

## THE BOTTOM LINE

- Enhancing wellness can be as simple as increasing opportunities for sunlight and fresh air, while opening classroom spaces may be another relatively simple change.
- When renovating or building new, consider materials choices that will enhance the air quality of indoor spaces, which have been shown to be more polluted than outdoor spaces.
- The WELL Building Standard focuses on enhancing human activity within spaces.



# BUILT FOR WELLNESS



# Independent schools have moved wellness out of the gym and into spaces where everyone can benefit.

By Stacey Freed

Above left: Lunch deck of Untitled No. 1 preschool in Santa Monica, California.  
Photo Credit: Whitney Cox. Above right: Cafe at Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore.  
Right: Health Center at St. Andrew's School in Middletown, Delaware.



If it's frigid outside and students at Berwick Academy in South Berwick, Maine, are looking for a bit of nature, they can seek out one of the indoor living walls on campus teeming with plant life. Instead of participating in traditional sports, they can take yoga as part of their physical education coursework or attend a fitness class after school. The preschool-grade 12 school also has a test kitchen where students can learn about food and culture during a language course, or simply about healthy eating.

What do these amenities have in common? They are all part of a heightened focus on “wellness” in education as well as in the wider culture. Wellness is a wide tent, encompassing every aspect of a school community. To make wellness authentically part of a school community means connecting it to your school’s mission and finding ways to integrate it into the curriculum at all levels. It also means developing facilities that can accommodate a variety of wellness activities.

“One of the core values that drives our mission is a quest for balance, which fundamentally defines our sense of community,” said Jonathan Douglas, Berwick Academy’s CFO. “The choices we make — from student schedules to athletics to the arts — always keep wellness top of mind.”

## A Sense of Wholeness

What does “wellness” mean? Listen to marketing hype and it would seem that wellness can be delivered through caffeine-laced aftershave, vitamin

water or CBD-infused clothing. But wellness, as defined by the Global Wellness Institute, is “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health. ... [It] is multidimensional, [taking into account] physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, environmental” perspectives.

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For schools, pursuing wellness might mean developing curriculum and facilities that support students and faculty in making healthier choices, whether that be through thinking and reflecting, or moving and doing. A wellness program might lead to more productive learning outcomes, increased collaboration and lowered anxiety and stress levels.

Enhancing wellness could be as simple as letting in more light and fresh air. Numerous studies have shown that improved indoor air quality, increased daylight and access to nature all have a positive effect on student achievement. “Gathering spaces bathed in sunlight are important,” said Philadelphia-based architect Alan Metcalf. As is the sense of control that can come from a simple thing like windows that can be opened. “You don’t want to feel isolated indoors,” he explained. “Operable windows can make a space feel larger and will allow for the release and off-gassing of any chemicals.”

Wellness can also manifest in deeper structural issues. “You want to create spaces for interaction and that are open to each other, spaces that foster a sense of wholeness as opposed to something that silos subjects or work,” commented Ben Pell, principal at PellOverton in New York City. “Create the opportunity for students to create a space for themselves that feels right rather than proscribing the way a space is used.”

Prakash Nair has seen the negative impacts of the opposite approach, one that



St. Andrew School's Health Center, front and plan. Credit: Voith and MacTavish Architects.

## Environmental and Wellness Standards

Since 1998, the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system has provided guidance on sustainable practices. These include lower energy and water use; improved indoor air quality; enhanced health and wellness; comfort to occupants and decreased environmental burdens. LEED buildings are constructed with less waste and help occupants save on maintenance costs. According to the Center for Green Schools, there are now more than 2,000 LEED-certified K-12 schools. The U.S. Green Building Council reported that in 2019 these made up 217 million square feet of LEED certified space.

The WELL Building Standard, developed in 2014, looks at improving health and human experience through building design. It focuses on the quality of air, light, sound, water, community, movement, materials, innovation, nourishment and thermal comfort in a building.

Untitled No. 1 preschool in Santa Monica, California, is the first WELL-certified preschool in the world. "WELL picked up where LEED left off in terms of actual operations," explained founder and veteran teacher Laila Taslimi.



The kitchen at Untitled No. 1, the first WELL certified preschool in the world.  
Photo Credit: Whitney Cox

In 2017, Taslimi found a 1,500 square foot house on a 6,500 square foot lot and converted it to a school. "It was a major conversion, but not a tear down," she explained. After completing the requisite city planning process to obtain the conditional use permit to make the conversion, Taslimi hired a builder and an architect and worked with an International Well Building Institute (IWBI) consultant to design the space. The consultant taught Taslimi how to monitor systems over time. The rehab cost between \$1 million and \$2 million, including more than \$10,000 for the certification, which included consultant fees and the cost of the upgraded materials and labor.

The school has many windows with views of the natural landscape. Solar trellises provide 40% of the school's electricity. The paint chosen does not pollute indoor air quality. Surfaces are

maintained with the safest cleaning products. Most flooring is original wood, with cement tile in bathrooms. The kitchen has cocoa husk linoleum, PaperStone counters (a 100% recycled product), and recycled thin glazed brick walls. Millwork is formaldehyde free and either FSC certified or reclaimed wood.

