

## Service Associate Q&A

### Kim Hassell of Plunkett Raysich Architects says school buildings need to accommodate change

*Editor's note: Each issue, we pose questions to a WASB Service Associate to share the good work that these businesses do with Wisconsin public schools.*



**Kim Hassell** is the Partner in Charge of the Education studio at Plunkett Raysich Architects, LLP.

**Q.** *What is a big challenge facing school districts when building or renovating a school? What are some solutions to these challenges?*

**A.** One of the biggest challenges we encounter is that many school district staff members have yet to experience the build new or renovation process. This inexperience causes them to fall back on previously used operating methods and processes, which may no longer be relevant. In my 30-plus years of designing schools, the one thing that has remained constant is change in instructional delivery methods. This ever-changing pedagogy is the result of new research, social/economic shifts, political environments, and/or emerging technology for education. When designing a school building, districts often rely on their experience providing instruction in the past to form the basis for the new building. It is our role as trained educational planners and architects to expose administration and staff to new methodologies, instructional tools and career offerings. Our challenge is not only to expose our clients to new approaches, but also encourage them to implement these approaches into the design of their new building.

**Q.** *How do you balance designing a school that is safe and secure but also welcoming?*

**A.** It is important to continually restate that the primary purpose of a school is to educate students. Recent school violence tends to influence design decisions away from this priority to one that concentrates on security. To assist school districts in keeping the primary focus on educating stu-

dents, we've developed several security strategies that are not overtly obvious to students, parents and the community and provide a welcoming rather than prison-like environment. These strategies are further refined after each violent episode.

**Q.** *What are some of the biggest changes in school design in the past decade or so?*

**A.** The biggest change in school design is, quite simply, creating a building that accommodates change. Industrial revolution school design required durability of structure. Post-war era schools were highly energy inefficient buildings that were built quickly. The close of the 20th century brought compact school models that aligned different spaces in a neatly efficient yet inflexible arrangement. The 21st century mantra, however, is flexibility and changeability. It is difficult to predict the next new teaching approach, but what can be confirmed is that a new approach will undoubtedly arrive before a building reaches its life cycle.

**Q.** *Are there any new building materials or design ideas that are changing the way schools are being designed?*

**A.** New building materials are constantly being created and introduced, and incorporating adaptability and flexibility into facility design requires materials to accommodate change differently. Highly durable materials like brick and block are replaced with light steel framing and wall board. Materials used for building floors or roofs need longer structural spans to allow for space reconfigurations in the



future. Designers also aim to increase natural light to enhance learning while minimizing the impact on heating and cooling systems.

**Q.** *Ideally, how do you think a school building should serve its students and community?*

**A.** The key words in this question are "building should serve its students." Student-centered learning environments place students at the very top of the prioritization list relative to building needs. This does not mean that there is a single set of building standards to follow. We've learned that each student learns differently and that the building must accommodate a variety of learning modalities. Schools must offer spaces not only for different types of learning but also for differently sized groups of students, from small and large groups to the individual learner. What is most rewarding about new school architecture is that it provides students the highest degree of achieving their goals and aspirations. It is a very exciting time to be a school architect. ■

*The WASB Service Associates Program includes more than 20 businesses and organizations that have been recognized by the WASB Board of Directors as reputable businesses and partners of public education in Wisconsin. For more information, visit [wasb.org](http://wasb.org) and select "Service Associates."*