KIDS ACADEMY

21st Century Classroom Design Ideas for Elementary and Middle School

We all know the stereotypical 20th century classroom. It's depicted in countless movies and TV shows as a room with desks lined up in rows, a teacher's desk at the center of the classroom, and a chalkboard with notes scrawled in cursive. Even in modern portrayals of classrooms, not much has changed, and unfortunately this remains true for many real-life classrooms across America, save for white board instead of a blackboard.

We've already talked about flexible seating arrangements, and how they benefit children in the classroom; however, today we're going to discuss the larger picture of classroom setup and design. Over the past few decades, educators have learned so much more about the learning process, and just how important the classroom environment is to ensure relevant instruction in a modern school and world.

First, let's explore the essential components of a modern classroom setup before digging into actionable ideas for designing a classroom for the 21st century.

Key Elements of Modern Classroom Design

When thinking about classroom design for 21st Century learning, it's important for teachers to think outside the box. Today's big trend in education is to convert teaching into an experience that is much more student focused. Gone are the days where the instructor stands in front of a class to lecture. Instead, the learning experience centers around students engaging with the content, while the teacher acts as a guide. Considering this key change in pedagogy, explore the following key elements of a modern and relevant classroom:

 • Furniture: it includes more than just desks

When we think of classroom furniture, most of us recall sitting in desks for long hours of each school day as a child. However, to make a room more student-centered, teachers should be incorporating other types of furniture into the room. First, imagine the room without any desks. How could you utilize the space? Nooks and areas of the room could be created to allow for different types of activities throughout the school day.

To outfit a room, different types of furniture may be needed or utilized, such as small couches, beanbag chairs, or tables where students collaborate for projects. For ideas regarding flexible seating, be sure to go back and read our previous article here.

 • Thinking about flexible spaces

While thinking about organizing the space in your classroom, don't forget about accessibility and the ability to use the space for multiple types of lesson activities. For instance, if you incorporate a reading corner, also use it as a quiet place for journaling to inspire focus and creativity. Creating spaces that can be utilized for many different purposes can help teachers get the most use out of her design.

In addition, think about adding removable dividers or partitions to create workstations for independent work, or making full use of yoga mats, exercise balls to encourage movement for particular activities. The key here is to plan for spaces within the classroom that can be modified and changed to accommodate different types of lessons.

• Design with lesson activities in mind

Speaking of different types of lessons, it's important to remember that a modern and relevant classroom might look entirely different in an elementary classroom as opposed to how one would be set up in a middle school. This might be due to, in part, but the different types of classes and activities that students of various ages complete. Also bear in mind that a 21st century room must reflect 21st century teaching practices. In order to design a new learning space, it needs to reflect the types of activities that are often used. For example, if a teacher prefers to use collaborative learning, the space can be outfitted with tables that encourage teamwork, versus individualized learning spaces for students who work independently.

• Allow space for some freedom and movement

Think about your bedroom, or even your living room at home. When there's too much furniture in it, how does it look? It's likely that most people would find the room crowded and small, even if the room itself is fairly large. Likewise, when planning your room design, think about how a student might view it when they walk in each morning, or at the beginning of the year. If the room is crowded with desks or bulky furniture, it will look small. It will also prohibit or discourage freedom of movement, making the room less comfortable.

Instead, plan to use a variety of types of furniture and spaces within your classroom that open it up and allow for range of movement. For instance, use beanbag chairs or carpet squares for a reading corner, or use standing desks for a writing center.

• Plan for technology

Of course, no classroom would be modern and relevant without the inclusion of technology that students use for learning! But don't forget that these laptop, Chromebook, or iPad carts can take up a lot of room. Consider this when planning your new classroom design and think about adding a dedicated space where kids can use the

technology in centers or stations. If possible, organize your technology so that it can be easily stored and taken for student use throughout the school day.

• Incorporate bright colors and catchy visuals

It is often noted that researchers have found that natural light help students think and learn, yet many classrooms across the country lack windows! Even in the absence of a natural light source, it is still possible to brighten up your room to make it look positive, light, and colorful!

First, consider the lighting already available within the room. Is it too bright? Too dim? Add your own lighting in the form of hanging lights or floor lamps to help the atmosphere. Second, think about the color. Do you have plain white or beige walls? Ask your campus if it's possible to paint a wall as an accent, and if not, deck it out with colorful posters and bright visuals that are relevant to your subject area or kids.

A key ingredient in any modern classroom is a space for learning through technology. Allow the Talented and Gifted app to be an essential part of your 21st century classroom. Create an account today to see for yourself!

21st Century Classroom Design Ideas

Now that we've taken a closer look at the essential elements of a 21st century classroom, let's dive a bit deeper to discover specific ideas for designing a new and improved classroom environment! Try the following to give your room an exciting face lift:

- Create centers or stations with a variety of themes and activities

Learning centers can be a fun and dynamic addition to any K-5 classroom! To plan for centers or stations, teachers should plan where in the room to include them, and what furniture is required to set them up. These stations can be placed in corners, and they can include carpet squares, flexible seating arrangements, or even centers with headphones and tablets. Switch out your centers periodically to incorporate a variety of activities throughout the school year and be sure to align them with the content students are learning in class!

Some specific ideas for centers include:

- A writer's space complete with different types and colors of paper, story stems or starters, writing utensils for editing, vocabulary lists, and grammar help.

- One cute idea for Valentine's day is to create a center that allows kids to have a "blind date with a book"! In a reading center, keep a shelf of books that contain books that are covered where the title or cover cannot be seen. Students choose any children's book from the shelf to read. Complete your center with a follow-up activity after children finish reading!

- Make an art cart! This station would contain various art supplies for making illustrations, cards, or dioramas connected to the content.

- A math or logic area filled with tangrams, base ten blocks, or other manipulatives. Also feel free to include math games or puzzles and keep them all in a chest or box ready and waiting for student use.

- Plan for a comfy reading nook

No classroom is complete without a comfortable place for kids to use for independent reading. Newer teaching methods suggest that children form a love for reading only when they are also given time to read whatever they want that suits their own interests. To make the reading spot warm and inviting, bring in a soft chair or use beanbags for student use.

- Include a makerspace

Makerspaces are just what they sound like: a space for kids to make their own creations! Makerspaces are collaborative areas and provide children with a variety of STEAM tools

to create projects or content. For instance, in a high school setting, a campus might make video cameras, software, and 3D printers available for student use. At the elementary level, materials might include crafting supplies, duct tape, building blocks, K'Nex or building gears, Legos, batteries, light bulbs, etc. The sky really is the limit with a makerspace, and the station can be designed with your student's grade level, ages, and skills in mind!

Designing a classroom for the 21st century takes a little bit of time and perhaps some funding, but when the transformation is complete, your students will be ready to tackle modern and relevant topics to take their learning to the next level!