



# A Social-Emotional Approach to Safe School Design

*by Brian Buckner, Ross Tarrant Architects*

**S**chool safety is top-of-mind in nearly every facet of society today, and school designers are certainly no exception. While discussions about safe schools tend to focus primarily on physical safety, we must also recognize the clear link between social and emotional health and school safety.

It is well documented that the social isolation of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was detrimental for many students, both academically and socially. This social isolation is also responsible for taking a significant toll on student mental health. In response, many schools and districts are placing an increased emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills in post-pandemic education.

The link between SEL and student safety is leading today's best facility designers to recognize that a major component of creating safe and supportive learning environments is how the buildings we design encourage healthy social connections and reinforce personal accountability. SEL equips students to become better communicators who are prepared to resolve conflicts and support the emotional health of their peers, making the ability of a physical learning environment to nurture human connection more important now than ever.

What does it look like to take a social-emotional approach to designing our learning environments? Well-designed learning environments can support SEL through three primary strategies:

### Promote **Social Gathering**

David Thornburg, an award-winning educational researcher, identifies four primordial metaphors for learning:

- Campfire: learning from an expert
- Watering Hole: learning from peers
- Cave: learning from introspection
- Life: learning by doing

A well-designed school provides spaces that enable students to experience all four of these learning modalities on a regular basis. In our efforts to make sure we are protecting schools against external threats, we can't forget the importance of building a healthy community inside the school walls. Students benefit from the opportunity to learn from peers at the "Watering Holes." These spaces enable students to decompress and make meaningful social connections with peers. By strategically locating these spaces off the main path of travel, students don't have to go out of their way to connect with others — it becomes automatic. Adding natural daylight and outdoor views to these environments provides a healthy sense of perspective, while a subtle change in flooring texture and ceiling height can clearly identify convenient spaces for congregating that don't impede the flow of traffic.

### Promote **Intentional Collaboration**

The intentionality of these spaces is key. Many of us probably remember underutilized common spaces in our schools. In many cases, those spaces were deserted because they didn't serve a clear purpose. They weren't designed with active learning in mind. To support learning everywhere, school designers must consider how valuable spaces outside the classroom can be in supporting informal learning and student collaboration. Corridors can be reimagined as versatile learning spaces that can support individuals, small groups and even a full class. When designed to support a variety of activities, these spaces can host individualized instruction, group discussions or rich presentations of student work utilizing whiteboards and digital technology.

The key to the success of these spaces is providing options that enable students and teachers to customize them quickly and easily. Furnishings that provide varying heights, multiple textures (soft vs. hard) and mobility enable students to make the space their own.

### Promote a **Positive School Climate**

While the first two strategies deal primarily with supporting and promoting informal learning, they help set the foundation for building a strong school community — and a healthy and positive school climate is arguably the biggest driver of school safety. The benefits of a positive school climate are wide ranging, from helping to close achievement gaps to reducing bullying to preventing risky student behavior. There are several ways the physical learning environment can reinforce a positive school climate:

- **Incorporate graphics and school branding.** Environmental graphics are an affordable and impactful way to reinforce the bonds between students and their school community. They can instill pride, reinforce identity through school logos and mottos and establish expectations by displaying encouraging mission statements and positive reinforcement.
- **Allow for the display of student work.** Schools should be designed to incorporate spaces for actively displaying student work. Showcasing and celebrating student success reduces feelings of anonymity and enables students to feel seen and celebrated, which can be especially beneficial for non-athletic students.
- **Reinforce safety through passive design.** School design is crucial to enabling (and encouraging) students and staff to keep a





better eye on one another. Providing clear lines of sight in corridors and eliminating blind spots reduces instances of bullying and the potential for aggressive behaviors. This feeling of “see and be seen” can support strengthening relationships with other peers and staff.

- **Promote inclusivity.** Schools should be designed to make students feel included, both through access to facilities and inclusion in celebrations of successes. Every student has an important role to play in the health, happiness and safety of their school.

School is where students come together to learn, but it is also where they develop the social skills that enable them to contribute to a healthy and thriving society throughout the rest of their lives. School design plays an important role in student academic and social

development. By asking the right questions and making decisions that support a healthy school climate, we can create learning environments together that support the health and safety of all their occupants. 🌐

#### **About the Author**



*Brian Buckner is an associate and senior project architect with a passion for designing future-focused educational environments that inspire excellence. The only Accredited Learning Environment Planner (ALEP) in Kentucky, Brian is committed to helping Kentucky school districts design facilities that support students and educators and offer the flexibility to evolve to meet changing educational needs. Brian is a member of the Kentucky Chapter of A4LE and currently serves on the KASA School Safety Council, to which he lends a unique perspective and insights into how buildings can be designed to support strong school cultures and keep students safe.*



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