school stories

The future of school design

Round Table Discussion

October 2024

Jestico + Whiles will soon deliver its 100th school – a milestone representing many thousands of hours of work by hundreds of people, but most importantly resulting in quality learning environments for more than 180,000 young people and their teachers. To celebrate this milestone, we created School Stories, revisiting five of those schools to shine a light on the communities that have developed there through interviews with students, teachers and staff.

As well as looking back, we also wanted to look to the future of school design, and explore some of the challenges and opportunities facing the education sector. For more than 20 years, it has been our privilege to have worked with a wide range of inspiring education leaders: in both the state and independent sectors, in the UK and internationally – from headteachers and policymakers to strategists and designers.

We brought some of these experts together in our studio to gather a full range of insights into the future in education design. The round table met at a time of political change, in the context of a new Labour government in the UK. Chancellor Rachel Reeves used her first budget to announce around £6.7bn of new capital investment for the Department of Education, but this comes in the context of £40bn of cumulative cuts to school capital funding since 2010. A comprehensive curriculum and assessment review, announced in July 2024, will not publish its recommendations until 2025.

At the same time, technological change is accelerating, in Britain and globally. Society is both more interconnected yet more atomised than ever, and AI-led automation is transforming the job market in unpredictable ways. How should schools evolve to prepare students for such a rapidly shifting landscape?

Developing a hybrid model

As Covid-19 took hold in 2020, schools were forced to adapt to online teaching and learning almost overnight. After pandemic restrictions eased, children returned to the classroom, but the long-term effects of inequitable online learning are still being felt, with persistent absenteeism quadrupling[1]. Consequently, in August 2024, UK government

issued non-statutory guidance stating that remote education "should not be viewed as an equal alternative to attendance in school" and should be considered "only as a last resort". However, interest in hybrid learning, where teaching is delivered partly online and partly in person, continues to grow, particularly internationally and in the independent sector. The pros and cons of this model were passionately debated in our discussion.

One advantage advocated of a blended approach is that it allows schools to share expertise remotely, develop specialisms that students at other schools can access, and offer a wider range of subjects, therefore helping to break down geographical barriers. Students can then give more consideration to accessibility, proximity to home and other factors when choosing which school to attend.

The challenge for architects designing schools now is to imagine how a hybrid school might look and function. The panel discussed a model that might have greater focus on communal spaces that require in-person interaction, specialist facilities or hands-on collaborative work, such as art and music studios, or science labs. More theoretical subjects, meanwhile, could be delivered digitally to students in more adaptable study space on site, at home, or both. A more flexible arrangement like this could also aid teacher recruitment.

' In a hybrid learning model, schools can share their expertise remotely

' Independent schools can lead by example in pursuing innovation

Yet for some schools, where it's an achievement and a priority just to get children into the building, feed them and keep them safe, considerations of a hybrid approach to learning seem distant. The debate highlighted clear disparities between communities in terms of the ability to access education of this nature.

For education leaders thinking about how to implement hybrid learning in their existing school buildings, the cost of technology is a significant factor, and not all students have equal access to reliable internet or devices. Although teachers adapted rapidly in the face of the pandemic, many would still need upskilling to achieve the full potential of remote teaching and learning.

The budget to rebuild or even retrofit school buildings is limited. The embodied carbon cost of building new schools is another factor, although fewer journeys to and from a hybrid school might go some way to balancing that out.

The panel also noted that while remote learning can significantly improve access for some neurodivergent students, it may not be suitable for others, such as those with behavioural problems: for some, school as a physical space offers respite from problems at home.

There were differing views on how quickly new digital tools can and should be integrated into the classroom. However, the panel agreed that since schools must be built to last, some imagination is required in thinking what education should be like in the future, and that independent and international schools, which might have more scope to experiment in pursuit of innovation than public sector schools, should look to lead by example.

[1] Persistent absence – defined as missing at least 10 per cent of sessions, equivalent to one day every fortnight – has risen dramatically. The numbers missing one day a fortnight quadrupled between 2019 and 2021 (from 8 per cent to 34 per cent) and the proportion missing two days a week (40 per cent of sessions) was more than 10 times higher, (from 0.2 per cent to 2.3 per cent).

Source: "The pandemic, pupil attendance and achievement report" - LSE Centre for Economic Performance / Nuffield Foundation, September 2024

The digital dilemma

As digital natives, today's students have grown up online, for better or worse. Technology is an integral part of their lives, and digital communication is here to stay, even as most schools move to ban or restrict mobile phone use and interest in 'offline' tech like vinyl records continues to grow.

