A Brave New Campus —
Marysville Getchell High School Campus
2011 MacConnell Award Winner

By Amy Yurko with support from Craig Mason

I’ll never forget my amazement when my favorite jazz vocalist, also my teacher, revealed that even as a veteran musician, she still gets nervous on the stage. “Nervous energy encourages me to take chances” she said, emphasizing that taking chances is key to the musical improvisation for which she is known to this day. I enjoy finding opportunities to quote or otherwise thank a teacher who has had such profound impact on my life and my work, like my music teacher, and I look for opportunities to apply these valuable insights to new situations and in new ways. The Marysville School District was a client who requested – demanded – these particular words of wisdom: be brave, take chances. It was a great fit.

In short, the success of the new Marysville Getchell High School Campus can be attributed to the bold and fearless attitudes of those who envisioned it and those who made it a reality. Following the first successful bond issue in fifteen years, the district and community rallied under the courageous leadership of a newly appointed superintendent to redirect community energies toward positive change focused on student learning. Five years later, Marysville can boast a 27% increase in graduation rates and having one of the most innovative and award-winning campuses in the nation.

In the Beginning…

Through in-depth explorations of exemplary learning programs across the nation, a quest for discovering new ways to engage learners, and the courageous commitment to keeping an open mind throughout the process, the district spent nearly two years formulating bold principles which would serve to guide the redefinition of high school education in Marysville.

Under the leadership of Architects of Achievement and together with programming and planning specialists, staff, students, and community members, the set of five guiding principles detail the values and concepts central to student success. The five Board-approved Guiding Principles include: Relationships at the Center, Focused Learning, Identity-Purpose,
Community, and Accountability. Each principle includes additional detail that was instrumental to maintaining focus on the shared vision throughout the subsequent design of the new campus.

Conversations among all participants challenged each other to keep our eyes on the goal by continuously asking “what would it look like if we really meant it?” During both the charrettes and throughout the project’s development, potential solutions were assessed on how well, how purely, they supported the guiding principles. The design team was forced to rethink our typical project development process by blending together the typically independent programming and design phases. Together we stepped outside our comfort zones to deliberately leave behind traditional concepts of educational delivery and the spaces that typically accompany them.

Communities of Learners
The district began formulating a strategy for organizing students into communities of learners as a means to achieve these guiding principles. Concurrently, the planning and design team began exploring ways for the school itself to support them. Together we were creating an entirely new educational system enabled by four independent interest-based buildings for 400 students each with equal access to a shared community commons.

Taking Chances
In a typical project, the specific needs of educational environments are informed, if not driven, by the anticipated curriculum, programs and teaching strategies. While the district was quite clear that distinct and purposeful learning communities would be their strongest strategy, the specific curricular focus for each of these communities was not yet decided. So we were challenged instead to create spaces that could support whatever curriculum the district decided to develop for their learning communities. While it would have been understandable for these circumstances to have made us nervous, instead they encouraged us to take chances.

Start with the Learner
We began with the learner, identifying various fundamental activities, groupings and supports (spaces, equipment, lighting, technology, etc.) necessary for learning, regardless of subject matter. We engaged students with a wide variety of perspectives, from star performers to drop-outs as well as students with varying physical abilities, to help us understand their needs. They identified a desire for self-selecting their settings from a range of options - from large and open to quiet and small, from soothing and supportive to stimulating and challenging, from structured to natural. They identified a range of ways for working with others - from independent yet simultaneous work to collaborative teaming to large group presentations, and on and on.

“The architects really wanted to hear what I had to say for accessibility and universal design from a student’s perspective. So I met with them and gave them a few ideas, and now I am touring the new campus and I saw a couple of things and thought ‘that was my idea, that’s so cool!’ It’s kind of a legacy; I can say I helped design this building.” Shelby Hintz, former Marysville student

A key issue for many students was to have adults recognize their differences, instead of simply focusing on their similarities, when determining groupings, activities, environments, and even curriculum to meet their personal learning needs. We saw that each of these students seemed to have an innate desire to do his or her best, and that the structured environments of traditional schools had discouraged some students from finding opportunities to prove it.

Being Brave
We addressed the challenge of planning and designing a campus which had not yet determined its intended educational programs armed with this wealth of learner insights and the adopted Guiding Principles. The challenge was bravely transformed into an opportunity to see the campus as a living environment, one that would – and should – evolve to support any curriculum that would engage students both on opening day and throughout the life of the facility. What would it look like if we really meant that?

Scenario Planning
Cognizant that technologies, interests, and priorities change so quickly...
that school campuses can be obsolete on the day they open, the team critically reexamined the core functionality of educational spaces to design a relevant, flexible, and adaptable campus. How? Scenario planning.

