Engaging and Inspiring: Partnerships to Transform School Learning Environments

A White Paper from the Heart of America Foundation

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THE CHALLENGE

The United States has more than $2 trillion of net worth invested in school facilities, according to calculations by Prakash Nair, president of Fielding Nair International. Yet, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) rates the condition of our nation’s public schools as “D+”, with an estimated $38 billion annual underinvestment in K-12 facilities needed to provide “healthy, safe, and modern learning environments.” The obstacles facing districts are well known—multiple, often competing expectations, resistance by voters to approve tax increases for construction and renovation projects, and the special challenges presented by old buildings. ASCE estimates that $77 billion is needed just to address the backlog of deferred maintenance.

These were the animating challenges presented to panelists at the Heart of America Foundation’s 20th anniversary celebrations and symposia held in Minneapolis and Chicago in the spring of 2018. Founded by Angie and Bill Halamandaris in 1998, Heart of America (HOA) provides high-quality resources and transforms spaces into modern learning environments so that students and communities can learn and grow. HOA has served more than two million students in need by distributing more than 4 million books and transforming nearly 400 school libraries, cafeterias, gymnasiums, college and career centers, tech labs, and many more educational spaces in high-need areas across the United States.

And the need is great. On average, school buildings across the country are 44 years old, said Sara Johnson, VP Creative Director at KNOCK, a creative agency in Minneapolis, while teaching philosophies and practices have evolved considerably over the decades. But even recently-built facilities don’t always give today’s learners the skills required for success in an ever-changing world, noted Virajita Singh, assistant vice president in the Office of Equity and Diversity and senior research fellow at the University of Minnesota. Singh shared a story from the construction of Rapson Hall—the university’s home to the College of Design—and the moment when she and her colleagues realized the building would be dated before it was even complete, given how rapidly technology had influenced the work of architects, designers, and other creative professionals over the course of two years.

It’s not just technology that’s evolved, but also what we know about learning, and the conditions that inspire, engage, and create wonderment and delight. Learning is no longer confined to classrooms and libraries but occurs in all sorts of spaces we generally don’t think about when building and renovating schools—including hallways. Writing for the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries, Jill Heath, president and chief executive
officer of Heart of America noted that learning spaces “should reflect how we ideate, ruminate and ultimately discover in our constantly evolving environment.”

WHEN OLD = “NEW”

In some districts, a 44-year-old building would rank among the more recently constructed facilities. When Ricardo Trujillo hears talk about schools built in the 1950s and 1960s, he thinks people are referring to the “new“ facilities. A former high school principal and now a deputy chief for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Trujillo described challenges faced by teachers and students attending schools built in the early-20th and even late-19th centuries, with two-foot thick walls, fixed classrooms, confined spaces, leaky roofs, and ancient heating systems. Campuses like this are not uncommon here and in school districts nationwide. Any additional money CPS could secure is generally used to “play catch-up” and address basic safety and health needs, which he acknowledges is an understandable priority. Trujillo said that addressing anything beyond the basics—reconfiguring spaces and providing kids with access to technology and other tools needed to develop the skills they’ll need—is difficult to do without the help of outside philanthropy and partner organizations such as Heart of America.

The need for reconfigured spaces—flexible, adaptable, learner-centric spaces for exploration, experimentation, and innovation—is more critical now than ever, said Michael Schur, an architect with Gensler. The “cells and bells” model of a previous era must evolve toward one centered on “thinking, making, doing”, Schur states—creative spaces that inspire creativity, and that can change as the needs of learners and their communities change. Schur echoed Prakash Nair’s assertion that many older, traditional school buildings do not facilitate the type of modern, learner-center pedagogies where students are “personally and actively engaged in their own education”. Perhaps not surprisingly, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows a correlation between the age of a school building and the income-level of the students enrolled; the nation’s oldest schools having a higher proportion of children in poverty.

