

# School Buildings – The Last Domino

## It's Time for Something New

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In the post-COVID debate about reopening schools, everyone seemed to agree about one thing: bringing children back to their physical school setting was important. A study published by MIT's Teaching Systems Lab titled, *Imagining September*<sup>i</sup> noted, "One of the most important insights from school closures is the incredible importance of physical school buildings to the work of schools." The study goes on to quote a district leader who said, "building time will be 'gold.'"

I respectfully disagree. Building time has not been "gold" for a long time and, after COVID-19, the fallacy that school buildings serve our children well became that much more evident.<sup>ii</sup> When schools closed abruptly at the start of the pandemic, educators quickly scrambled to offer the same severely limited experience online that they had been offering students in the physical school setting. Most of the evidence that filtered back from "online schools" showed that this model did not work because students were not willing to be held hostage at home in the way they have been in the classroom.

The chart below provides a stark illustration of the extent to which our current model of education is shaped by the school building. The left column describes a defunct educational model that is dictated by the familiar classroom-and-corridor based (cells-and-bells) school building. Taken together, the 13 elements that represent the average school day for millions of children and their teachers describe a model of education far removed from the reality of the world beyond school. Yes, the school building is "incredibly important" but for all the wrong reasons – it prevents schools from delivering the education our children deserve. If so, how can we redesign the school building to facilitate rather than militate against the delivery of a modern education?

In the right column, the change in the physical design of the school from a cells-and-bells to a "learning community" layout can dramatically upgrade all aspects of teaching and learning to make them more relevant for today and tomorrow.<sup>iii</sup>

No	Schooling Dictated by the Cells-and-Bells Model of Physical School Design	Schooling that is Possible in a Learning Community Based Model of School Design
1	Children are forced to spend most of their school day in a classroom	Children choose to occupy spaces best suited to the learning activity they are engaged in
2	Each group of 20 to 30 students is sorted by age and actively supervised by one adult	Students work in multi-age groups of varying sizes, passively supervised by a group of adults
3	In the higher grades, different teachers teach different subjects	A group of teachers working together offers a robust interdisciplinary curriculum
4	The school day is broken down into fixed periods with each period devoted to the study of a different subject	Individual student schedules are organized around the completion of interdisciplinary projects

5	Teachers do not routinely collaborate with peers other than at fixed times set aside for team preparation	Teachers work together in a professional office and collaborate throughout the school day and beyond
6	Direct instruction predominates teaching practice and even when students are engaged in individual study or teamwork, it is to carry out tasks explicitly defined by the teacher	There is very little direct instruction. Teachers serve as advisors and guide students with the help they need to complete individual or team assignments that students had a hand in selecting
7	Most of the student assessments measure retention of content and not the demonstration of skills	Individualized formative assessments are designed to provide ongoing feedback and are focused on skill building
9	There is almost no opportunity for teachers to mentor students individually or tutor them in small groups	Teachers can work one-on-one with students, tutor them in small groups, or lecture to larger groups
10	Peer tutoring between students is rare to non-existent	Peer tutoring is encouraged and facilitated by the design of the learning spaces
11	Most of the learning is theoretical, and there is very little hands-on or practical learning	Most of the learning is hands-on and practical with the theory embedded in the assignments
12	Stationary students use mobile technology	Learning spaces amply demonstrates the power of anytime, anywhere learning
13	Students are rarely tapped to express their creativity or engage in complex problem solving – two essential skills for today and tomorrow	Most of the student work is personalized and focused on creativity and complex problem solving

The good news for schools is that the conversion of a traditional cells-and-bells school into a learning-community based design is relatively inexpensive and can be accomplished quickly. Much can be done within capital budgets already set aside by schools and school districts. Even in cases where a bond referendum is needed to obtain construction money, such efforts become far easier when the facility changes are educationally driven.

One-by-one, the COVID pandemic upended elements of schooling previously deemed “essential” such as textbooks, standardized tests, mandatory attendance, required number of days in school and homework. In the shadows the sanitized school building stood waiting to re-exert its socially distanced authority and, in one fell swoop, wipe away all the disruptive innovations its removal from the educational equation had made possible. We do not need to bow to its authority. Today, the traditional school building is the last standing domino preventing the creation of a relevant and effective education system. Knocking it down, metaphorically if not literally, is the critical key to unlocking the incredible creative potential of our children, so that they can go on to build a world far better than the one they are inheriting from us.

<sup>i</sup> Reich, J. & Mehta J. (2020) Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools during Covid-19, MIT Teaching System Lab. July 3, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> With all its dysfunction, the physical school is still critically needed for children in underserved communities. For many of these children, school provides a safe haven from abuse and depression, a place to get a healthy meal, and their only access to high-speed Internet. However, a well-designed school is just as important for these children as it is for every student.

<sup>iii</sup> The Learning Community model of school design is fully described in the following two books: 1) Blueprint for Tomorrow – Redesigning Schools for Student Centered Learning by Prakash Nair, Harvard Education Press, 2014 and 2) Learning by Design. Live | Play | Engage | Create by Prakash Nair, Roni Zimmer Doctori and Dr. Richard F. Elmore, Education Design International, 2020.