As budgets tighten, school districts across the country are looking to the architectural community to design more creative, collaborative spaces that can accommodate a variety of activities and help them get better bang for their buck.

Think of functional spaces in terms of marketing. How can we get students excited about learning and the school environment? At the same time, as funding and space are at a premium, we have to imagine spaces that can serve a variety of needs for students, staff, and the community at large.

Imagine corridors that are more than just travel paths, but also include a food service kitchen or study nook. Visualize a pie-shaped space created using moveable walls around a central teaching station that would allow a 30-student classroom, or smaller, multitask stations, to be converted into a 90-student auditorium space. We need to think outside our preconceptions and present more options to clients.

Common multiuse spaces include cafeterias, libraries, and general communal areas such as corridors and atriums. With some creative thinking, any of these spaces can serve many masters well.

All-Day Lunchrooms

The dual-use cafeterias of yesteryear were a move in the right direction, but today’s spaces are called upon to do much more than host lunch and pep rallies.

They require more electrical outlets for the rapidly changing, technology-based learning environment. They must also be designed with whimsy and color to compete with today’s hippest eateries and attract this savvy generation of students. Cafeterias of the past were utilitarian, with cinderblock walls and acoustic tile ceilings. Kitchens commonly opened onto rooms with linear tables and a corolling system to shuffle students through a single cafeteria line. That’s not fun at all.

When the Auburn (AL) School District wanted to upgrade its 40-year-old junior high school cafeteria and 30+-year-old high school cafeteria, Todd Freeman knew the renovations...
At Auburn High School, bar seating added in a cafeteria renovation provides a comfortable area where students can eat lunch, work on computers, or socialize.

Left: Today’s libraries need to evolve into media centers that can readily adapt to new technologies as they are adopted by schools.
would require more than new HVAC, windows, and flooring. “Our district has been growing about 5 percent per year for the last eight years,” said Freeman, former director of school operations for the district and current principal of Auburn High School. “The major thing we needed was more space and a better way to take care of the growing population at the schools. We had a limited amount of space, so we needed to use it for multiple purposes, not just a cafeteria.”

One of the district’s goals was to entice more students to eat in the cafeterias since the schools are reimbursed for a portion of meal sales. The renovated cafeterias were built around a grab-and-go food court concept, with multiple points of entry and sales. The schools can host several different lunch waves, and the students can get in and out quickly.

The junior high added 68 seats by installing bar seating and 42-inch-high countertops by a bay of windows. Those seats give the space the appeal of a Starbucks, which is stiff competition for today’s school cafeterias. Bar seating offers not only more places to eat, but

The more schools learn about daylighting, the more they know there is no substitute...
Libraries That Reach Out

Much like lunchrooms, libraries compete for student attention. A drab library won’t engage them for long. These days, students want options. As technology advances, modern libraries become media centers that need to be flexible enough to provide for future technology. That requires placing additional conduits within the walls with pull strings or providing many more outlets than seem necessary. Bookshelves are almost a relic of the past, but some small, simple moves can enhance old, dull racks. Comfortable seating, strategically placed among the aisles, can “speak” to students and draw them closer to the books.

Placing instructional teaching areas within or adjacent to libraries makes it possible for teachers to create lesson plans that include assignments that can only be achieved through library investigation. These areas also may be used for study groups where noise is a concern. Don’t think of this space as another cinderblock-walled room; consider glass wall dividers instead to allow for a cohesive connection to the library.

One goal of the renovation of the Trinity Presbyterian School in Montgomery, AL, was to increase attendance at the private school as well as add space to the library. If you’re going to get parents to pay tuition, you have to create an environment that will get kids excited about going to the school. A new mezzanine within the almost-two-story library added square footage but also created a special space for students. Lounge chairs even feature built-in arm tablets like you see at coffee shops.

Librarian Linda Hastey enjoys serving students lemonade in the summer and hot chocolate or apple cider in winter. A single-out, carpet-free space with flexible seating lets her offer refreshments in a hospitable café environment, further piquing interest in the library.

A Grand Atrium

Collaborative use of space on the post-secondary level means creating environments that are conducive to multiple activities and appeal to people of every age. Atriums not only create visual appeal due to their grand height but can also be clever areas to introduce study and social activities. The space can be creatively divided with interesting placement of stairwells or elevators. Simpler, more portable elements like flexible seating, moveable partitions, planters, and art sculptures can also add to the versatility. Remember your electrical needs; as technology advances, this will be a must.

The Burrow Center for Fine and Performing Arts at Wallace State Community College in Hanceville, AL, is a fine arts center with a central atrium that connects the recital hall and two or three classrooms. Comfortable furnishings in the atrium make it inviting as a rendezvous spot for students between classes, and also for art openings and receptions, said Gary L. Owen Jr., vice president of architecture with Goodwyn Mills Cawood’s Birmingham, AL, office. The art gallery for which the center is named feeds into the atrium’s common area. “The school has even had little jazz combos and cocktail parties in the atrium when there are art openings or other gallery events,” Owen said. The area also acts as a pre-function area for the recital hall.

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