

NEW JERSEY OPINION

In digital age, school buildings in N.J. must be repurposed to keep up with technology | Opinion



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Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

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New Jersey's commercial real estate has been dramatically impacted by recent technological advances, to the point that many office buildings have been closed or demolished. Now - given the proliferation of online education and mobile communications - could the same be in store for our public schools?

It's a possibility we should carefully consider. After all, our school districts are, collectively, among the state's largest property owners. In many communities, they're the largest employer.

Nearly every sector of our society has been affected by digital technology and its constantly accelerating capacity for sharing information and services. Consider Uber's effect on traditional taxi services, Airbnb's impact on conventional hotel chains and how Amazon's proposed, drone-based delivery system could alter the business of established shipping companies. Institutions are being forced to evolve - and the same is expected of New Jersey's public schools.

Online learning, supported by widespread internet access and mobile devices, is increasingly available to students - a reality requiring educators to constantly assess these offerings, while also considering how school buildings can accommodate them.

Then there's preparing students for college - which increasingly allows for online coursework, or what's often referred to as "24/7/365" learning. In fact, a proposal made several years ago would have required every state high school student to complete an online

course before graduating. To continue doing so, we'll need facilities that can accommodate this "anytime, anywhere" instructional approach, plus funding to staff this type of learning.

Let's also keep in mind that many structures in which our students are educated were constructed prior to the Vietnam War, and some built during the Great Depression remain in use. As years pass, school districts have increasingly relied on federal, state and local funding to finance referendums for repairs intended to keep facilities useful in addressing our students' needs.

And these needs vary greatly. Consider:

[?] Until recently, school cafeterias were laid out to accommodate one daily food line. Now, we have multiple food stations - a healthier format that has necessitated restructuring many cafeterias.

[?] The ongoing evolution of the "keyboard" - which two generations ago meant having several classrooms devoted to typing instruction. One generation ago, these rooms were converted into computer labs. Now, the challenge is providing wireless access throughout facilities to maximize the effectiveness of portable devices.

[?] Barely two decades ago, schools required expansive library spaces to house their books. In 2015, much of what our students read is accessed online, so libraries are being creatively repurposed.

[?] Prior to Title IX legislation in 1972, school athletic facilities focused on physical education instruction and interscholastic athletics for boys. In the ensuing decades, these structures underwent reconfiguration to accommodate female student-athletes. Today, many districts need to convert athletic fields to more durable, multi-purpose, synthetic surfaces.

The big question is whether our structurally sound, 20th century school buildings can be viable in the dramatically changing, 21st century educational environment.

Resoundingly, the answer is yes. Here's why:

Our public schools were not, are not and never should be exclusively devoted to college and career readiness. Guided by caring administrators, teachers and support professionals, students learn to handle challenges, both academic and interpersonal. They learn to work in groups, make eye contact when speaking, solve problems with increasingly less adult influence, discuss and debate issues affecting their lives and edit and critique the work of peers in face-to-face situations. These experiences represent key stepping stones toward successful citizenship - experiences that can occur only in brick-and-mortar structures where everyone gathers with a common purpose. Good students make good citizens and become productive, innovative members of society.

community is essential to growing up. It would be misguided to believe any internet-based option could replace this core experience.

Are some school buildings in our state old? Yes - but much older by far is the tradition of schools as gathering places emphasizing the human factor. We may need to repurpose our buildings, but what doesn't change is the need for a physical place where educators and students experience the priceless interaction that enables learning. Even decades after students exit a building for the final time, it's the expressions of care and encouragement from teachers, classmates and administrators that are remembered and treasured.

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