

6 Characteristics of a Positive Learning Environment

How School Facilities
Support Student Learning



INTRODUCTION



In order to provide an exceptional education to students, school buildings have to be purposefully-built in such a way as to inspire creativity, independence, and a love of learning.

Good facilities in schools should be designed to nurture the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development of students. In addition, they should also continually improve their campuses in response to student need and the latest research.

At the International School of Beijing (ISB), for example, our high-quality campus provides a positive learning environment for the student body of 1700+. In 2020,

we also remodeled and created four new buildings, ensuring we achieve our mission, vision, and strategic priorities.

But what does an innovative facility look like and how does it help students? In this eBook we explore six ways in which a purposefully-built school campus enables student learning and prepares them for their future.

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FLEXIBILITY, OPENNESS, ACCESS TO RESOURCES



Flexibility, openness, easy access to resources, spaces designed to be adaptable with lots of movable partition walls, these characteristics give students choice in how and when they learn.

FLEXIBILITY

According to [*Modern Learning Environment*](#) by Mark Osborne, [*Director of Leading Learning*](#) and a teacher, school leader, and consultant for more than 20 years, both students and teaching staff should have the ability to combine two classes into one for team-teaching, or split a class into small groups and spread them over a wider area. They should also have the ability to combine different classes studying in similar learning areas.

With the ability for school facilities to be flexible and adaptable, teachers can choose how they want their students to learn, and students can learn in a way that is best for them.

"It helps my thought process because I'm not stuck at a desk all the time." says Noah M., a student at ISB, regarding why he prefers flexibility in his learning.

OPENNESS

With movable walls, flexible workspaces, more glass, and the strategic use of a common learning area, modern learning facilities are all about openness.

Through a common learning area and flexible workspaces, schools can have central teaching. These areas give students access to what other classes are learning so that teaching and learning can be complemented and enhanced, according to Osborne.

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

With each learning area or classroom, good facilities in schools allow spaces for many different activities.

Whether it's reading, group work, project spaces, a wet area, a space for reflection, or for presentations, both students and teachers have the ability to find the resources they need - whether it's wireless or wired technology - when they need it.

"[Through modern facilities], inquiries are shared, interventions devised collaboratively and reflections based on both self and peer observations, which leads to a more robust, continuously improving community of practices," Osborne writes.

In addition to flexibility, openness, and easy access to resources, it's also important for learning environments to be clean and fresh to keep students motivated and focused.

ISB'S CAMPUS INSPIRES CHOICE IN STUDENTS

"Educational spaces on the ISB campus are intended to be creative spaces that provide much more than a standard educational experience, and as such, the spaces provide for the active observation of the ISB learning processes and activities," says Gerrick Monroe, CFO at ISB. (2012-2023)

The theme of the school facilities at ISB highlights our refresh and remodeling plan which include visible teaching and learning spaces so that our community has the ability to observe and celebrate the innovative work of students and teaching staff.

"ISB classroom spaces were transformed from the more traditional classroom settings to a revised, visible learning spaces where solid walls are replaced with large windows that open into community spaces and hallways," says Monroe.



The visible spaces must also be flexible to support the differentiating needs of the positive learning environments and activities the teaching staff provides students each day.

There is a consensus in the field of education that flexible spaces allow for seamless changes in the daily programs and activities offered in a space and are also more easily repurposed to meet the changing programmatic needs of a dynamic learning organization over the long-term.

A Look at ISB's New Flex Space

With movable walls, versatile seating, *ISB's Flex Space* - located in the *High School* - is the perfect balance of flexibility, openness, and adaptability.

"It's proven that interdisciplinary work is more profound because students can see the links between what they're learning. When students are choosing their path and deciding what they study, they are more engaged. And when we have more flexible space for projects, we start to see those things take action," says High School Principal David Munro (2015-2021)

Not only is the space strategically constructed to inspire creativity and problem-solving skills, but the architectural engineering is also of the highest standard and is modern in appearance, giving students a taste of what they will see in university.



DESIGN BASED ON EXTENSIVE RESEARCH



The design of a building, especially an educational facility, should be a collaborative process which incorporates the school community, teaching staff, the student body, board members, specialized architects, and of course, extensive research.

At ISB, buildings are designed based on research exploring the kind of spaces which make for productive learning, and the community is always consulted.

