

From the Twenties to the Future

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ALEXANDER Avenue Elementary School, Cheektowaga, New York, moved from the twenties into the seventies. A well-maintained, sturdy, steel-frame building suited to the closed education of the first quarter-century was readied for the educational challenge of the century's last quarter during the summer of 1970.

Alexander School had looked typical of the 1920's. Technologically and educationally it was outdated, with high ceiled, undersized classrooms, inadequate lighting,

waste space, and an inefficient heating system. It provided limited library space and offered little chance for educational flexibility.

What happened? The district officials were mounting a bond issue for the construction of a second open-concept elementary building in the district to replace the old Pine Hill School. Steady district growth had accounted for the erection of the district's first open-space school, Union East Elementary School, in 1968.



The dark, enclosed corridor (left) of the Alexander School was opened up, carpeting was added, and the ceiling was lowered to produce a light and roomy atmosphere for learning.



Photos taken before renovation © Cheektowaga Photo News



The cramped and cluttered Kindergarten Center (top) was transformed by a better use of space and the addition of carpeting and a lowered acoustical tiled ceiling.

The plan for public approval of the bond issue included winning the support of the district's PTA. At the executive board meeting on October 14, 1969, Omer W. Renfrow, District Principal, was asked: "If the open concept plan is so good for Pine Hill and Union East, why couldn't Alexander be open too?" So was born the Alexander Renovation Project, not just to repaint or recover, but to reconstruct the entire interior of the school as an open-concept building.

The program established the following requirements:

1. Flexibility

2. Central resource center available to all learning areas

3. Multi-use of spaces and provision for facilities such as art and music unavailable in the existing structure

4. All changes basically accomplished within the confines of the existing structure

5. Construction procedures not to disrupt any academic activities.

The board of education awarded the reconstruction project to an able architectural firm. Mechanically and electrically the existing equipment was outdated, inefficient, or not suited to the program requirements. The firm abandoned existing systems and replaced them with modern efficient equipment providing both adequate control and flexibility.

What were the results? The reconstruction has brought about:

1. More space for each student
2. Building capacity increased from 432 to 513 students
3. Carpeting, air conditioning, lowered ceilings, new lighting, and gay colors combining to eliminate a gloomy, noisy, and regimented atmosphere. A warm, natural, flexible, and free environment for learning has taken its place
4. Elimination of walls and the creation of a new learning environment permitting groups to be formed and reformed naturally and quickly within and across class grade lines



The Resource Center (left), located in an inaccessible corner of the school, was cramped for space.

5. An open and central resource center giving teacher and student ready access to the new multimedia, independent study, team teaching, team learning approaches to learning

6. A new openness lending encouragement to team planning, team teaching, and differentiated staffing

7. New conference, storage, and specialized teaching spaces

8. A well-equipped art alcove opening onto the cafeteria

9. The overhaul of the mechanical and electrical systems

10. Sound control in all learning areas provided by a new suspended acoustical tile ceiling and carpeting throughout the building

11. Flexibility in learning spaces through the use of portable sight line furniture and chalkboards. (Demountable walls to divide and enclose spaces have been provided for activities of programs requiring restricted spaces.)

The only addition included a new receiving area, loading dock, kitchen storage, and elevator shaft.

Educationally, the school building provides:

1. An open and central resource center which gives teacher and student access to the new multimedia, independent study, team teaching, team learning approaches to learning

2. Encouragement to team planning, team teaching, and differentiated planning



The new center is situated in the middle of the building, and is spacious and airy.



The rarely used balcony (top) was enclosed, the floor leveled, walls opened up, and the useful space of the Resource Center was doubled.

3. New conference, storage, and specialized teaching spaces for the development of new courses and programs, including art, music, and drama.

The School District now has a modern building that can adapt to future educational programs and requirements. A warm, natural, versatile, and free environment for learning is available. A building that had promised to be a minus for the future has become a positive educational plus.

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