Taslimi designed the building to expose its systems; children can see plumbing components, electrical conduit and thermal insulation behind walls, under the floor and above the ceiling through intentionally placed wire glass panels. It's "building as teacher," a term coined by the local architects at March Studio. "These views spark questions about how the building functions and stand more generally for Untitled's philosophy," Taslimi says. "School — mostly the people but also the place — exists to inspire and invite children to figure things out."

creates siloes. Before he was architect, president and CEO of Education Design International, he directed operations for school construction for New York City, where for more than a decade he oversaw \$10 billion worth of construction. The emphasis was on "cells and bells," or singular classrooms and rigid schedules. "At the end of that, we hadn't improved any educational measures," he said. "Any dollar you spend in education should ultimately benefit children. And not just in keeping them safe, warm and dry; [the facilities budget] should help with social

pathologies, teacher retention. I didn't see any of the improvements I wanted to see."

Instead, schools should be designed around "learning communities." Nair's perspective: "Why have five identical classrooms? Why not create a variety of spaces so we can all benefit in the same square footage — spaces where one child has access to multiple adults, where teachers can work with each other and become more professionally astute? And, architecturally, we're solving a space problem. There's no need for a hallway. Opening up space and taking down walls is inexpensive and can be done in a summer," he said.



The Walsh Wellness Center at Berwick Academy. Photos courtesy of the school.



## Material Choices

According to the EPA, Americans spend 90% of their time indoors — in homes, schools, workplaces, and cars — where the concentrations of some pollutants are often two to five times higher than typical outdoor concentrations. Many architects and designers are taking that into consideration as they specify materials and finishes for their projects. Elements like carpeting, cabinetry, furniture and paints all off-gas chemicals, most of which are noxious and have effects ranging from headaches and nausea to respiratory illnesses and cancers.

One resource for learning about building materials' off-gassing is [wellnesswithinyourwalls.com](http://wellnesswithinyourwalls.com).

Daniela Holt Voith, founding partner at Voith & MacTavish Architects in Philadelphia, said her firm aims to use natural materials where possible and, in other cases, materials with low volatile organic compounds (VOC), as high levels of VOC can have negative health effects. The firm also takes into account the environment. "We don't support the use of vinyl. The manufacture of vinyl is a very polluting process," explained Voith. Acoustics and lighting also enhance wellness, she said.

## Beyond the Gym

Traditionally, the "wellness" spot on a campus was the gym, but more independent schools are designing recreational facilities that accommodate much more than varsity practice. Heavy on weight rooms, the older spaces were intimidating, said architect Casey Smith, principal at Hord Coplan Macht. "Now the types of equipment and space configurations are changing, moving away from weight machines to using one's own body weight. They're created more for the common student." These newer rec facilities often include multi-purpose rooms that can provide space for meditation, yoga, a variety of cardio classes and additional swing space for sport-specific training areas.

Multi-purpose wellness spaces also go beyond physical activity. "We're designing spaces in which mental health can be discussed, where peer counselors can talk with each other, where they can teach about healthy habits in terms of eating, exercise, meditation and relaxation," Voith said. Some schools are co-locating counseling suites within athletic facilities and while others include them in the student center — rather than near the infirmary. "It's making counseling more mainstream. It's more expected that everybody will need to talk with someone at some point," explained Voith.

## Centering Wellness

Founded in 1791, Berwick Academy's mission "promotes virtue and useful knowledge among the rising generations," said Douglas. "While believing in academic excellence and expecting students to strive to be their best in all aspects of school life, we also encourage students to lead a balanced life through discovery, self-reflection and growth."

About 10 years ago, a committee began looking into wellness programs, and one committee member, a trustee, was particularly interested in finding a space where students could practice yoga and mindfulness. She made a large donation to refurbish two rundown buildings on the edge of campus to create a wellness center. "We were happy to do something purposeful that was in line with our core values that date back to the 18th century," said Kim Kryder, the upper school counselor and director of wellness.

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Three years later, the Walsh Wellness Center opened. One building has a yoga studio and a test kitchen. The other building houses reception, the school nurse, a room for nursing mothers, tutoring classrooms, and wellness staff offices. Each building also has a living wall that provides greenery in a vertical planter system. Grades five through seven take wellness classes, which cover "physical, social and mental/emotional health and how all three of these things are important [as well as] traditional health classes, physical health, nutrition, drugs and alcohol, how to manage digital lives," said Kryder. Yoga is a requirement for those in the lower school.

Refurbishing the buildings cost about \$1.43 million, which came through donations. Additional costs include adding a director of wellness position, which didn't exist before, and about \$3,000 a year in maintenance for the living walls, Douglas says. "Beyond that, the upkeep of the building is fairly similar to the rest of



The new student center at the Bryn Mawr School. Photo courtesy of the school.

the campus without any other unique or special expenses."

The Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, Maryland, recently completed a student center with an emphasis on wellness. The 683-student preschool-grade 12 all-girls day school began construction in February 2019, and the center opened in August. The \$11.7 million project was funded by donations, debt and school equity (board designated funds).

A strategic plan adopted by the school's board of trustees in 2016 made it a priority "that students feel supported and nourished — by food, community and their co-curricular interests," said Sharon Wolford, assistant head of school for finance and administration. The new center is "the physical manifestation" that helps achieve the school's priorities, she explained. "It's the space where we can support, nourish and care for the whole girl, for the whole day and where students, parents, faculty and alumnae can feel connected to one another and enjoy their time on campus."

The center added 30,000 square feet of new and refreshed dining areas, common spaces, fitness and changing areas, theater improvements, an air-conditioned gym and outdoor seating. Food management staffing increased slightly to support increased use of dining facilities, Wolford

reported. And, while she says she can't tie enrollment directly to the project, "we did receive a record number of applications during our season of construction and heard frequently from families about the excitement and positive buzz." **N**



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