

Q&A with Galina Mihaylova

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What are the attributes of a successful school design?

I believe a good school feels alive. It lifts you the moment you walk in. It calms you. It helps you focus. It makes you feel safe and like you belong. A successful design is open, light, and airy with the gentle murmur of the exchanging of ideas. Rooms are free from obstruction, offering flexibility for kids to move, think, and work in differing ways. The space follows them. Safety is present but quiet and fades into the environment. The school feels like the town outside—familiar, proud, built to last. There are outdoor opportunities to grow gardens, to build things, or walk in nature and breathe fresh air. Nothing is wasted with all space working for a shared purpose. A great school doesn't just house education—it shapes it, creating a place where students and teachers thrive physically, emotionally, and intellectually. A well-designed school is a happy school, a place full of hope and possibility.

What emerging factors in educational design are shaping today's schools?

Great school design begins with understanding how students learn. Today's spaces flex to support quiet focus,



Dublin Elementary, Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, Michigan
Photo Credit: Christopher Lark Photography

collaboration, and hands-on exploration while integrating technology. As learning evolves, so should buildings—walls move, furniture adapts, and rooms serve multiple purposes. Shared hubs like learning stairs, commons, and media centers encourage spontaneous interaction. The "learning studio" model is reshaping classrooms into collaborative, engaging environments. Modern design supports emotional and cognitive needs with wellness hubs, quiet zones, and attention to lighting and air quality. Natural light, clean air, and calm acoustics help students thrive. Sustainable features like net-zero and carbon-neutral systems are increasingly common. Inclusive elements—cultural art, sensory-friendly zones, and non-gendered spaces—foster belonging. Security should be strong yet welcoming, with controlled entries, lockable rooms, and thoughtful landscaping. Many new designs incorporate dedicated tech labs and maker spaces to equip students with real-world skills. A great school reflects its community, is built to last with sustainable materials, fully accessible, fosters belonging, and connects indoor and outdoor learning seamlessly.

Why is seeking out an educational client's identity during the design process so critical?

Every school serves a distinct community, culture, and educational mission. One-size-fits-all design ignores what makes a place meaningful. When architects understand a school's values, teaching philosophy, student needs, and local context, we can create spaces that truly support learning, reflect pride, and foster belonging. This leads to buildings that aren't just functional; they're inspiring. A school designed around its own identity feels authentic. It helps students and staff feel seen, respected, and connected to their environment. That emotional and cultural alignment makes the collection of spaces more than a building—it becomes part of the learning experience.



Livonia Early Childhood Center, Livonia Public Schools, Michigan
Photo Credit: John D'Angelo Photography



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