

Planning Schools for 2050? First, Let's Get *Now* Right



By Franklin Hill, Ph.D.

For 20 years, I have promoted constructing today's schools with the future in mind, yet as many school districts begin planning for the year 2050, I am starting to think this foresight/forethought might actually be a distracting course of action. Some districts may try to plan so far into the future that they neglect the present.

But, there is an option to do both: plan for today and appropriately and practically plan for tomorrow.

An effective master planning process addresses educational trends, curriculum issues, and facility concepts across a continuum of applications and time periods for implementation. This process allows for immediate no-cost/low-cost applications and higher-order opportunities based on cost-effectiveness and funding availability.

Figure 1 on page 9 illustrates the four levels of attention:

1. The base of the pyramid focuses on doing the fundamentals well for all students.
2. Curriculum addresses teaming, resource, and neighborhood options.

Any reduction in the transfer of cognitive information is akin to having students wear blinders or earplugs.

3. Creativity makes the school a learning “tool” for problem solving and higher-order thinking.
4. Globalism puts the luster on a flat world. This important strategy can occur at any time.

In an education facility, the basics must maximize the transfer of all forms of information from the instructional medium (teacher or technology) to the learner. Any reduction in the transfer of cognitive information is akin to having students wear blinders or earplugs.

Level 1: The Fundamentals

When educational achievement is presented as a bell curve, we realize that there are students at both extremes of high and low achievement with the vast majority of the population occurring somewhere in the middle.

As is often said, “A tide rises all boats.” In the case of education, technology is that tide, helping improve learning for all students. In environmental design, enhancements are the tide that increases the achievement potential for all students.

When the environmental basics are designed well, the bell curve for learning moves to the right and all students, regardless of their educational base position, have an opportunity to improve across the continuum. These design elements can be no-cost ideas that allow a teacher to change the environment immediately, such as:

- Room orientation
- Technology placement
- Natural light management
- Directional speaker placement
- Teacher desk placement/orientation to maximize available student space.

These ideas apply to all learning spaces.

Level 2: The Curriculum

The next level of a master planning process is a “curriculum” focus on coordination and integration of learning across disciplines. Integrated learning has been a natural process throughout history—it has only recently become an institutionalized process in our schools. Human nature has always inherently integrated authentic information and used it appropriately, when it has been regularly applied in an age-appropriate way.

Facility implications of curriculum integration include small learning communities, connectivity between various learning environments, and resource space for teaming of students, teachers, and instructional technologies. Just as one size does not fit all with regard to curriculum, one size does not fit all where open space and technology are concerned.

Level 3: Creativity

“Creative” master planning reconstitutes the fundamentals of age-appropriate authentic problem solving within an academic environment. Age-appropriate

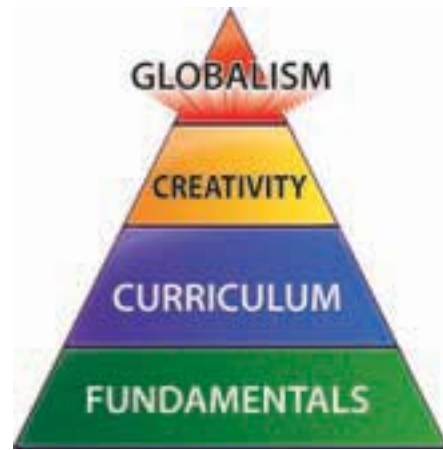


Figure 1. Master Planning Pyramid

exposure to fundamental problem solving issues excites the human spirit.

Age-appropriate exposure to fundamental problem solving issues excites the human spirit.

Facility considerations can include such configurations as the following:

- Making the school environment a “learning tool” that is physically integrated into the curriculum
- Incorporating data analysis computer peripherals that integrate different disciplines, technology, and the building—the learning atrium model
- Integrating science and tech prep lab orientation to incorporate problem solving.

Age-appropriate problem solving and authentic learning must rely on more than technology. Years ago, a science teacher professed proudly, “We will never have to touch test tubes again and laboratory areas will become obsolete.” That concept was ridiculous then and remains ridiculous now. Yet many schools districts passively accept this idea as a legitimate solution to abdicate the challenges for successful problem-based education of the “whole” student into the 21st century.

Level 4: The Global “Glow”

The glow is what learning is all about: not just lifelong learning but learning for life. The glow promotes appropriate, authentic learning for a changing world. The following examples are ways to expand the learning environment to enhance a global education curriculum:

- Using projection video to create simulated multicultural environments
- Creating café dining areas with multicultural design flexibility
- Engaging creative indoor/outdoor design applications that transition problem solving to 3-D learning.

When planning for the future, evaluate the real issues applicable to your school district and educational situation. Plan your school's needs at several levels of cost and complexity, from the "fundamentals" through the emerging global issues.

The glow is what learning is all about: not just lifelong learning, but learning for life.

The planning pyramid may provide a helpful framework for prioritizing your immediate goals and those further into the future.

Proper framing of a breadth of educational and facility needs, from the practical low-cost/no-cost options to the more complex and costly, will assure the community that you are using a practical and down-to-earth process. The fundamentals will resonate more clearly with the majority of the community and will build confidence before you begin discussing more complex options.

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