into an office-type setting. Spaces for reflection, research, and collaboration have become necessary as teaching professionals increasingly share their classrooms with colleagues. Teacher workspaces encourage sustained planning and preparation time, facilitate interaction and collaboration among teams and departments, and foster a professional community across and within grade levels.

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Additional Information

See NCEF resource list, *Teacher Workspaces,* online at http://www.ncef.org/rl/teachers_spaces.cfm

Publication Notes

Teacher Workspaces was updated in October 2010 based on the June 2000 report of the same title by Dan Butin of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design at the University of Virginia.