SPACE COMMUNICATES VALUE

Poverty is increasingly radiating out from the urban core, with inner-ring suburbs and even more outlying communities experiencing growth in their proportion of low-income residents—many of whom have been forced out of gentrifying areas due to the rising cost of housing. While urban school districts such as Chicago, Baltimore, and Detroit have experienced well-publicized struggles to provide the kind of environments that optimize student learning, schools in suburban areas are increasingly challenged along the same lines. For example, Montgomery County, Maryland, now has more low-income students than nearby Washington, DC, along with the challenges that accompany meeting the diversity of needs that used to characterize mostly of urban districts.

The City of North Chicago is illustrative of the “suburbanization” of poverty. North Chicago, the global headquarters of AbbVie, Inc., one of the world’s largest biopharmaceutical companies, is a “donut hole” surrounded by some of the most resource-rich communities in the nation, according to Melissa Walsh, senior director for global philanthropy and vice president of the AbbVie Foundation. Walsh described an experience
preparing for a speaking engagement shortly after moving into her current role, when she toured a middle school in North Chicago and was shocked by the desperate conditions of the building. She recalled thinking, “how am I going to be able to look people in the face and tell them how committed we are as a corporate neighbor when we let them go to school there every day?”

Walsh continued that “space tells people who use it what we think about them.” This belief was echoed by Betsy Vohs, founder of Studio BV, a design firm in Minneapolis, who said pointedly that if a school “looks like no one cares, the message is clear: you don’t matter, and learning doesn’t matter.” It’s not as if schools need to be exemplars of stunning architecture (or “pristine”), but it can go a long way to provide spaces that are comfortable—where kids feel at home—and that “bring dignity back,” in the words of Gensler’s Michael Schur. And for many kids, the school they attend is home—the one thing that remains consistent in their lives. And these years are precious. “An eight-year-old doesn’t get another chance to be eight, and a nine-year-old doesn’t get another chance to be nine,” said John Flynn, Heart of America’s vice president for innovation.

But there is something about uplifting architecture, said Vohs, which “can galvanize different elements of the community, and where efforts can ripple out from an inspiring structure.” Virajita Singh noted how space has an organizing function, signaling the kind of behaviors that are acceptable (and encouraged), as well as the power to bring people together to inspire fresh ideas and innovate. Sara Johnson of KNOCK emphasized the impact of walking into a room and feeling great about it—perhaps consciously, perhaps subconsciously—due to its light, color, comfort, and possibilities. Singh reminded the audience of how energy conservation efforts in the 1970s exacerbated the “prison” feel of many public buildings, until designers and building users experienced a “daylight renaissance” in the 1990s. Daylight doesn’t just improve the aesthetic: increasing the amount of daylight that flows into classrooms can both reduce absenteeism and improve test scores, said Elva Rubio and Trung Le, writing in The Third Teacher, a landmark text that explores the link between the school environment and student learning.

PARTNERSHIPS IN DESIGN

Architects and other design professionals know something about creating spaces for function as well as inspiration. And while space matters—and buildings enable and shape the activities of people who use them—teachers need support to design activities that optimize facilities and technology. “It’s not just physical structures, said Trujillo, “it’s also the learning that is enabled. We need to teach teachers how to use the space in creative ways.” This is why teachers and students need to be involved as co-creators of spaces that will encourage and inspire learning—a theme that emerged strongly in conversations in both Minneapolis and Chicago—and which represents an integral step in Heart of America’s learning space design and transformation process. When designing spaces in schools, developing partnerships with students, teachers, and other members of the community is paramount. Heart of America brings 20 years of experience as a catalyst in the relationship building process, bringing together a cross-section of partners and identifying unique funding sources to turn vision into reality.
Design is both an outcome and a process, says Singh, and big changes can be made even in the absence of significant financial resources by engaging both kids AND adults along the way. Designers lead people through change, added Vohs, and if people “are involved in the change process they become champions of change” and empowered by their engagement. Not every community is the same, added Nelson, which highlights the importance of listening to people and designing environments that meet the unique needs of the individuals who live, work, and play in them. Rick Dewar of Cannon Design writes in The Third Teacher that the planning and design process “will get off on the right foot by inviting every potential user and stakeholder into the process—right from the start.”