Imagine a space planning exercise that is focused on learners instead of spaces. An activity that typically uses blocks or drawn bubbles to represent spaces, instead uses buttons or dots to represent students and staff. Say you have 400 of these buttons or dots. Arrange them into clusters of activities, both formal and informal, based on student and teacher insights and in support of the guiding principles. Pretend there is a curriculum defined, and that the students are engaging in activity-based learning. Now, use string or drawn lines to both distinguish and connect the various activities. Pretend some lines are stationary walls, others are movable, some are made from furniture and still others are simple changes in floor patterns. Now repeat this exercise several more times using different curricular themes each time and be sure to take photos or otherwise capture the results. Next, compare the schemes from each exercise. Discuss possible reasons for the commonalities and differences among each idea. Brainstorm a single solution which can support all of your findings. The result is a truly learner-focused plan, able to transcend curriculum and offer the range of environments to support nearly any curriculum of today, and many of those which do not yet exist. Now, celebrate the fact that none of your buttons has “dropped out”!

**Environments for Teaching and Learning**

With commonalities of learning activities, groupings and supports defined, the Marysville Getchell team defined a series of essential learning spaces, which in combination could serve various curricular themes. In addition, settings for support of basic administrative and operational needs were included. The following settings were defined for each of the four learning communities:

- **Welcome Center** – a prominent entrance which identifies each building and includes easy access to administration and student services
- **Social Commons** – informal gathering space with direct connections to the outdoors, is large enough to bring the entire learning community together, can also be used for dining, student presentations and other large group functions
- **Learning Commons** – dispersed resources, with the atmosphere of a bookstore instead of a traditional centralized library

> “The library at Marysville Getchell is not a place. It is distributed resources so students have access to the same kind of resources as a traditional library, but in real time,” said Gail Miller, Assistant Superintendent of Marysville School District. “Students can access materials wherever, whenever. They don’t have to schedule time to go to the library.”
• **Specialized Learning** – a large open “tinkering” space, equipped and furnished to support the specific curricular focus of the learning community

• **Applied Learning Lab** – space for the “real world” application of learning

• **Project Commons** – open space for interdisciplinary and collaborative projects

• **Core Learning** – core instructional space for mid-sized student groupings

• **Wet Lab** – with lab stations and outdoor connections for inquiry-based learning

• **Small Group Rooms** – small conference rooms for group work, interventions and conferencing

• **Storage Rooms** – purposefully identical in size to small group rooms, to allow for reassignment or relocation as necessary

• **Terraces and Balconies** – outdoor spaces at ground level, balconies and on roofs to extend the learning environments and connect students to the stunning natural surroundings of the site.

These spaces are artfully organized in each building to promote relationships, focused learning, identity-purpose, community and accountability.

The design enables great flexibility in the administration of student-focused learning. Within each physical learning community, a series of interconnected learning spaces support the personalized educational approach.

Of course, each autonomous learning community is responsible for providing a comprehensive education to each student with a personalized approach which recognizes their unique abilities and interests. In addition, each community is accountable for all students to meet graduation requirements, college entrance requirements, and for preparing them to succeed in life beyond high school. With these openly defined learning environments in each building, these expectations can be effectively met.

“When you’re in your own SLC, you have everything that you need right there. The way that it is so open makes it feel united, and to be able to easily find the teacher you need to talk to, and you never feel alone.” Melissa Jones, MGHSC School for the Entrepreneur

**Shell-and-Core Approach**

The four learning community buildings are designed using a “shell and core” concept which locates the seismic and load-bearing steel structure and most plumbing out to the exterior walls, routes electrical and HVAC through floor and ceiling, and allows interior walls to be easily reconfigured over time to adapt to changes in educational program. With the addition of interior windows, movable walls, furniture on wheels, and ubiquitous technology, the design allows learning spaces to be reconfigured to meet any instructional model now and in the future.

Midway through the design of the campus, Marysville School District determined the identities of each of the small schools, and the design team led by DLR Group planned for the opening of each community including specific equipment, graphics, color schemes and finishes to support each theme. The shell and core theory was reinforced when late in the construction process the team learned that one of the theme-based schools was unsubscribed. No problem! The building was quickly readapted for its replacement curriculum.

The final four theme-based buildings include:

• Academy of Construction and Engineering
• Bio-Med Academy
• International School of Communications
• School for the Entrepreneur

**A New Type of High School**

Imagine a school without hallways; a school where every single space is used for education. Imagine a school where student learning, starting with literacy, drives all decisions related to instruction and construction. Imagine a school not as a school, but as a retreat for learning. Students are offered the engaging and supportive spaces they deserve, with the rigorous and relationship-based instruction they crave, and with opportunities to connect with the world around them. Exhilarating “aha moments” are now filling their days. They are astonishing us with their focus, impressing us with their accomplishments, and appreciating us for our bravery.

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