



DEJONG

CASE STUDY

Mason Early Childhood Center
State-of-the-Art Early Childhood Center Opens in Mason, Ohio

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The Objective

The Mason City School District, located 25 miles north of Cincinnati, is one of the fastest growing districts in Ohio. In fall 2003, DeJONG facilitated community meetings to update the district's facility master plan. The goal was to address the district's future facility needs. What resulted was the development of the new Mason Early Childhood Center (MECC).

The Strategy

The planning process began when DeJONG facilitated community meetings to address overcrowding in the district's elementary schools. The community indicated a preference to build a new early childhood center that would pull preschool, kindergarten and Grade 1 students out of their current facilities and place them together in an environment specifically created to accommodate small children's educational needs. An educational specifications committee, composed of teachers, parents, administrators, and support staff, met at the end of 2003 to plan and organize the new center. The committee developed the following guiding principals:

1. The new early childhood center will be the first opportunity for many parents in the district to experience Mason City Schools.
 - The building should be warm and welcoming to parents of young children and not feel "institutional."
 - The atmosphere should be family-friendly and include visual identification for non-readers and color-coding for easy way-finding.
 - All students, parents, and community members with special needs should have easy access throughout.
2. The facility should be built and sized for the younger student.
 - Structures should be eye-level for small learners.
 - Designs should keep developmental needs of young children in mind.
 - It should be flexible to accommodate individual needs of students.
 - Common areas should intermingle children so they experience a sense of community.
 - Distances between special areas and regular classrooms should be appropriate for the very young student moving throughout the building.
 - Space should be divided for separate grade levels.
3. Outside spaces should be appropriate for younger children, including:
 - Separate playgrounds to meet the needs of each individual grade (PreK, K, and Grade 1).
 - Halls should be wider and wings/pods should be shorter.

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4. Consider the importance for teachers to remain connected.
 - The building design should not divide the staff and children into isolated groups.
 - Provide gathering spaces for teachers to be social, as well as adequate work space.
5. Design a flexible facility to accommodate future needs of the district.
 - Green spaces with lots of natural lighting.
 - Flexibility for community use.
6. Exterior facility guidelines should include:
 - Adequate parking, car, and bus drop-off areas separated from each other and adjacent to a “holding area.”
 - Bicycle trails, courts, sheltered areas, and outdoor labs.
 - Security cameras and lighting.
7. Interior facility guidelines should include:
 - Restrooms with open, visible hand washing centers.
 - Cases for display of artwork and awards.
 - Lots of windows (natural light) with blinds within them to block light.
 - Elevator, centralized stairway, and stairway to each wing.
 - Walking lines on floors.
 - Restrooms in classrooms; adult restrooms near office and lounge.
 - Speaker intercoms throughout.
 - Soundproofing for music rooms.
 - Built-in storage.

The Challenge of Size

The most significant challenge was the size and the scope of the project. The Mason City School District is only 25 square miles with intense development. Typically, when creating a project like this, we consider early childhood centers housing 200-300 students or maybe even a center for 600 students. However, based on the limited geographical size of the community and the limited sites available, the project had to be planned and designed to accommodate more than 1,200 students. Creating a large school in a non-institutional manner initially seemed like an oxymoron.

Fortunately, in the past 15 years the district has been very successful in building large elementary, middle and high schools (contrary to current research on school size). They accomplish this by creating smaller learning environments within larger schools and choices for staff, parents and students within the schools. These school projects are some of the most visited schools in the country. The design, along with curriculum and staff development, has been major contributors to the success.

To meet the challenges associated with enrollment size, the building was organized into four classroom pods for groupings of 50-100 students. Multiple drop-off and entry areas were created, as were multiple outdoor

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playgrounds. Special attention was paid to interior color selection – all focused on creating a sense of scale and community for younger children.

The Results

The MECC opened on September 6, 2006. During the 2006-2007 school year, it served approximately 1,900 students in 13 half-day preschool sessions, 36 half-day kindergarten sessions, and 33 sections of Grade 1.

The purpose of MECC's preschool is to provide programming for children with identified special needs who qualify for center-based services. The program also enrolls typically developing children, ages 3-5, from the community. These children are selected through a lottery system and are assessed a monthly tuition fee. The preschool sessions are mixed-age groupings of 12 children, seven of whom have identified special needs. Programming provides opportunities for children to learn through play within a planned learning environment.

Dr. Kevin Bright, Superintendent of Mason City Schools, said DeJONG's educational planning expertise, along with design skills by the architecture firm Voorhis, Slone, Welsh & Crossland, have helped the district creatively and innovatively house 10,400 students in six buildings.

"They continue to come up with creative concepts, such as 300-student pods that become learning communities," he said. "In addition, DeJong's student enrollment projections and forecasts have helped us stay ahead of the growth curve. Even though we've had an average of 622 new students per year for nine years, we've never had to add a modular classroom unit."

DeJONG continues its decade long relationship with Mason City Schools to ensure all facilities provide ideal learning and teaching environments.

William S. DeJong, Ph.D., REFP, is CEO of DeJONG, one of the country's foremost educational facility planning firms. Dr. DeJong is a member of the National School Boards Foundation, was president and assistant executive director of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI), and was the executive director of the National Community Education Association (NCEA). He co-founded Schools for the Children of the World and has taught School Planning and Design at Harvard University for the past 12 years.