It’s these partnerships that result in lasting change, according to Singh, who said “design is a means to an end, and the end is the partnerships—the deep relationships—and a commitment to a vision that’s been created.” These are the types of partnerships that are possible when community members, designers, donors, volunteers, and non-profit organizations come together to transform learning environments. Melissa Walsh of AbbVie spoke to the power of partnerships that enable the company to give back to the various communities where they are located—not just through financial donations, but also by engaging their employees in meaningful work in neighborhoods. These projects enable people to “go beyond the four corners of the job description”, said Walsh, she added that providing meaningful opportunities for volunteer engagement has become both a talent retention tool and a key component of the company’s identity and culture.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL WORK OF HEART OF AMERICA

Companies want to make changes in their communities, said Vohs, but often need a partner organization to help make it happen. Walsh noted that this isn’t part of the conventional business model—even if it’s a high priority for a corporation—adding “we continue to work with the Heart of America to make sure that we can answer the question of what we are telling kids by virtue of the spaces where they are going to school every day.” Betsy Vohs beamed that “when Heart of America transforms a school you can feel it—it’s all different now. These special things that happen when you work in a transformed environment. Teachers empowered to teach in a different way.” This is not a luxury, said Vohs, adding “if we don’t fix these schools people aren’t going to be inspired to keep inventing and creating,” leaving our collective future creative and growth prospects in doubt.

Tim Tormoen has seen the power of community investment through multiple lenses—as a volunteer on HOA’s school library makeover projects, as a corporate community relations partner, and now as HOA’s vice president for administration and operations. “It’s an opportunity for people who may never connect in their day-to-day lives to come together and create something that is life-changing,” says Tormoen, adding “we forget how even small acts of kindness can be so powerful and meaningful to someone.”

Heart of America brings multi-disciplinary expertise and a passion for transforming learning spaces, leading partnerships among school leaders, teachers and students, designers and builders, and corporations. Teachers and students are involved in the visioning process with architects and designers, while school district leaders ensure that building and renovation processes align with capital improvement goals and specifications.
Corporations provide financial grants to support transformation projects, while their employees devote time as volunteers, lending their skills, time, and talents to improve spaces and create change. In-kind donations from landscape and construction companies, furniture and fixture manufacturers, book publishers, retailers, and other project-specific vendors help turn spaces from dark and drab to dramatic and delightful.

To unlock students’ full learning potential, they must have access to great teachers, sufficient resources and equipment (including books and technologies), and an inspiring learning environment. Michael Walden and Trung Le ask in *The Third Teacher*, does your learning space “work for what we know about learning today, or just for what we knew about learning in the past?” Does it develop curious individuals who are constantly trying to learn, asks Gensler’s Michael Schur? Is it flexible enough to support the various ways that students and teachers will use the space over time—in ways that we can predict right now, wonders Betsy Vohs of Studio BV?

Finally, are learning environments which Jill Heath describes as “spaces pulsating with energy and excitement...carefully curated, providing the proper mix of tools, resources and inspiration, where the full experience of learning will occur more rapidly and more frequently”? This challenge will drive the work of Heart of America over the next 20 years.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jill Heath is president and chief executive officer of the Heart of America Foundation (HOA), bringing to her leadership role more than two decades of experience in corporate philanthropy, strategic visioning, and community investment. As the founder of H+H Strategies, Jill supported national nonprofits with philanthropic portfolio strategy, engagement plan development, strategic planning, and external affairs. Jill became an honorary member of the HOA family while at Target Corporation, where she developed and managed Target’s award winning and nationally recognized School Library Makeover Program as a member of the Community Relations Team, awarding more than $30 million in grants during her tenure. She also managed Target’s philanthropic portfolio for the east coast. Jill holds a bachelor’s degree in biology from Albion College, a Sea Education Association accreditation from Boston University, and executive education certificates in marketing/communications and non-profit management.

Chris Rasmussen is an independent education and non-profit consultant with nearly 30 years of experience advancing student success and organizational mission through effective leadership, governance, and policy. His professional experience includes 10 years with the Midwestern Higher Education Compact, where he led several grant-funded initiatives designed to help higher education leaders and policymakers address shared challenges in student access, affordability, and completion. He also served as vice president for programs and research for the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Chris earned his bachelor’s degree from Gustavus Adolphus College, and his Ph.D. from the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
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