The panel discussed the responsibility of providing students with the social skills demanded by employers in this context. At some schools, a ban on mobile phones has led to a marked increase in socialising, with "more conversations across the dinner table". Others stressed that students can and do benefit from socialising online – particularly those who are neurodivergent – citing the rapid growth of esports, with some schools now fielding their own teams.

Artificial intelligence tools similarly divided opinion. Some panellists felt that while AI held promise in supporting teaching staff with time-consuming admin work like timetabling, AI-supported independent study would not be suitable for some students, who must not be left behind. AI is undoubtedly already impacting the assessment process, and has rendered the take-home essay format all but obsolete. On the other hand, this presents an opportunity to move towards a more collaborative and inclusive learning and assessment process that is less reliant on end of year exams.

’ Digital tools can make learning more accessible for neurodivergent students

Schools as community hubs

It was clear from the discussion that schools are still reckoning with the long tail of the Covid pandemic: as well as technological change and financial constraints, absence levels remain well above pre-pandemic levels. During some periods of lockdown, schools were the only community facility open and accessible.

The panel discussed the idea of schools acting as hubs – or 'beacons' – for the communities they serve, and the benefits of more holistic thinking around social services.

In Scotland, one panellist noted, some schools are being delivered with integrated services like counselling and parenting spaces, and even midwiferies and dentists.

In the future, there would be advantages to a more consolidated approach to community services for the young through to the elderly, linking nurseries, schools, employers and care homes. This could address inefficiencies and make it harder for vulnerable people to 'fall through the cracks' of the social support system, but it's a major organisational challenge cutting across multiple government and local government agencies and funding streams.

The panel agreed that while greater integration raises questions around safeguarding, that shouldn't be seen as an excuse not to be ambitious. In the meantime, school spaces should be designed with wider community use in mind, and opened up for those uses outside of timetabled hours. At Passmores Academy, for example, the school's central 'heart space' is given over to a community group every Saturday, offering local people the opportunity to connect over a tea or coffee.

If hybrid schooling does take off in the future, upskilled teachers could help school buildings double as community tech hubs, running classes and workshops for the wider community to boost digital literacy.

Softening the edges

Given the limitations of funding, the panel discussed smaller interventions that school designers might use to improve experiences for teachers and students in a cost-effective way. By focusing on details like wider corridors; covered outdoor space; planting and landscaping; and colour psychology, architects can help to "soften the edges" of school campuses and give students and teachers "breathing space". Careful acoustic design can make a big difference for students and their ability to concentrate, while thoughtful furniture design can solve practical issues by allowing teachers to see all their students' computer screens at the same time, for example.

The panel agreed on the importance of embedding inclusion at the heart of the design process – something that requires all schools to adopt a "SEND mentality" from the start. Rather than hiding SEND spaces in the "dark recesses" of school buildings, integrating them into learning spaces brings practical benefits as well as fostering a sense of belonging. One panellist described how grouping wellbeing and learning support services together with medical facilities can help break down the stigma associated with accessing them.

Striking the balance between cost-efficient "off-the-shelf" solutions and bespoke, context-driven design was another focus of discussion. Taking too much of a "cookie cutter" approach can result in schools that fail to properly meet the individual needs of their communities or enhance their physical setting, and don't support a sense of local pride. The panel agreed that successful school designs like Passmores Academy would not have been possible without a tailored approach, and getting to know the communities the schools would go on to serve was crucial to this.

On the other hand, the panel noted that starting from scratch with every school design would not be sustainable or effective. Developing design components that work and reusing them can free up budget to think more creatively elsewhere, allowing architects to "squeeze in a bit more comfort around the margins", even when budgets are tight.

Schools should act as hubs for their communities

Schools of the future

Designing the schools of the future will require, perhaps as it always has, a balance of optimism and pragmatism, and a pluralistic and open-minded approach to technology.

The existing estate of today forms most of what young people of the future will be educated in tomorrow. How we can improve it, particularly in making it more accessible, inclusive and energy efficient needs to be a priority. Supporting and provisioning schools to becoming better utilised community assets, as some already are, should be another important priority.

Adapting education to the digital age of connectivity and AI is essential for our young people's futures. A technology-enabled hybrid model school will not be suitable in all contexts, but imagining how a hybrid school or learning space might look is an interesting design challenge. We will be exploring this idea ourselves in the coming months.

As always in school design, as we were reminded by our panel, what's really important is not the architecture: that serves as a facilitating background. It's what goes on inside that truly matters.

Going around the table for each panellist's one takeaway, the wide range of creative perspectives and ideas was encouraging. The panel agreed on the importance of design thinking and its ability to solve problems, and that these conversations are crucial and not held often enough. The issues and ideas discussed will inform our approach as we look to designing our next 100 schools.

