

Designing Post-COVID Learning Spaces

Our opportunity is to rethink learning experiences and make face-to-face connections even better than before.

So much uncertainty remains as K-12 schools, colleges and universities reopen or plan for the reopening of their buildings to students and educators. To ensure the safety of students, educators and staff, everything will look very different — from classrooms and cafeterias to playgrounds and social spaces. The coronavirus has forever changed education. Our opportunity is to leverage what we've learned to rethink learning experiences and make face-to-face connections even better than before.

As we navigate what's next, educators will need to rethink how to leverage technology and physical [classroom space design](#) in a way that elevates both platforms to create a safe learning environment that will enhance learning outcomes.

Wave 1: Responding in the Now

In the immediate, the most important priority will be to welcome some students and educators back to an environment that keeps them as safe as possible and helps them feel safe as well. Educational institutions may bring staff and students back with staggered daily and weekly schedules for classes and activities - with a combination of in-person and remote learning. Consider the difference between reading and music for K-12 or a science lab and a psychology lecture for higher education? Small changes to the physical space will be necessary to allow for physical distancing. This can often be done by using existing furniture and adding a few new elements to the space to prevent disease transmission.

Design ideas: Strategies include limiting classroom and meeting room capacity, repurposing larger unused spaces like gyms and libraries for classes, having students remain in one location while teachers move from class to class, adding barriers, changing the configuration and placement of desks to observe six feet physical distancing guidelines and ensure people aren't facing one another, frequent cleaning and more support for those still learning from home.

Wave 2: Planning for the Near-Term

In the next stage, learnings from the first wave of staggered class and activity schedules will allow administrators to bring back most or all in-person classes and activities. As scientists discover more about how COVID-19 behaves, additional guidance will help create even safer environments. Learning settings and common spaces will need to be changed to accommodate more people while still following the best science-based evidence we have on infection control.

Design ideas: Solutions include designing for disinfecting by using smooth, easy-to-clean surfaces and introducing barriers that deflect the virus. Embrace how technology and the physical environment can work together to create better blended learning experiences — introduce more large-scale collaboration devices like the Microsoft Surface Hub 2S and Steelcase Roam Mobile Cart to support standing connections that can happen in open air environments.

Wave 3: Looking Toward the Far

There will be an urgency to move from “good enough” to “excellence.” As we look toward the future, learning spaces will be reinvented to enhance the benefits that face-to-face educational experiences can offer. Pedagogies and calendars will consider which activities are best online and in person, and our spaces will need to reflect those new priorities. There will be greater emphasis on safely supporting social and spontaneous learning in addition to finding new ways to enhance a scholarly atmosphere and energy in the physical environment that can’t be replicated online.

Design ideas: This means educational space planning paradigms of the past, driven by density and cost, need to shift. Flexible and fluid spaces will better support the adaptability expected of educators and students. And enhanced blended learning connections will bring online and physical experiences together to create an elevated sense of community.

Many parents and student supporters have come to realize the tremendous value of great educators and educational systems during the pandemic. Learning institutions that have been most successful have had a robust blended learning platform, student-led educational experiences and have created a community of support for all students. Those who try to hold too tightly to the past may fail to excel as they try to navigate what’s next. In the future, schools and campuses will be more important than ever.

Download the Guide

To see design considerations and thought starters, download the complete guide,
Navigating What's Next: The Post-COVID Workplace.

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