

Mr. Ken Sommerfeldt

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Ken Sommerfeldt, Superintendent for Westwind School Division and was published on February 28, 2018. Thank you to the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on the CASS website.

Learning Spaces in the 21st Century

Much has been said and written about 21st century learning environments, and 21st century learners in recent years. Nearly 10 years ago, the Alberta Government released a document entitled "Inspiring Education." Resulting from extensive consultation with Albertans it became a template for school reform and direction. It spoke of educating students for their future and not our past, and a shift from content learning to the development of competencies. Many things have changed in our schools over the last decade, and yet some things tend to stay the same. Recently, I attended the AASA (School Superintendents Association) conference and had a chance to interact with Dr. Heidi Hayes Jacobs. She is the founder and president of Curriculum Designers, providing professional services to schools, organizations and agencies to create modern learning environments, upgrade curriculum and support teaching strategies to meet needs of contemporary learners.

Dr. Hayes Jacobs asserted that to a large degree, schools continue to be organized around the industrial model. In short she said "we have schools that operate in 19th century structures (buildings) with a 20th century curriculum teaching 21st century learners. In too many cases the classrooms of today do not look so different from the ones our grandparents attended. While the work of adapting our education system to meet the needs of today's students continues, I want to draw attention to the excellent work that is taking place in how the space in schools is being used. Education research suggests that more emphasis on the acquisition of skills to create knowledge through collaboration is needed. In order to facilitate these 21st century learning skills, we need to rethink how learning space is organized and utilized.

In Westwind School Division, we have schools in Magrath and Stirling that are in the process of modernization. It has been fascinating to work with skilled professionals in architecture and design together with education partners including students to reshape 19th century building designs into truly 21st century learning spaces. Attention has been given to provide flexible space that can be defined to meet the flexible learning needs and activities of students. Creating open space for collaboration and learner interaction as well as "maker spaces" for smaller groups to create have been priorities. In both of these communities, the achievement of community partnerships has been essential to secure the "extras" that will make these schools meaningful hubs for the several decades. I am confident in the rising generation of educators who are exhibiting excellence in reaching the 21st century learner with the creative and adaptive use of learning space.