CONSULTATIVE PROCESS HELPS DEVELOP THE FACILITIES MASTER PLAN

Through the consultation with 30 stakeholders and over 300 members of the ISB community, the Facility Master Plan (FMP) was able to capture and incorporate all ideas, goals, and recommendations to build and remodel *four facilities*:

- 1 ISB's ES Arts Center and Theater (New-Build Project)
- 2 ISB's MS/HS Performing Arts Center (New-Build Project)
- 3 Early Years Learning Center (Remodel Project)
- 4 ISB's MS/HS Art and Design Center (Remodel Project)

The FMP design and review process looks both internally at the facility needs of ISB's developing programs and externally in order to identify the programs and facilities availed to the community of learners at peer schools around the region.

The process is democratic and gives the school community the chance to say what they want to see in the new facilities. There are over 20 members from ISB's community who make up the FMP Committee.

"Parents, students, teachers, staff, and administrators have all actively participated in activities and processes which were specifically designed to elicit ideas and goals from each committee member regarding future ISB programs and facilities," says Monroe. To read more about the FMP and the new buildings, [click here](#).



OVERALL QUALITY



According to experts in the field of education, well-planned, quality school facilities have a lasting impact on the educational experiences and creative activities in which students and teachers are able to engage. Educational research, see section two, has clearly determined that the traditional classroom settings which most adults have experienced during their own education are not optimal.

These traditional, immobile classrooms with teachers imparting lessons upon students from the front of the classroom are best replaced or modified to become a more **flexible, adjustable, and open** learning environments.

“[These adjustable spaces] better accommodate and support the active and engaging learning activities designed and planned to elicit student interest and challenge them to apply varied concepts and skills,” says Monroe.

ISB'S LEADING FACILITIES

“We were impressed with the facilities and opportunities offered at the school, but mostly we liked the energy, dedication, and positive attitudes from teachers and staff,” says Claudia Stenström Kontor when asked why she chose ISB for her family.

This sentiment is echoed by parents, students, members of the teaching staff, and alumni, all of whom see ISB’s positive learning environment and exceptional facilities as key reasons to attend the school.

ISB alumna, Kaitlin Davies, was presented with a number of options of where to go to school in Beijing by her father. She immediately chose ISB.

“It was quite clear where I needed to be in order to mix with the most diverse group of people and get the best education with access to the best facilities.”

A moment that sticks out to Davies during her time at ISB was when she had the opportunity to perform as part of a dance troupe.

“It was on this incredible stage, under the lighting. At [my old] school in Wales, we dined and performed on one really terrible stage. Having this state-of-the-art theater and being able to dance on it was pretty cool.”

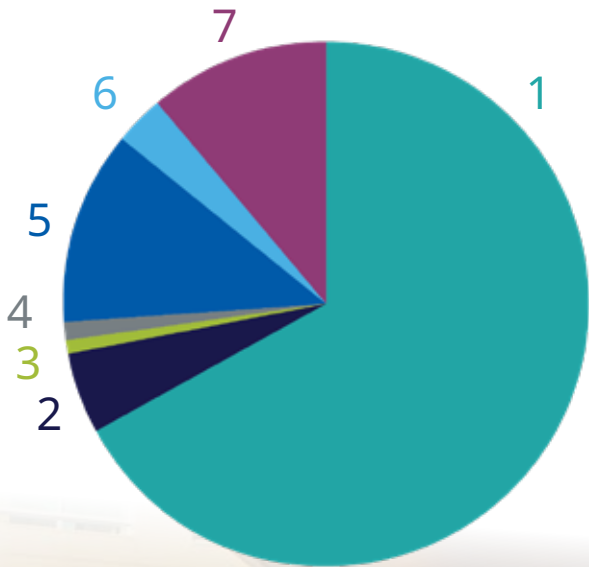
We invite you to book a tour to see our state-of-the-art facilities for yourself by [clicking here](#).

ISB, A NOT-FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTION

ISB is a not-for-profit institution and therefore we invest all revenue back into the school, to further our mission and vision and provide an excellent education for our students.

How School fees are used

- 1. Personnel: 67%
- 2. Instructional: 5%
- 3. Student Activities: 1%
- 4. Technology: 1%
- 5. Facilities: 12%
- 6. General and Administrative: 3%
- 7. Capital Expenses: 11%



QUALITY FACILITIES PUT TOGETHER BY EXPERTS

In order to create spaces that support a positive learning environment, world-renowned architects with expertise in educational facilities need to be consulted and participate in the planning of the buildings.

