

# e<sup>3</sup> Civic High School

**TOOL:** Adapting facility infrastructure to support personalized and project-based curriculum

**GOAL:** Redefining “classroom” to encourage students to learn in any setting

**BREAK THROUGH**

**MODEL:** e<sup>3</sup> Civic High School

## Why was this strategy developed?

When designing a new high school in downtown San Diego, administrators at e<sup>3</sup> Civic High School sought to create an environment in which learning would take place beyond traditional classroom walls. Since opening in September 2013, the school has redefined “classroom” to include the entire school structure and the downtown community. **All spaces, walls, furniture, and even the main staircase adapt to support the curriculum, meeting the dual purposes of personalized learning and collaborative, project-based instruction.** Educators use these features—and take advantage of the school’s co-location within the state-of-the-art downtown public library—to teach students that learning should go on at all times and everywhere within the school, and that students should continue this mindset beyond school in the community.

“The facility represents the e<sup>3</sup> way of how we live and operate together,” says Executive Director Helen Griffith. “We engage students around their passion and help them to collaborate, think critically, and problem-solve to make the world a better place.”

## How is it different?

Educators at e<sup>3</sup> had the advantage of building the school from the ground up in a unique project with the library. While this is not available to most educators looking for innovative ways to foster learning, other schools can benefit from seeing how e<sup>3</sup> utilizes its facility to engage students by helping them find what they love to do,

educate them with core academics, and empower them to take what they’ve learned to impact the world.

**The structure.** The school occupies two of nine floors in the library building. Most walls in the facility are either glass, movable partitions, covered in whiteboard surface, or covered by media screens. The glass walls foster a collective spirit of learning and a celebration of student activity among students and staff. The movable partitions allow rooms to be opened up for multiple uses. Whiteboard surfaces allow students to work collaboratively wherever they are in the facility (technology allows students to capture images of their whiteboard work). Media screens are available all around for students to connect their laptops

for collaborative work, or to display school messages and San Diego City television broadcasts.

The main staircase that connects the two floors is designed to be both a traveling path and a gathering space. It is lined by “Gallery” walls, which are lighted to display student work.

**The floorplan.** Students and visitors enter e<sup>3</sup> at “The Park,” a large gathering space that functions for everything from a Thanksgiving dinner to a school dance. The Park has mobile sectional sofas, chairs, and tables, and it’s outfitted with audio/visual technology for presentations and assemblies.

The classrooms—called “Studios”—exist in clusters called “Villages.” There are four Villages, each comprising four Studios and a

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**Dr. Helen V. Griffith, Executive Director**



science lab surrounding a “Village Common.” The Studios have movable furniture and walls, which, if opened, can enlarge the Village Common even more. Double door entries to each Village allow the whole area to be closed off.

Throughout the facility there are nooks where students can gather alone or in groups with laptops. Administrative offices are in the center of e<sup>3</sup>'s first floor in order to be accessible to students and parents and to foster a feeling of trust and mutual respect among students and staff.

## What is the advantage for students?

High school students are social. The unique environment at e<sup>3</sup> allows students to be social in educationally purposeful activities. They move frequently—more than in traditional schools, since e<sup>3</sup> students learn in self-paced, mastery-based “modules” rather than class periods (for more information on the school model, see [e<sup>3</sup>'s profile](#)). Students are encouraged and allowed to move about the facility throughout the day, with or without a teacher. Because students spend less seat-time in classrooms, the facility is designed to foster learning anytime and everywhere, through both purposeful and unscheduled social interaction.

## How does it improve learning?

The flexible e<sup>3</sup> environment fosters student ownership of learning. Educators intend for this responsibility to cause students to be more proactive about their learning, to dig deeper, ask more questions, think critically, and collaborate. This is also an effective way to scaffold students toward the independence they will have in postsecondary institutions and beyond. Students are encouraged to use technology (every student has a Mac Airbook), which expands their access to a broad range of digital resources.

While the entire curriculum at e<sup>3</sup> is centered on project-based learning, a few areas of the facility are dedicated to developing job-related skills. The media facility uses the same technology and equipment as the municipal broadcast television station, allowing students to practice broadcast journalism in the school and then transfer their expertise to a job in the city. Also, next fall, students will begin to be trained in The Park to troubleshoot technology (e<sup>3</sup>'s version of “The Geek Squad/Genius Bar”). It is planned that students will receive an e<sup>3</sup> certification listing the competencies mastered during their work as part of the e<sup>3</sup> Genius Bar.

## What is the advantage for instructors and administrators?

The flexible design of facilities at e<sup>3</sup> allows educators to change their instructional environments to best support the work they are doing. When students branch off to continue their learning away from instructors, glass walls throughout the building allow staff to ensure that students are staying on task. By affording students this measure of independence, e<sup>3</sup> is working to build a culture of mutual

respect that could foster a pleasant learning and teaching environment. Staff at e<sup>3</sup> work deliberately to create this culture by spending the first few weeks of the year building relationships between teachers and students.

## What are the challenges?

Griffith learned that while wheels on chairs make for flexible learning spaces, they are a distraction for many students. The e<sup>3</sup> team is replacing the wheels with castors to preserve mobility of chairs but discourage students from traveling in them.

Administrators also discovered some challenges with glass walls. There were no private rooms for conferences between students, counselors, parents, or administrators. To create more privacy for students, some partitions will be added, and the glass wall between the school and public library will be frosted.

Finally, since most students came from traditional schools, the team is working to restructure students' habits to adapt to e<sup>3</sup>'s flexible, independent environment. They are giving students enough structure to make them comfortable, yet slowly pushing the boundaries toward self-directed learning.

## What's next?

Students and staff will continue to be trained together on the use of the facility's technology infrastructure, to ensure that they know how to utilize the full range of options. Teachers will continue to receive professional training on using flexible spaces to foster student-centered learning. Also, students will decide on future furniture purchases and design some areas that were left open. Griffith is eager to allow students to take ownership of—and therefore be more likely to take care of—the facility.



## ARTIFACT:

Architect rendering of Village Commons reproduced courtesy of [LPA, Inc.](#)  
 (Click on the image to view a full set of the architect's rendering.)



VILLAGE COMMONS



The shared student commons are creatively flexible spaces within each village. The Commons are inviting with movable furniture and mix of surfaces, promoting communication among students and faculty. **Flexibility to adapt to changing needs has been designed into the school.** The studios surrounding the commons are designed to accommodate various activities; several with sliding partitions to open into the commons and others designed as 'quiet' studios for focused activities such as media viewing and distance learning.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**e<sup>3</sup> Civic High School**  
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**Press:** [Unpacking Big Visions For High School In New Downtown Library](#)

