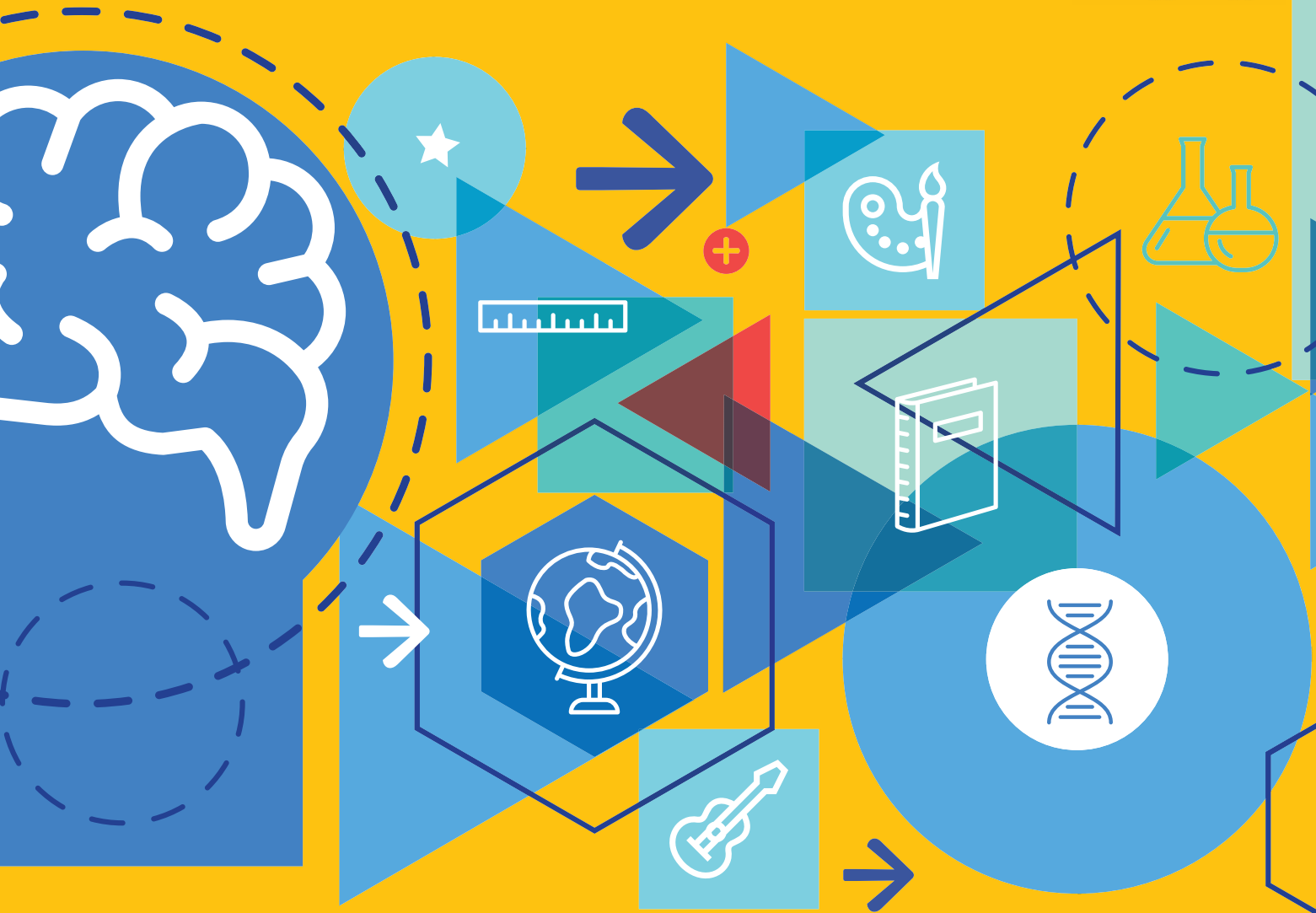


# Leading With a Design Mind

Three strategies to incorporate flexible learning spaces.

By Ben Gilpin



**H**ave you ever entered a space and immediately registered a feel for the room? I can still remember the classroom that intimidated me from the moment I walked in. I was in the eighth grade. I entered the room and quickly noticed the dim fluorescent lighting and the rows of seats. The room smelled as if I had just walked into my grandmother’s basement. The kicker was the teacher sitting in the front of the room reading the morning newspaper and motioning for us to do the assignment that was written on the chalkboard.

No matter what space we enter, the vibe is real. Let’s take a look at the research: C. Carney Strange and James H. Banning, as cited in chapter 2 of Diana G. Oblinger’s *Learning Spaces*, emphasize the ways in which the physical aspects of a campus convey nonverbal messages—welcoming or discouraging, valuing or disrespecting—even more powerfully than verbal messages. They refer to research that links the physical

attractiveness and lighting of a space to the motivation and task performance of those in the space.