Xiaoyi Ma is the Chief Designer for the ISB project and the Founding Partner of Inclusive Architectural Practice, a Beijing-based architectural design firm.

“My job at ISB is establishing design principles for the new buildings,” says Ma. “School projects, especially expansions to well-established educational facilities, are different from other building types. They require a designer’s tremendous flexibility and attention to detail in order to customize the design to meet and exceed teaching requirements with persistent forward-thinking.”

We invite you to learn more about Ma, her experience as an architect, and ISB’s new facilities by [clicking here](#).



AIR PURIFICATION AT ISB

According to a study by [*Environmental Health Reports*](#), when the air quality in a building has less carbon dioxide and volatile organic compounds, individuals perform 61% better on cognitive tests. Simply put, the cleaner the air, the stronger the brain function.

And at ISB, we've made it our mission to make sure the school community has the freedom to play and learn, in an environment which allows for the best possible cognitive abilities.

Throughout the ISB campus, the highest standards of air quality are provided by a state-of-the-art air-filtration system. This includes our pressurized domes, which are also equipped with heat recovery systems to maintain an ambient temperature.

The indoor sports facilities are in a dome with purified air, meaning students can exercise comfortably in any weather condition. With air purification across the campus, the air here is as clean or cleaner than anywhere in the world.



ALL FACILITIES UNDER ONE ROOF



When all schools, elementary, middle, and high school, are under one roof, it encourages cooperation across all divisions.

Though many schools have each located in a separate building, the benefits of having them in one location are plentiful.

Advantages of having all schools under one roof include:

- Students and teachers can easily use the educational and support facilities. The access of which is not dependent on weather conditions, temperature, air quality, or distance.
- Clean air and a heating/cooling system can more efficiently be provided through a singular, large, centrally-managed system.
- There is regular interaction and support across grade levels and multi-aged students.
- Siblings can be in the same building.



The decision to put all ages of ISB learners under one roof was made 20 years ago and it's a decision students at the school are quite happy with.

According to one student at ISB, there's always someone to ask for guidance.

"There are so many good people around here; if you ever need help, they will be by your side helping you every step of the way."

And even with three groups of vastly different ages, ISB is known for its inclusivity.

"One of the things I like about ISB is it's so inclusive, we have a lot of people and we're all doing things together, not only is ISB a great place, it's a great experience... it's not just a school, it's my second home," says another ISB student.

We invite you to see ISB's state-of-the-art, all-encompassing facilities for yourself by [clicking here](#).



SPACES TAILORED TO DIFFERENT AGES OF STUDENT

A photograph of two students in a science laboratory. They are both wearing white lab coats. The student on the left is wearing safety goggles and is focused on a task. The student on the right is also looking intently at the same area. In the background, there is a large, shiny, metallic sphere on a stand, and other lab equipment is visible. The overall atmosphere is one of focused scientific inquiry.

In every grade, children have vastly different requirements in order to learn how to excel in the 21st-century.

There is a consensus in the field of education that young children need extensive socialization and play-based learning to inspire inquiry early on. As children get older and university is on the horizon, students need to be presented with spaces similar to what they will see in post-secondary school to help minimize culture shock. Students, no matter what the age, need to be given independence and a choice in how they learn. And school facilities need to be built in a way as to tailor the education to meet the needs of each and every age group.

"It seems common sense that three-year-old students and 16-year-old students need and want much different educational experiences and facilities," says Monroe.

"Often, providing diversified educational experiences for students of different ages in similarly designed educational facilities is determined by the imagination and creativity of great educators that work within these spaces to provide high-quality programs for our students."

Experts agree when the design of facilities is planned according to the age, program, and developmental stage of the students, the activities and student experiences created by educators are significantly more impactful.

ISB'S PURPOSEFULLY-BUILT FACILITIES

The design of the ISB facilities and spaces opened in 2020 incorporate the educational needs of each learner in order to best help them excel.

“By actively incorporating teacher and programmatic designers into the development of these new facilities, the variety of programmatic and experiential uses of the spaces have been identified and considered so that teachers and students have the necessary spaces, equipment, and furnishings to support their work,” says Monroe.

