F.H. PASCHEN

ISSUE 5

2026 TRENDS IN SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION:

HOW SCHOOLS ARE BEING BUILT TO SUPPORT THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEARNING

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At their best, school buildings support both education and the broader community. In 2026, school construction is being shaped by how kids learn, how teachers teach, and how schools fit into the neighborhood. From safety to flexibility to sustainability, today's school projects are adapting to tomorrow's needs.

Here are five trends driving construction projects across early childhood centers, K–12 districts, and career pathways facilities.

SECURITY & ACCESSIBILITY ARE DRIVING K–12 DESIGNS

The most visible shift in school construction is the balance between safety and openness. For decades, the industry focused on one or the other. Now, the mandate is to deliver both.

In 2026, districts are moving away from the "fortress" model. High walls and fewer windows make a building secure, but they also make it feel like a prison. The modern approach uses Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). This strategy relies on natural surveillance—clear sightlines that allow staff to see who is approaching without needing cameras alone.

We see this most in the entryway. Secure vestibules are now standard. These double-entry systems force visitors to interact with staff before gaining access to the main hallway. But these spaces are no longer dark, cramped boxes. They are flooded with natural light and built with impact-resistant glass. They protect the perimeter while maintaining a welcoming atmosphere for students and parents.

Inside, accessibility is the partner to security. Wide corridors and strategically placed common areas prevent overcrowding, which reduces student anxiety and conflict. When a building is easy to navigate, it is safer for everyone.

THE BASICS OF CPTED:
Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design isn't about adding more cameras. Rather, it is grounded in designing and building smarter layouts. Here are the core principles:

NATURAL SURVEILLANCE
Keep sightlines clear. If people know they can be seen, they are less likely to cause trouble.

NATURAL ACCESS CONTROL
Use walkways, lighting, and fences to guide visitors physically toward the main entrance. The goal: keep them away from private areas.

TERRITORIAL REINFORCEMENT
Clearly mark where the school grounds begin. Well-defined boundaries discourage trespassing.

MAINTENANCE
A broken window invites more broken windows. Keeping the facility clean signals that the space is monitored and cared for.

LEARNING SPACE FLEXIBILITY IS A MUST-HAVE

The era of “cells and bells” is ending. For most districts, the idea of rows and rows of desks in identical square rooms is a relic of yesteryear. Construction in 2026 demands spaces that can change shape on a Tuesday morning to fit a lesson plan for Tuesday afternoon.

> **Classrooms used to be set-up to deliver the information to the students to memorize. Now education is not what you know, but where to find it and how to use it.**

> **According to the Dodge Construction Network, between February 2023 and February 2024, life science and R&D laboratory projects accounted for roughly 34% of the value of all education planning.**

Movable walls and modular furniture allow teachers to reconfigure rooms for small groups or large lectures instantly. This supports hybrid learning models where digital tools and in-person instruction mix. But the biggest driver of this trend is the return of the trades.

In elementary schools STEAM is changing the way schools are designed. In High Schools, the same is happening with Career and Technical Education (CTE), where leaders are re-thinking their floor plans. Districts are asking for hands-on learning labs, not just classrooms. We are building welding bays, automotive repair shops, robotics arenas, and culinary kitchens that rival professional facilities.

These spaces require different infrastructure than a standard math class. They need upgraded ventilation, heavy-duty power supplies, and acoustic dampening. The construction team must understand the difference between a science lab and a fabrication shop. The goal is to create a seamless flow between “thinking” spaces and “making” spaces, reflecting the reality of the modern workforce.


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TIMELINES ARE GETTING COMPRESSED

School boards and taxpayers want results, and they want them fast. The window for major construction is often limited to summer breaks, but ambitious projects now spill into the school year. The trend is finding ways to build safely and quickly while school is in session.

A recent project at Evergreen Elementary in Carol Stream, Illinois, illustrates this shift. F.H. Paschen was tasked with building a six-classroom, 9,000-square-foot addition. The schedule was tight: break ground in November and finish by August.

EVERGREEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN WING ADDITION

Design to Occupancy in 15 Months

Success required aggressive pre-planning. The team accounted for Chicago’s notorious winter weather in the bid documents, preventing the “open checkbook” scenario that often occurs when snow delays work. By securing subcontractors early and planning for the cold, work continued through the freeze.

The project also proved that flexibility saves the schedule. Halfway through the build, the district decided to expand the scope to include renovations of the existing building. Because the construction management team had control of the timeline and budget, they absorbed this change without missing the August deadline. The result was a project that finished faster and cost less, all while keeping the playground open for the neighborhood during construction.