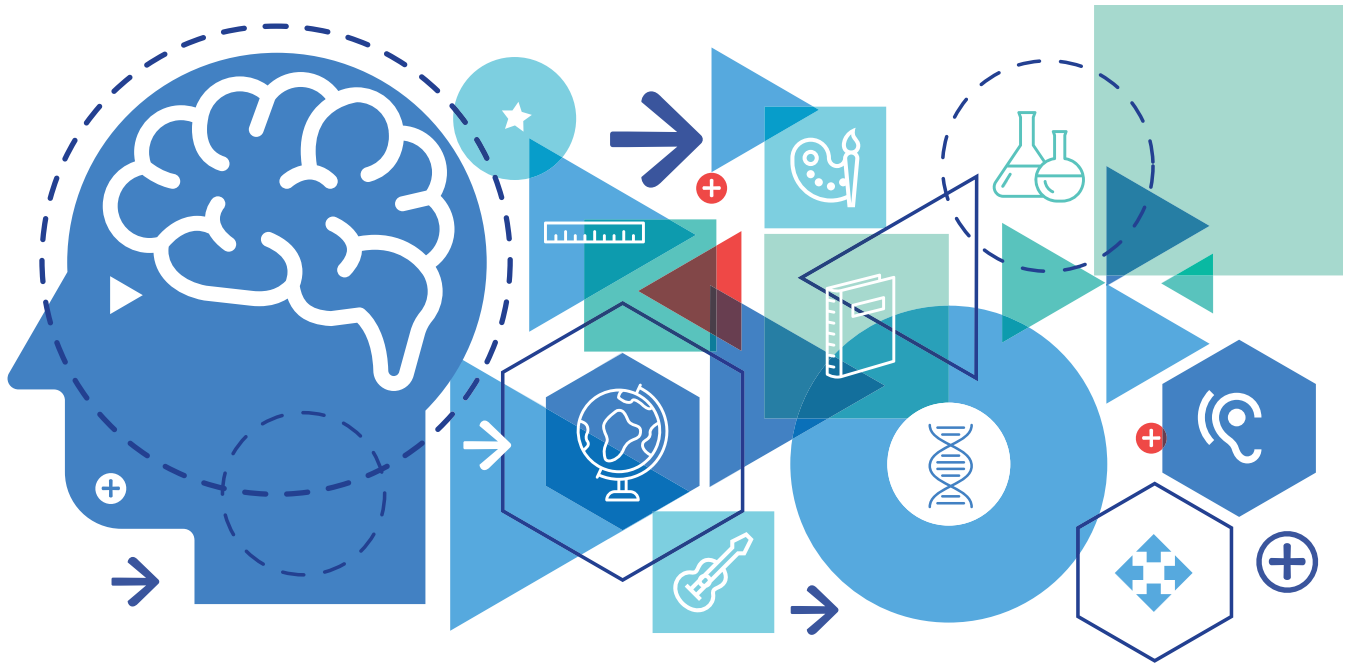
As leaders, we set the tone, but we cannot deny that the space also carries a lasting weight. The environment gives every individual a cue or a feeling that can dictate performance.

Leaders across the world are seeing an importance to the design of the school and classroom. Learning spaces offer an opportunity to engage students, staff, and families into a future of creativity, collaboration, and endless possibilities.

### 1. Create a Culture of Yes

Teachers and staff members will eventually ask you about redesigning a space. If you are skeptical, ask questions instead of simply saying no. These are classic starters:

- What is the purpose of the redesign?
- How will you judge the effectiveness?
- Who is the redesign for?



## REFLECT ON THIS

"Design creates culture. Culture shapes values. Values determine the future."  
— Robert L. Peters

Leaders should ask questions, and listen closely to the answers. Is this a student-centered decision or a teacher-driven idea? Has the teacher taken time to do research, or is he or she simply wanting a good reason to go to Ikea?

It is crucial for leaders to create a culture that allows for taking risks and trying new things. Principals also want teachers who have invested time in understanding the importance of learning spaces.

### 2. Limited Funds? No Problem

I frequently hear motivated educators talk about redesigning learning spaces. The conversation typically begins with excitement and lots of energy. But more times than not it turns to barriers and blockades. One of the biggest barriers that I hear from educators is a lack of funding. However, there are ways around this obstacle.

First, has a school in your vicinity recently passed a bond? If so, is it looking to get rid of any items? You may discover inexpensive, quality items are very attainable.

Second, have you written a grant? This sounds daunting, but in most school districts there's an individual who is experienced and gifted at writing grants. Try to schedule a time to meet with that person.

Another strategy is to check out garage sales. The old saying, "one man's junk is another man's treasure" holds true.

When encountering a barrier, communicate with your stakeholders. It is hard to turn your back on research and best practice. If you are receiving pushback, share the research.

### 3. Model the Way

As principal, I want everyone to know that students are at the heart of all decisions. This can be seen from the moment you walk into the building.

The lobby should be warm and inviting. Focus on soft colors and, if possible, accentuate natural light. This will really brighten up the area. Hallway walls should reflect your school's shared vision. At Warner Elementary School in Spring Arbor, Michigan, visitors see positive quotes, pictures of students, and artistry that personifies caring, kindness, and lifelong learning. I try to avoid the dated hardware that means little to the current student body.

Another powerful redesign statement focuses on the statement "less is more." My good friend and fellow educator Erin Klein consistently encourages educators to declutter learning spaces. "Classroom spaces are not teacher storage facilities," she says.

Finally, envision learning spaces of the future. What do you see? I imagine flexibility, collaborative work areas, comfort, and supportive technology. The learning spaces of the future are all about accentuating creativity, design, and exploration.

Imagine the possibilities. One of the best ways to build culture is by choosing to redesign spaces together. You truly grow as a team when you have a common interest and shared goals. **P**

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