

3 Common Space Challenges:

Different Needs in Different Environments

By Demco

According to new federal data, the average school building in the United States is nearly 50 years old. Despite this, numerous students and educators still call these buildings home in 2024.

Yet, instruction and teaching strategies have shifted. From the introduction of 1:1 devices and evolving edtech in classrooms to designated learning stations and collaborative spaces in libraries, how learners interact with their environments has changed — and continues to change.

An environment shouldn't constrict learning. Instead, it should empower learners and support their growth.

Nationwide, libraries, schools, and entire school districts face challenges in making the most of their spaces to accommodate modern needs, and no two spaces are the same. From restrictive spaces and limited storage options to environments without windows or natural light, each space requires a thoughtful approach. Here are three common space challenges that often arise.

1. LIMITED SPACE AND STORAGE

Between extra supplies, devices, coats, and more, storage is hard to come by in any space. At Oceanside Unified School District in Oceanside, CA, this exact challenge led community rooms in two of the school district's elementary schools to become congested with boxes and other items over the years. While both spaces were created to provide a spot for school staff to visit with families, they became the go-to place for everything that didn't have a home. Defining the goals of both spaces helped the Demco and Oceanside teams maximize the functionality of each room. Added storage along the

walls helped organize everything, while new chairs and tables in updated layouts helped prioritize face-to-face conversations. A win-win that didn't require major changes at either school.

2. POOR ACOUSTICS

When co-creating and brainstorming ideas for a space, it's important to remember that older buildings typically don't have the insulation or sound-dampening properties newer buildings do. Poor acoustics can disrupt the learning process and affect speech perception, learner behavior, and even educational outcomes. While we can't change the age or building materials of a space, implementing sound-absorbing decor can help. Incorporating soft surfaces such as carpets or creating zones with sound-dampening room dividers like those in Demco's CalmScape Acoustic Collection can improve a space's acoustics. And while soft surfaces can help with acoustics, hard surfaces can have the opposite effect. For example, at one school, leaders wanted tables and chairs with wheels to make it easy to move items between different classrooms (and even different schools). While the idea sounded great on paper, adding wheels changed the acoustics. With cement floors and high ceilings,



the wheels echoed across the space and made it difficult to hear others. Remaining flexible, the team adjusted their plans and made their space work without wheels.

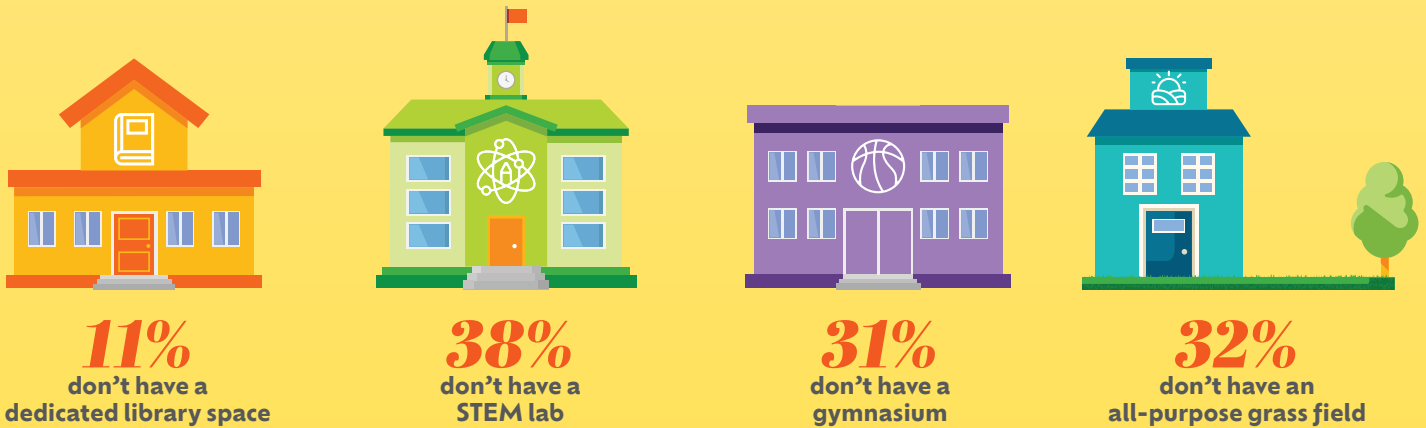
3. EVER-CHANGING PLANS

From simply refreshing a space to reshaping the look, feel, and flow of an entire building, changes big and small can be intimidating. Updating a space is much easier said than done, and that's

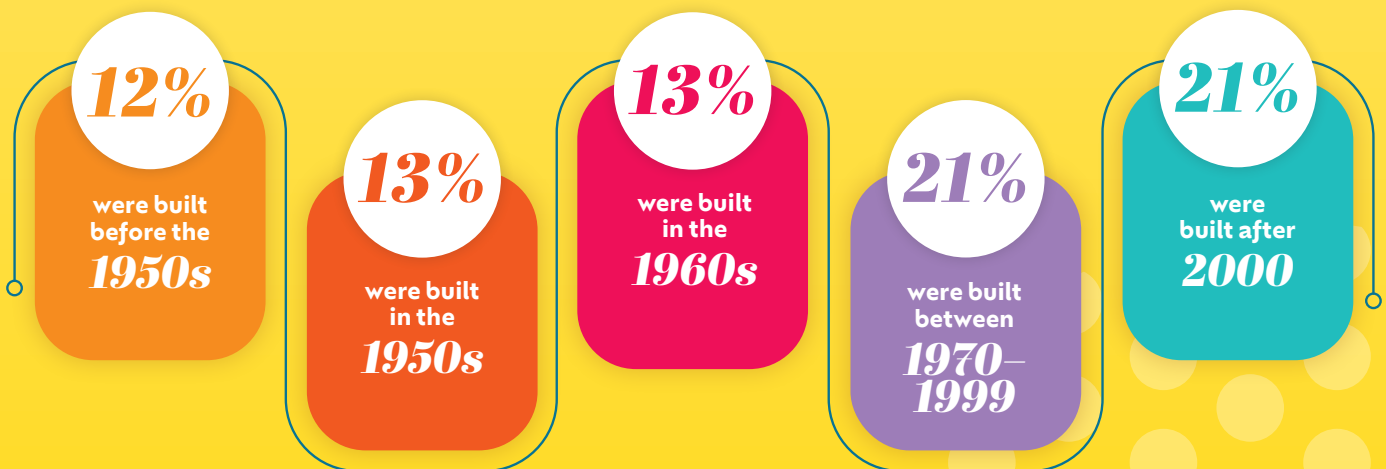
especially true when working with an older building with limitations. Addressing each challenge is a thorough process and involves numerous stakeholders. It's critical to consider input from all points of view and remain open to adjusting your original vision.

Plans will change. But remember that the end goal will remain the same: to create an environment that inspires and empowers. 🌞

School buildings vary greatly in what they can offer students. According to federal data:



According to federal data on school buildings:



"The Average U.S. School Building Dates Back to the End of the Vietnam War" by Mark Lieberman, Education Week