# LEARNING BY DESIGN
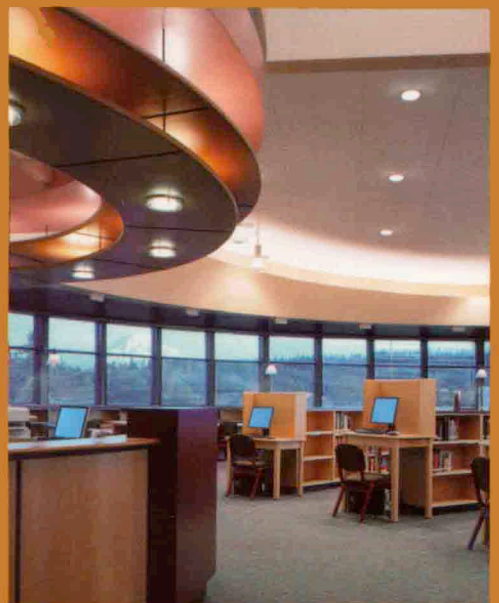
## A School and University Leader's Annual Guide to Architectural Services

# Making the Best Sense of Small Schools

**CASE STUDY**

*Educational program goals drive effective design*

BY GAYLAIRD CHRISTOPHER, AIA, AND VICTORIA BERGSAGEL

Small schools are not a new idea. After all, public education in America was built on a one-room schoolhouse design that accommodated children until young adulthood. But as society became more sophisticated, so did the country's schools and higher education facilities. And as a result, many educational facilities became big-budget and behemoth—impersonal and ineffective for many students.

Conversely, small schools can be affordable and sustainable, and most importantly, they make sense for students. Recent research has deepened the argument for small schools in three ways. First, an analysis of more than 3,000 construction projects showed that smaller schools are no more expensive to build than their much larger counterparts. Second, budget analyses of 25 effective small schools throughout the United States demonstrated that, on average, small schools spend less per student on educational program, maintenance, and operations than the per-pupil expenditure in their districts; at the same time, they achieve results that are equal to or better than schools in the same area. Third, these schools offer innovative and effective educational programs, facilities, and strategies for cost effectiveness.

However, while small schools have successful track records, smallness itself may be insufficient. Merely converting a high school or college area of study to a small learning environment



School hallways that incorporate social spaces encourage student interaction outside the classroom.

does not guarantee its success. Much depends on the components of the educational program.

That said, these aspects of smaller school design should be weighed against educational program goals and curriculum:

**Sense of community.** In a smaller school environment, it is easier for students to establish personal relationships with their fellow students and teachers. The way learning environments are grouped, the creation of positive social spaces, and the adjacency of staff and student spaces can support a sense of community.

**Learning priorities.** Flexible learning environments create opportunities for student exploration and include features supportive of collaborative learning.

**Common focus.** Effective smaller schools have a focused curriculum. Whether centered on environmental studies, social justice, the arts, sciences, or technology, students ultimately need to understand they are truly accountable for their learning.

**Hands-on experience.** Students need to be working on meaningful activities. Such learning can occur in a small learning environment, through group work and hands-on projects, or externally, through internships or apprenticeships. ∎

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## Tips for Planning Small Schools

Whether building a new educational facility or moving from a large comprehensive model to small learning environments, here are several design features to keep in mind throughout the planning process. Consider including:

- Flexible and moveable storage for student projects and portfolios
- Small group spaces for student–student, student–teacher, and teacher–teacher meetings
- Collaborative corridors for break-out sessions, student projects, and display of student work
- Social spaces for students to gather, work, and hang out with friends (consider cyber cafés, niches, outdoor courtyards, and seating)
- Multipurpose spaces that support more than one function
- Community gathering spaces for student teams, parents, community members, and staff
- Separate welcoming and well-defined entrances to support the identity of multiple small schools in one facility
- Personal spaces for students to concentrate, focus, and work independently
- Flexible and appropriate equipment, technology, and furniture to maximize learning