Schools all around the country are embarking on innovative teaching and learning approaches to respond to major shifts in the use of technologies and the way students are learning. This publication is one of a series which aims to showcase how schools are converting existing space to prototype different types of learning environments and settings. This case study looks at Waimairi School in Christchurch.

WAIMAIRI SCHOOL is a decile nine school which caters for years 1 to 6. It has 500 students and operates out of older and newer permanent and relocatable buildings, including CEBUS (Canterbury Education Board Unit Standard) block buildings.

Prior to the Canterbury earthquakes, Waimairi had started to alter their learning spaces to better fit their teaching practices.

This modification work has restarted as part of the Christchurch Schools Rebuild (CSR) programme.

Background

Waimairi School, along with other Christchurch Schools, was impacted by the earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. Prior to these events the school had started to make modifications to their classrooms in order to better support their teaching and learning practices.

Post quake, it has used some of its CSR property budget to transform single cell spaces into more open, flexible spaces that better support and enable the school to realise its vision for teaching and learning.

The journey

There are many ways to plan and implement fairly minor and non-structural alterations to spaces to enable schools to design and test new teaching and learning techniques.

Waimairi Principal, Mike Anderson says, “We are on a journey, part of which is taking a design approach to learning. We want to design from the inside out by first asking what learning is about, and what skills and dispositions we want students to have. Then we can design ways of teaching that will support these ideas.”

The board of trustees ran ‘share an idea’ workshops with Waimairi parents about the skills and attributes they want their children to have by the time they leave the school, and how the built environment could best support this. They also did a study of contemporary schooling in Melbourne. The school ran update meetings to share ideas and plans with parents as the process unfolded.

The school wanted everyone - students, parents and teachers - to understand and agree how learning happens. The principal also referred to “Teaching as Inquiry” from the New Zealand curriculum as a guide.

Non-structural walls were removed in CEBUS Block buildings in order to function as prototypes for new learning spaces.
Openings were created in existing walls to create collaborative learning spaces.

How they altered their spaces

The biggest mindset change was to stop thinking about a floor plan and to focus on designing the learning settings.

The school decided they needed people inside the situation to think about the spaces - they couldn’t just use an off-the-shelf product. The teaching staff became actively involved in designing learning programmes and the spaces to support them.

Out of good will, a couple of parents who are interior designers sat in on teacher sessions to provide ideas about furniture designs. The school made a list of all the things that could be present in a learning space and designed settings for each learning need.

Using existing buildings, the school ‘mocked up’ different configurations using low cost materials then looked at how they function as effective learning spaces in practice. At the same time, the school had to continue to run. They had to try things and fail fast (if they were going to fail) so that they could learn quickly.

Using their existing buildings in this way means Waimairi staff have developed an ever maturing and well researched learning design methodology. It also means that current Waimairi students benefit from very well thought out and executed learning programmes in spaces that support them.

Lessons

- Use teachers as designers - they have to be actively part of the design process. It has to be a personal thing.
- There has to be a clear purpose for each learning space - a general purpose space ends up being everything and nothing.
- Peel everything back to see the “why” so that options for change become clear.
- The “why” is important - there can be many different versions of the “what”.
- It takes longer than you think for deep understanding of an idea - two to three years in Waimairi School’s case.
- Bring an expert design voice to the table.
- Understand the impact of culture - talk to the local iwi about design, especially for food preparation and sleeping areas.
  - There have to be actual design features based on cultural considerations.
- Ensure any property changes are reviewed by an appropriately experienced property expert.

“You don’t commit to a big change (spending a lot of money) if you haven’t tried it first.”

Mike Anderson - Principal

“It is often because people do not understand, that they resist change. Teachers and parents, as soon as they understood the ‘why’ - the reasoning behind teaching and learning environment decisions - they started to share ownership.”

Mike Anderson - Principal