Early Years Learning Center

The [Early Years Learning Center](#) is a remodel project and is a large, purpose-designed space to better serve ISB's youngest learners.

Details of the building include:

- Thirteen classrooms, lofts, and large common spaces.
- Early Years art classroom, music classroom, and student kitchen.
- Child-sized facilities and indoor play spaces connected to the outdoor play spaces.
- Remodel of the first floor of the current Elementary School, with a small expansion out into the Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE) and into the current Early Years courtyard playground.
- Supports ISB's Early Years program philosophy of differentiation, play-based, and inquiry-based approaches to learning, by offering flexible learning spaces.

- Supports collaboration and the development of skills and community within and across grade levels, by utilizing communal areas.
- Enhanced safety as this center is a protected learning space for our young learners.

“This building has been specifically designed with the inside and outside flexible spaces, active exploration and play areas, and creative design centers needed to best support our innovative Early Years Program,” says Monroe.

“Young learners need inviting and engaging facilities that challenge and support their learning.”

And the intention behind the remodeled facility is to do just that. Sections such as the lofted learning and play areas, indoor sand and water features, and secret gardens all have the built-in purpose of engaging ISB's youngest learners.



FACILITIES BUILT AND ADAPTED IN RESPONSE TO CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT



The 21st-century is one of change and ambiguity, and schools must continuously review their curriculum, approaches to learning, and facilities to make sure they are equipped to respond to these changes and teach students the necessary skill sets to thrive in tomorrow's society.

"Programs at dynamic schools like ISB require purposefully designed, flexible spaces to best meet the programmatic requirements," says Monroe. "In order to determine what facility additions and modifications are needed, ISB has regularly run FMP design and review processes to collect and help prioritize these prospective projects."

Take a look at section two to discover more about ISB's FMP.

Similar to many established schools, ISB's FMP is regularly reviewed and updated to guide the short and long-term campus remodeling and construction planning.

According to Monroe, this regular review process is to make sure any additions or modifications to the facilities are relevant and vital to the success of our innovative and changing programs and in line with our goals of providing world-class facilities that best meet the educational needs of our dynamic school community.

A LOOK AT REMODELED AND NEWLY BUILT BUILDINGS RESPONDING TO PROGRAMMATIC CHANGES

At ISB, we are committed to providing a positive learning environment and opportunities for students to excel.

The school facilities are an extension of our learning philosophy; to nurture the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development of students. And as the programs change and expand, so do the facilities. [*Inquire now with a member of our Admissions team*](#) to see the innovative and ever changing campus in person.

ES Arts Center and Theater

[*The Elementary School Arts Center and Theater*](#) was a new-build project. It's a flexible, creative performance/practice space unlike any other on campus, expressly designed to meet the needs of ES performers and audience members.

Benefits include:

- Supports the development of ISB's ES fine arts foundational programs, which in turn fuels the growth of world-class secondary fine arts programs.
- Increases the opportunity to focus on whole child development and offers a greater range of options for students to meet individual success (increased co-curricular options for students).



MS/HS Performing Arts Center

The Middle School/High School Performing Arts Center is a new-build project. It's purpose-built to create a space for the growth of our dynamic performing arts programs.

Benefits include:

- Provides ample space for growth in these performing arts programs and resolves issues with acoustics and capacity.
- Extends and supports the learning of our performing arts students both inside and outside of our school day programs.
- Better supports student creativity in composing, performing, and recording.
- Reflects the great value that ISB places on our arts programs and will help to inspire our students for a lifetime.



MS/HS Art and Design Center (Remodel Project)

The Middle School/High School Art and Design Center was a remodel project and is a centralized design facility for showcasing design and engineering programs.

Benefits include:

- Meets the demand for campus spaces which facilitate large-scale design and robotics courses.
- Showcases ISB's design, engineering, and entrepreneurship programs which challenge students to create, prototype, and iterate ideas, through a centralized design facility.
- Facilitates applied learning in Science, Math, Technology, Art, and Design.
- Provides inspired spaces to facilitate transdisciplinary and projectbased learning.

We understand that this is a lot of information to digest in one sitting, that's why we've made it into a download. Click here to download our infographic and consume this information at your own pace. You'll also receive a *BONUS Admissions Questions Checklist!*



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