Designing the schools of the future will need a balance of optimism and pragmatism

Speaker bios

Sharon Wright (chair)
Sharon has a background in strategy and organisational development, working with senior leaders in the public sector. A recognised expert in her field, she has supported local and central government, schools, Multi Academy Trusts, housing associations and not-for-profits. In the past, Sharon has led a not-for-profit promoting good school design and worked in the Civil Service on education and employment policy. Over 20 years, she has gained expertise in supporting schools and colleges with capital projects, visioning, and briefing. Sharon is a regular speaker and chair on learning environments and has co-authored several books on school design.

Vic Goddard
Vic is the CEO of a multi-academy trust that includes Passmores Academy, where he was Principal. He gained national recognition as the star of the BAFTA-nominated Channel 4 documentary "Educating Essex." Branded "the worst headteacher in the country" by the Daily Mail, Vic wears this badge with pride, and is celebrated for his dedication to his schools and students. He regularly appears in the media speaking about education, and authored "The Best Job in the World," a book which reflects his passion for his leadership role despite its challenges.

Claire Jackson
Claire is the education sector strategy lead at Galliford Try, and a Chartered Building Surveyor with more than 30 years of experience in construction. She has specialised in education for the last 12 years, delivering new and refurbished schools through various programmes. At Galliford Try, Claire leads the national education team, driving innovation and collaboration to ensure the delivery of high-quality education buildings.

Crawford Wright
Crawford is the Head of Architecture and Design at the Department for Education (DfE) in the UK. He leads a multi-disciplinary team responsible for setting design and construction standards for all state schools in England. He has been instrumental in the School Rebuilding Programme (SRP), a 10-year initiative aimed at rebuilding and refurbishing schools across England, emphasising sustainability and innovative design elements such as improved ventilation and outdoor learning spaces.

Karen Sanderson
Karen is an award-winning furniture design, procurement, and logistics expert with 20 years of experience in the education sector. She focuses on how students and teachers interact with their environment, including seating arrangements and learning dynamics. Karen has expertise in SEND spaces, high-level education curriculum, and developing work skills for the employment market. Recently, she has been exploring sustainable furniture design. She has worked as both a designer and advisor throughout her career.

Ellis Whitcombe
Ellis is Deputy Head, Director of Strategic Development at St Paul's Girls' School and an inspiring teacher of physics. With two illustrious careers behind him, in the military and as a product-designing entrepreneur, Ellis is the member of staff responsible for the school's recently-completed Centre for Design and Innovation, an interdisciplinary facility with technology, design and maker spaces to nurture the next generation of female engineers, innovators and entrepreneurs.

Helen Taylor

Helen is an architect, formerly of Jestico + Whiles and now director at Scott Brownrigg, with over 20 years of experience in education design focusing on sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. She is passionate about cross-industry collaboration, engagement, and research. Helen has co-authored several publications on school design and played a significant role in establishing Modern Apprenticeships in Architecture. She is a Fellow of the RIBA, a RIBA Chartered Architect and Client Advisor, and a Part 3 examiner at Oxford Brookes University and UCL Bartlett.

Ben Marston

Ben has worked in education design for his entire career and co-leads the Jestico + Whiles education studio. The studio will soon have delivered 100 school projects across two decades, designing inspirational, effective, inclusive and sustainable facilities across primary, secondary, and special schools; public and private; new-build and refurbishment projects, both in the UK and internationally. Ben is an RIBA Client Advisor and the current chair of the NLA Expert Panel on Education. He has a particular interest in low-energy sustainable design, and is also responsible for Addition Labs, Jestico + Whiles' design research initiative.

Kai Vacher

Kai is principal of British School Muscat and British School Salalah in Oman. A dynamic thinker and innovator, he has devoted his career to teaching, learning and seeking ways to bring out the very best in students, teachers and the community. Kai believes in combining the best traditional teaching methods with more innovative, research-based approaches. Kai is also a High-Performance Learning Fellow and on the COBIS (Council of British International Schools) board. His was recognised as one of the Top 10 international education influencers of 2021 by ISC Research.

James Tatham

James Tatham is a director at Jestico + Whiles, co-leading the education studio. He has extensive experience in education design, overseeing a broad portfolio of projects including primary, secondary and SEND schools, as well as further and higher education institutions. He has worked with various education clients, including the Department for Education, academy trusts, local authorities, free schools, the University of Cambridge, and the British Council in the UK and internationally.

Julie Désormiers

Julie is an associate director at Jestico + Whiles. She has extensive experience in both the residential and education sectors. Julie is a key member of Jestico + Whiles education studio, with expertise in stakeholder engagement. She has worked on the design of several UK state and independent schools, as well as international schools. Recent projects include leading the brief development and design process for a number of schools, including a specialist SEND school for the Cayman Islands Government.

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