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How Flexible Spaces Support Students

As a physical education teacher, I spend most of my day in a gym. It is my classroom, but it is also a multi-purpose space, supporting not only instruction but activities, events, and other ways our school and community come together. Like any teacher, I know how much the space where I teach can shape the experience I can give my students.

Teaching today requires flexibility. Students have different abilities, strengths, and needs. Quality instruction means being able to adjust, create smaller groups, offer different levels of challenge, provide extra instruction, or give students different ways to practice. Having the right kind of space gives teachers more options to make those adjustments and support students.

I see both the value of that flexibility and the challenges when space is limited in my own classroom. Multiple classrooms sometimes need to share a gym, requiring us to divide the space and put a large number of students together. That can affect the skills and activities I am able to teach, how I group students, and how I adjust a lesson for different ages, abilities, and skill levels.

PE is only one of the many ways our gyms are used. At USC, our two gyms serve students from PreK through 12th grade. Physical education is part of the required curriculum, so our PE schedule is one of the first pieces that must fall into place when the school schedule is developed. Other classes then have to fit around it. It may seem strange to think that gym availability can affect when students have math, reading, or other core classes, but one space constraint can impact the entire day.

The demand for those spaces does not end once the instructional schedule is set. Our gyms are needed for assemblies, activities, performances, practices, extracurriculars, school events, and more. As a teacher, I see every day how many students, classes, and programs depend on the same spaces.

What I experience in the gym is one example, but it is true throughout our school. Sometimes students learn as a full class. Sometimes a few students need a quieter place to work with a teacher. Some learning requires specialized equipment or room to collaborate, while some students need dedicated space for additional services and support. We also need places where larger groups can come together.

That is why, when we talk about needing more space at USC, I believe it is important to talk about what kind of space we are creating and what it allows students to do. Growth may be driving the need for additional space, but the proposed plan is intentional about creating different spaces for different needs. Small group and breakout spaces would provide more options for instruction and individualized support. Repurposed rooms would provide space for STEM, additional sections of core instruction, and specialized services. Expanded student support areas would provide dedicated places to meet and work together. The proposed multi-purpose space would add flexibility on a larger scale, providing additional room for PE while creating a space that could serve many different purposes throughout the day.

As a PE teacher, I can easily picture the difference it could make. A space used for PE in the morning could provide room for indoor recess, an assembly, a performance, or a school activity later in the day. After school, it could support athletics and practices, extracurricular activities, Homecoming dances, and youth programs. In the evening, it could be used for community education or another community event.

To me, that is what makes flexible and multi-purpose spaces valuable. I don't look at the proposed plan and simply see more square footage. I see more possibilities for our students, including more ways to teach and learn, more room to provide support, more opportunities to participate and try new things, and more places to come together as a school and community.

Growth may be the reason USC needs more space. Making sure it is the right kind of space – flexible, purposeful, and designed around how students learn and grow – is what can create more opportunities for the students we serve.

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