

Connection, Diversity, Mobility: A New Age for International Schools in China

Xi'an Liangjiatan International School (XLIS) and Steelcase Education embrace active learning to create an environment where students thrive.

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Xi'an is a city with diversity at its roots. Located at the start of the old Silk Road, it has been a keystone in connecting the cultures of China and Europe since 100BC.

Today, its multicultural heritage continues to shape its future. Overseas companies, including leading technology brands, are establishing their presence in the area and bringing a diverse, international workforce with them. But despite the energy and potential of the region, most expatriates stay for only a few years.

For Lily Liu, Head of Xi'an Liangjiatan International School (XLIS), a school is at the heart of a community. As part of Liu's postgraduate research, she visited top educational institutions in Finland, Qatar, the United States and the United Kingdom to experience the leading edge of evolving education. She saw an opportunity to build a K-12 international school in Xi'an that would be more than just a dynamic learning environment: it would offer families greater connection and the chance to lay down roots. "It's important to provide local and international families with their own sense of place in the city", says Liu, "as well as the confidence that their children are experiencing the best of a 21st century education."

What began as a passion project for Liu has blossomed into an educational ecosystem that shines as an example of the future of active learning. "How we feel at school, or university, stays with us our whole lives," says Liu. "My time at the University of Southern California was so positive and I want to see our students create those memories and positive associations with XLIS."

Steelcase Education dealer, Tracy Wang, and her team worked closely with Liu to understand and execute her vision. "It was always one of our goals to promote and support the city of Xi'an," says Liu. Integrating international and local awareness was also a key concern and she saw XLIS as part of the solution. Guided by the philosophy of 'listening and learning', she consulted students and teachers. Liu says, "by involving those who will be inhabiting the spaces, we knew we would be able to create a place for them, and shape the school's future—and the future of international education—together. This process in itself gave students a sense of voice and confidence through collaboration."

SPACES FOR NURTURING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Education today requires more than rote learning and recall. From creative and critical thinking, communication and collaboration, to growth mindsets, empathy and adaptability—students need to be equipped with the soft skills that will help them forge positive and productive career paths. By focusing on physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing in active learning environments, these concepts are brought to life at XLIS.

The school is rooted in the values of innovation, global connection and independence, and offers the *International Baccalaureate®* Diploma Programme curriculum. Currently, over 400 students are enrolled from kindergarten to high school, with the aim to grow to nearly 1,300 students in the next five years. Keeping class groups small provides greater opportunities to create a fluid learning environment that suits the demands of the transdisciplinary curriculum.

FREEDOM AND FLEXIBILITY

Liu envisioned students receiving personal care and attention, as well as opportunities for independent learning. At XLIS, teachers can act as facilitators and coaches, adjusting classroom layouts to better connect with students. Classroom furniture can be easily rolled into new configurations to create larger islands, rows or circles to reflect the group's activities and lesson formats. This mobility can be found throughout the school and helps to break down traditional boundaries, empowering students with the freedom to connect.

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LILY LIU | Head of Xi'an Liangjiatan International School

"It's important in an education-centred environment to create a sense of equality within a group, and for teachers to meet students at their level," says Liu. "The ability to effortlessly reconfigure spaces to support the lessons of the day is invaluable for engaging, retaining and inspiring young minds."

ROOM TO GROW

At XLIS, every space is a learning space. In those ‘in-between’ areas, there are inviting lounge settings that encourage informal catch-ups and discussions and create a welcoming ambience for the whole community, including parents and visitors. The school’s library is a reimagined space: a learning commons where knowledge, tools and resources converge. It supports a range of dynamics; from independent individual study, to group sessions, with a spectrum of private and public areas to facilitate collaboration, connection and focus. Casual and comfortable spaces provide students with the chance to share and collaborate using technology, cosy up with a book, or sketch out class projects.

Hosting meals that are as healthy for the mind as they are for the body; the cafeteria is relaxed and informal, with a variety of settings for groups of different sizes. Modular furniture and bar-height stools and tables echo modern and inclusive dining environments and help to develop social soft skills in another uplifting, friendly space.

TACTILITY AND TECHNOLOGY

Balancing digital access with human connection is essential for students today. Even in a cyber age, tactile learning has immense value. Steelcase Education solutions ensure that analogue learning tools are still close at hand. Verb whiteboards, small dry-erase whiteboards, are not only ideal for personal use and group work, but they help encourage more introverted students to share their ideas, too.

Studies by UCLA show that taking notes longhand, rather than by typing, can improve conceptual understanding and comprehension. Doodling and sketching are part of the creative trial-and-error process and the chance to engage with a lesson or subject in a way that feels natural. Campfire paper tables provide writable surfaces and notepads that liberate students to express themselves and productively connect with one another.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT

Bringing a syllabus to life requires a dedicated and passionate teaching staff, who are productive and feel valued for their contributions. Teachers need bright, open, flexible classrooms that help them enjoy their work while best serving the needs of their students.

Comfort, collaboration and rejuvenation are provided in the new teachers’ lounge. These spaces support lesson planning, quiet reflection, peer to peer coaching and social connection, as well as access to work tools and power. The diverse mix of settings offer teachers choices to support their range of activities as well as a range of postures for wellbeing.

XLIS moves away from the traditional staffroom, where each teacher has their own desk, to a teachers’ lounge—an oasis of comfort, connection and focus. The lounge provides a range of settings for casual connections, peer-to-peer coaching and access to work tools, enabling an international team of educators to find their personal productivity flow.

HARMONY WITH COMMUNITY

Liu and the team at XLIS are united in the belief that a school needs to work in harmony with its community. XLIS embraces both Chinese and international cultural values; the school regularly holds events and activities that celebrate diversity. Liu sees this appreciation for both local and international culture as critical, “Our world is increasingly connected. XLIS students have the opportunity to develop a global mindset, while also deepening their appreciation for the city that is their home—Xi’an.” This philosophy and approach have shaped XLIS as a leader in inclusivity and active learning and are part of Liu’s vision to contribute to the positive development of the city.

Liu’s priorities are clear, “As principal, the most important thing for me will always be making sure our campus is safe. But the second-most important thing is that our students are happy, healthy and enjoying their school life. I’m proud to say that, through our shared values and vision, XLIS and Xi’an will be home to many happy students for years to come.”

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