Designing facilities for safety and wellness

by Irene Nigaglioni

It's not a surprise to anyone that the safety of school aged children is on everyone's minds. Recent events around the U.S. and in our own backyard in Texas have focused our attention on mass shootings and what can be done to keep our students safe.

This conversation is one that has several implications, one of which has to do with the physical environment and its impact on safety and security. There is a need for a dedicated effort to design safer school learning environments, but the conversation on how to do this needs to be broader than just the physical plant.

Environments do impact the health and wellness of its occupants, and in schools, they can have a positive impact if properly designed.

Facility planners and designers are challenged by communities to design buildings that can help keep students safe, but the request is typically focused on hardening the environment. Although we can all agree that a single point of entry to a school is a good tech-nique for minimizing visitor access to a building, we also need to shift the conversation to creating future focused environments that allow students to feel safe and supported.

Research overwhelmingly shows that the environment has an influence over our cognition and health. In her 2017 book "Welcome to your World," Sarah Williams Goldhagen goes as far as stating that "there's no such thing as a "neutral" environment: Your built environ-ment is either helping you, or it's hurting you."

Other key studies show that the built environment can negatively impact mental health as well, causing stress, anxiety and depression. So, we must ask ourselves, is the solution truly hardening, or should we consider a softer approach? What are the schools we want to continue to create?

The pandemic gave us a great opportunity to rethink the return to school environments and how they can support students. During the pandemic we saw the need for the built environment of a school disappear as our students flipped to learning behind a computer screen at home. If education could happen completely online, is there really a need for the physical facility that is a school?

We since know that for most of our students, the need to return to a physical space is essential, but do we want to return to the same school environments of the past century, or do we want to return to safe, welcom-

ing, healthy, innovative, diverse and equitable environments that support each learner in his or her journey?

The answer appears simple, but understanding the changes that need to happen may sometimes be harder to grasp. These changes are essential to ensuring healthy, nurturing and safe schools for all our children and staff.

Various leading national organizations have recently published safety and security guides for the design of school facilities. These reports focus on the need to design future focused learning environments that support students, via the inclusion of spaces, adjacencies and materials that are proven to help reduce stress and enhance learning.

During the fall of 2022, the Association for Learning Environments (A4LE) convened a symposium where the discussion on safety and security was not limited to the physical environment, but rather to what can be done with the physical environment to help mitigate mental health issues.

The findings and recommendations from the symposium help to identify these features, as well as the activities that must accompany them, such as easy access to counselors, and the opportunity to explore the outdoors for improved health benefits. Overall, it was overwhelmingly reiterated that school safety and security is not just a building design issue.

As chair of the A4LE Southern Region Foundation I have had the opportunity to be part of the jury of the Exhibit of Texas School Architecture design competition. This competition evaluates buildings on six stars of distinction which look at the design of school facilities in a holistic manner.

These stars of distinction each highlight features or processes that help enhance learning. It is important to note that there is not one "safety and security" star of distinction as this is embedded in all other stars. The stars of distinc-

tion include Design, Value, Community, Planning, and School Transformation. For 2023, we have added a Wellness star of distinction given the importance that a whole child approach has in designing safe and secure schools.

Building on all of the above information, the Wellness star will focus on those inclusions that benefit staff and students, such as flexible furnishings, access to outdoor learning environments, increased counseling areas, inclusive design features, views of nature, awe-inspiring design or the inclusion of biophilic elements in the design of spaces.

Biophilic elements tie us to nature, which increases our ability to concentrate and helps provide a sense of calm and reduce stress. This important school architectural exhibit is a great way to recognize school districts and design teams that have placed a high level of importance in designing safe and secure learning environments.

While recent school safety events demand our attention, we must always remember the responsibility and opportunity that comes with school design as it is known to impact students' behavior, development and academic performance.

It is imperative that school design be a part of a larger conversation that includes the community, parents, staff and students. The time is now to move beyond discussions of hardening to discussions of wholeness, wellness and respect. We all must take this charge seriously.

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