

Making Space for Modern Learning

By Dr Zeb Jansante, Mandi S. Figlioli and Brett Slezak



About the Authors: **Dr. Zeb Jansante** is the Assistant Superintendent for the Bethel Park School District since the summer of 2020. Prior to that, he served as the principal at Bethel Park High School for 14 years. His administrative career spans three decades, and in 2014, he was named the PA Principal of Year by the PA Principals Association.

Dr. Jansante served on the Principals Association Board of Directors for over 25 years. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Point Park University's School of Education.

Mandi S. Figlioli joined the Bethel Park School District as the Coordinator of Curriculum and Instruction for K-12 STEAM in 2021. She enjoyed 10 years as an elementary educator before pursuing a career in administration. She also served as the Assistant to the Superintendent of the Burgettstown Area School District for seven years and is a children's book author.

Brett Slezak serves as the Director of Technology at Bethel Park School District. After spending 10 years teaching health and physical education, he made the transition into administration. In 2020, Mr. Slezak was awarded the PETE & C Technology Administrator of the Year for Pennsylvania. While teaching, he was the 2017 recipient of a Carnegie Science Award for Middle Level Educator of the Year.

Public education, by and large, is long overdue for a “facelift” in modern learning spaces. Bethel Park School District is no different than most. Navigating the uncharted waters of a pandemic, in addition to a fourth Industrial Revolution, has necessitated an urgency to alter traditional school building designs. We believe that these modern learning spaces must support a universal design for learning and be conducive to exploring the skills and dispositions necessary for the future workforce that our students will be contributing towards. At Bethel Park School District, we are currently renovating our two-time, Blue Ribbon of Excellence middle school that has not seen a full renovation for 30 years. We are also in the process of consolidating all five of our neighborhood elementary buildings under one roof into a new K-5 elementary center. Both projects cost several million dollars, however, the informational concepts of this article can be applied to any single classroom, partial or full renovation or a full build at your district within your respective budget.

Before moving any walls or breaking ground, it is important to conceptualize; space design sets the tone for the type of learning experiences that will occur in a classroom. The physical environment will not only impact academic success, but also a student's social well-being. Whether you are constructing a new school, renovating an existing building or re-designing a classroom, we would like to offer the **ABC framework** as a lens for creating a space for modern learning created by the Bethel Park School District team.

“A”gency

Generally speaking, agency is defined as the sense of control you have over your circumstances, as well as your capacity to influence your own behavior and manage various tasks and situations. Educationally speaking, *student agency* speaks to a student's capacity to shape their learning by setting personalized goals, reflecting on them and taking responsible action to achieve them. “Regardless of whether a problem is obvious or hidden, the impetus to engage with it starts with a sense of agency – a sense that it's possible to reshape the way things are by directing one's actions purposefully” (Clapp & Tishman, 2017). In order for students to feel a sense of agency, the learning environment must host experiences that are meaningful and relevant to them. It is imperative that these experiences be driven by their interests, reflective of their voice and achieved through authentic choice.

We also believe when designing learning spaces conducive to student agency, we must acknowledge that a teacher is the designer of learning experiences, not just a means for dispensing content. The physical spaces should reflect this. As educational designers, we should avoid making the teacher desk or podium the central feature of the room. Rather, it should be a place where students can visit to ask questions and receive feedback. It is also important to plan for the furniture to be easily rearranged to accommodate various student groupings. The space should flex to the work, not the work to the space. In addition, a variety of media and materials should be plentiful and accessible. Students develop agency when they are both fluent with these tools and use them in a way that showcases their learning through their unique voice. For this reason, it is equally important for spaces large and

“**In order for students to feel a sense of agency, the learning environment must host experiences that are meaningful and relevant to them.**”

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

small to have places where students can publicly display their work or present their findings. When spaces are designed with these ideas, students truly can have agency over their learning.

“B”elonging

“Developmental psychology describes adolescence as a time in which the key learning and growth opportunities occur in the context of group identity, alienation, fidelity, peer pressure and experimenting with new roles. In other words, asking oneself again and again, “Who am I? And do people like me?” (“Fitting In,” 2022). Modern learning spaces are designed with inclusivity, equity and variability in mind. Metaphorically speaking, students need access to windows and mirrors; the space should not only foster a sense of personal belonging, but also an opportunity to explore the perspectives and identities of the entire community of learners that share the space. As we work toward mastery of grade-level standards, we must also promote the development of the student’s individual learning profiles and preferences. For students to thrive in the space, there must be opportunities and areas for self-regulation, and perhaps even de-escalation. One of the best ways for students to feel like they belong in the space is to truly engage them as co-designers in the process. While this looks different across age levels, students seeing their input come to fruition in a space sends the message that they are valued and belong there.

“C”ollaboration

Sabrina Gates (2018) asserts that while educators often work alone in the classroom, they do not — and should not — operate independently. Throughout our careers, we’ve always found that the best way to improve learning experiences and environments is to work together. With this thinking, we believe knowing how co-designing sows the seeds of belonging in a space, collaboration is not only an essential part of the design process but also an intended consequence. With collaborative learning experiences as the thoughtful goal, it is important to be intentional about the type of learning that will occur in the space. This includes not only thinking about furniture, but also planning for what materials, supports and technology that will be utilized. A modern learning space should offer flexibility to seamlessly transition between multiple modes of instruction, such as whole group, small group, partner or independent learning.



DRAW Collective Architects’ design of a Western Pennsylvania elementary maker space for Fox Chapel School District.

And while designing for collaboration is paramount, we would be remiss to not address the other three “C’s” of modern learning. It is equally essential that learning spaces offer opportunities for communication, creativity and critical thinking. Workspaces neatly assembled for the convenience of attendance and recording no longer mimic the diverse and rich environments of the workplaces that our student’s will experience after graduation. If we expect our students to work in a collaborative community, we can’t design our learning spaces to be social islands.

As we work to incorporate the ABC’s of modern space design, we must be cautious to not make assumptions, or resort to unilateral decision making and outdated trends. Space design and instructional planning should be fluid, flexible and responsive to the learners it serves. These transformations can occur on a large or small scale, and do not have to be costly. Flipping the classroom culture to foster agency, belonging, and collaboration can be as transformational as new furniture or the latest and greatest technology. If we approach our learning spaces as blank canvases, the possibilities for co-creation are endless. We cannot delay the rapid speed at which education evolves, but we can embrace the journey as our masterpiece.

For further information, please contact Dr. Jansante at jansante.zeb@bphawks.org

References

- Gates, S., (2018, Oct. 18). Benefits of Collaboration. *neaToday*. Retrieved from <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/benefits-collaboration>
- “Fitting In: Enough is Enough.” Insight Education (Educational and College Admissions Counselors), July 2022, <https://www.insight-education.net/fitting-enough-enough/>
- Tishman, S. & Clapp, E. P., (2017, Oct. 1). Building Students’ Sense of Agency. *Educational Leadership* (ASCD), Vol. 75, No. 2. Retrieved from <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/building-students-sense-of-agency>