REPURPOSING EXISTING SPACES

New construction grabs headlines, but every district that has been through a project knows that renovation is the workhorse of 2026. With fluctuating enrollment numbers as some districts shrink while others boom, many school administrators are looking at what they already own.

Most are finding that the most sustainable building is the one that already exists. Rather than demolishing and rebuilding, districts are stripping structures down to the studs. This allows them to upgrade mechanical systems and insulation, drastically lowering energy costs, without the price tag of a ground-up build.

We are seeing libraries converted into media centers and cafeterias transformed into multi-purpose auditoriums. This trend extends to adaptive reuse, where in some cases, creative districts purchase vacant commercial properties (like big-box stores or office parks) and convert them into school facilities. These shells offer the high ceilings and open spans that modern CTE programs require, often at a fraction of the cost of new steel.

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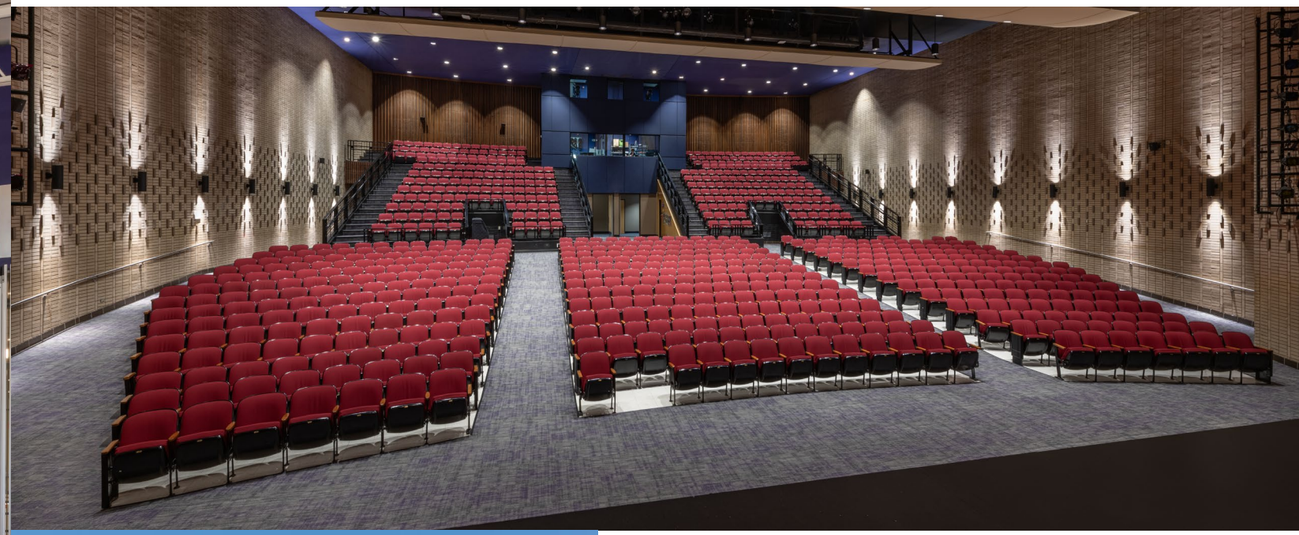
SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

The final trend we're seeing continue to emerge is the integration of the school into the town or community it serves. In 2026, a school building that sits empty after 3:00 PM is seen by many as a wasted asset.

Savvy architects and builders are designing facilities with shared use in mind. Gymnasiums, auditoriums, and libraries are placed near the perimeter of the building with separate secure entrances. This allows the community to use these resources on evenings and weekends without compromising the security of the rest of the school.

> **"Turning schools into shared resources is both good public policy and good community economics."**

This goes beyond recreation. New projects often include space for health clinics, food pantries, or adult education centers within the school footprint. By treating the school as a community hub, districts see a higher return on investment for the taxpayer. It strengthens the bond between the institution and the residents, making it easier to build trust, engage the community and align interests for future improvements.



CONCLUSION

The school buildings of 2026 are complex machines. They must be safe but inviting, durable but flexible, and built at a speed that matches the urgency of modern education.

F.H. Paschen understands that a blueprint is just the beginning. Whether it is a ground-up high school with a state-of-the-art welding lab or a summer renovation of a historic elementary school, the focus remains on the end user. We build the walls, but the teachers and students build the future inside them. By anticipating these trends, we ensure that our schools serve their communities for generations to come.

5515 N. East River Rd. Chicago, IL 60656
www.fhpaschen.com | 773.444.3474