

Planning School Media Centers

John Brim

Today is the first day you will be working in the new media center. After five years of toiling in a converted classroom, with books stacked up to the twelve-foot ceilings and nowhere to hang your coat, the new center is paradise. Before the first students arrive, you take a moment to admire the beautiful carpet, tasteful art prints, and spiral staircase. The first class of the day will be arriving soon, so you begin to prepare for the first lesson in the new media center. This is the first opportunity you have had to use the new projection screen. In preparation for showing your favorite orientation filmstrip, you flip the switch that sends the power-driven screen gliding silently down from the ceiling. You close the blinds to darken the room, and for the first time you notice another aspect of that delightful skylight in the center of the ceiling; there is absolutely no way to stop light from pouring through it. Showing filmstrips and films will be possible only on cloudy days, and the power screen was so expensive! You have no time to dwell on the problem of the skylight; a class of eager students is filing into the center. One group is selecting books, another is heading for the new listening/viewing area where all the AV equipment is waiting. You will have to watch them at first, at least until they learn how to use the equipment and materials properly. As you move toward the students to help them, a different group intercepts you asking for help in the reference area. You nervously glance at the listening/viewing area, then take the small group up to the second floor to the reference collection. Upstairs listening to the students with one ear, you hear the telltale sounds of mayhem from downstairs. Ah, there it is, the sound of audiotape being wrenched from a sound filmstrip viewer. Down the stairs you scamper, hoping for the best, and as always, faced with the worst. Long after all the students have drifted homeward for the day, you begin to think there may be some unanticipated problems with the design of the new media center.

Unfortunately, the scenario is all too common among the users of new school media facilities. Inadequate planning and lack of communication between the architect and educators sometimes results in a less than perfect facility. How can administrators, supervisors, and media professionals prevent the costly and frustrating mistakes that can plague new media facilities? They can adopt a logical method of advance planning to insure that a new facility will properly support and sustain the instructional curriculum. Unfortunately, the simple logic of planning based on user input escapes many educators. In order properly to prepare for building a new facility, a system of sequential planning should be established. Each step must contribute to the ultimate goal of constructing a media facility which will fulfill all projected curriculum requirements.

Step I The Planning Committee

Before an architect is engaged, a planning committee should be established to write educational specifications for the new media center. The committee should include media professionals, administrators, teachers, members of the lay public (parents), and students. The primary responsibility of the planning committee is to establish a clear description of the projected media program and the activities which will take place in the proposed media center. The committee also will monitor the project throughout construction, checking to see that educational specifications are followed by both architect and contractor.

Step II Educational Specifications

Educational specifications are the guidelines that an architect uses to design a new facility. Since very few architects have a school media background, it is unreasonable to expect them to know how to build a facility that can support a contemporary instructional curriculum. Architects must be provided with enough information to bring to life the components of a school media program. The planning committee must first write a complete program description. The program description should be a listing of the projected media program's educational goals and philosophy and must include all instructional aspects and support services that the comprehensive instructional program will demand. An example of educational goals is found in the sequential skills curriculum suggested by the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction's publication: *Competency Goals and Performance Indicators, K-12*. The committee is responsible for specifying the activities, such as reference, circulation, and production which are necessary to support the instructional program. For example a listening/viewing area should be provided to support instruction in the use of nonprint materials for reference. The committee must clearly state how the facility will be used by students, teachers, and the media staff to accomplish the listed activities. This is done by describing activity areas and their relation to each other in the proposed center. The architect will need to know how much space to allocate to each activity. The architect will also need to know what specific types of furniture, equipment, and environmental controls will be necessary for certain activities (Remember the skylight?). Realistically one should assess the future staffing possibilities before deciding on a design. If two full-time staff positions will not be provided to the media program, then a two-level media center would pose problems of control.

Step III Dealing With the Architect

The committee is responsible for communicating with the architect throughout the building project. The architect's job is to take the educational specifications and convert the written descriptions of areas of activity, area relationships, and program needs into a physical reality. The planning committee should not presume to tell the architect how to design the building beyond the guidelines set in the educational specifications. The architect and the committee should meet frequently to ensure the goals set by the educational specifications are being met by the preliminary facility design. Any misunderstandings must be resolved as early as possible. The committee

should review the design at all stages and anticipate problems that will arise in the future. The furniture layout included on the blueprint drawings should reflect the actual furnishings to be put into the new facility. Obviously, if the media center's projected functions are carefully planned, a furniture layout is essential. Without such a layout it is difficult to evaluate whether or not the furniture and activities will fit into the allotted space. While it is the responsibility of the architect to create the plans of the new facility, it is the responsibility of the planning committee to evaluate those plans and judge whether or not they achieve the goals stated in the educational specifications.

Step IV Monitoring Construction

After the blueprints have been approved, the planning committee, or a designated representative such as the media coordinator, should monitor the actual construction of the facility. Mistakes not noticed in the preplanning stages such as inadequate electrical specifications, may become obvious after construction begins. For example, the workroom/production area may need more power than the reference area. Power to support a dry mounting press, tacking iron, laminating machine, typewriter, and duplicating machine, may be required. If this equipment is ignored, use of the workroom/production area will be severely restricted. The planning committee is responsible for anticipating problems and supplying information necessary to resolve those problems. When monitoring the actual construction of the facility, the planning committee is ensuring that the educational specifications are being properly implemented.

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Step V Coping With Budget Problems

The final responsibility of the committee is to cope with budget changes as they occur. Considering today's budgetary problems, facilities are often reduced in size. When the decision is made that there will be cuts in the media center facility, the committee must be sure that the cuts will not cripple the entire media program for years to come. Cuts may be made arbitrarily if the committee cannot guide those who adjust the budget. The committee should be the best judge of where cuts will have the least impact on the instructional program.

Is all the work entailed in the process of planning and building a new media center really worthwhile? Consider the difference between knowing beforehand exactly what can be done in a new media center versus the pot-luck approach of the unfortunate media coordinator mentioned earlier. An inadequate facility will mean limits to both service and instruction. Planning prior to the construction of the media center and close communication between the participants in the project can prevent many hours of frustration and costly renovations in the future.

(Editor's Note: All blueprints for proposed public school media centers are reviewed by the Division of Educational Media of the Department of Public Instruction.)

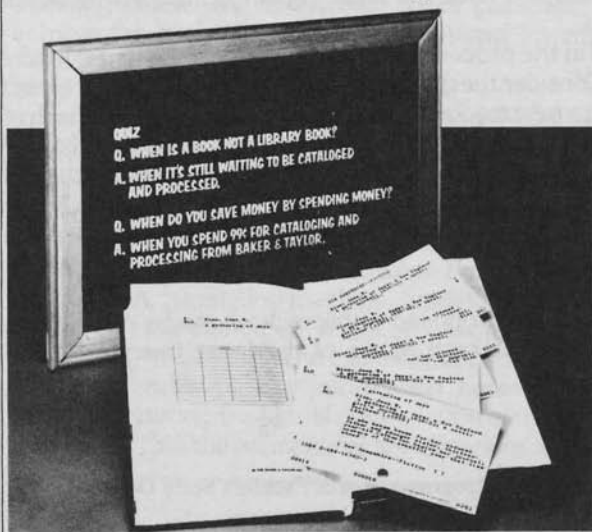
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Resources

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Instructional Services, *Competency Goals and Performance Indicators K-12*, 1979.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Division of School Planning, *Development of Educational Specifications*, 1975.

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