

COMMON HALL



SETTING THE TONE...

Think of the schools you know best. The ones you've attended, the ones you've worked at. Now, picture entering the main entrances of those schools. What greets you? What is at the heart of the main school building?

Corridors? A reception area where a parent might be sitting? Teachers walking past a photo or two of the school? Is it a place where students are welcome? How might it make them feel?

We've asked teachers across Italy and around the world these questions and we found that most school entrances set the tone of a place where children and adolescents would not want to be.

Some entry corridors or rooms are just pragmatic and unwelcoming afterthoughts, as if everyone is being hustled into a classroom or office. Others are more smartly decorated but have the detached atmosphere of the reception area of a corporate headquarters.

There is another option. It's called the 'Common Hall' and it's an idea built on both research and practice. It's in operation in the schools operated by the NGO Still I Rise across the world. Common Halls are keystones of a more radical, homely form of education.

We invite you with this short guide to learn more of the Common Hall concept and consider how it could be brought into the schools you work in.

Repurposing one room in your school will not single-handedly raise well-being through the roof, but it could just be the starting point of the transformation of your school's culture which you've been looking for.

If you have questions about the Common Hall or our wider approach, do reach out to info@stillirisengo.org



"The Common Hall is fun! Sometimes I do arts and crafts there, sometimes I just talk to my friends on the sofas."

- Brian, student.



THE COMMON HALL

The Common Hall is the first room students, staff and school visitors enter when they arrive at a school. At Still I Rise, we believe the whole school should be a second home for our students, and so the Common Hall starts this off. It is a space which feels like you're entering a home.

It is comfortable, beautiful and welcoming to people of all ages. It is not just a space to pass through, but a place to spend quality time in: to relax, to chat, to study, to research, to play, to learn, to share.

Schools which have implemented the Common Hall have enjoyed a multitude of benefits including increased student well-being, ingrained academic habits and deeper student-teacher relationships.

In this quick guide you'll find:

- The Student Well-being Crisis and how school space redesigns are proving an effective response
- The ethos of School as Home
- The features and benefits of the Common Hall
- Examples of how the Common Hall is put into practice



THE WELL-BEING CRISIS

Student well-being is in a poor state. 40% of European teens report feeling low, nervous and experience psychosomatic symptoms more than once a week (European Commission, 2020). The World Health Organization found that mental health problems are rising across the continent (2020). And Italian students actually express higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety than the OECD average (OECD, 2018).

This may be due to a variety of factors including:

- Study load and demands for high performance in tests.
- Judgment from teachers and parents, and little time children have to devote to their passions and hobbies.
- The fragility of the bonds with teachers and parents who should act as guides.
- The fast pace of modern life that can mentally and physically 'drain' pupils, teachers and parents.

There are a multitude of recommended approaches to address the well-being crisis which can and should be taken. One response which is consistently ignored though may just be one of the most effective: the physical space students inhabit at school.

Research has shown that by paying more attention to the architectural structure of our schools, the level of discomfort of students and teachers is reduced, but more importantly studies have shown that the level of learning, enthusiasm and motivation increases significantly in flexible environments.

In Still I Rise's own schools, we have noted that the approach taken of providing a home-like atmosphere, exemplified in the Common Halls, reaps rewards. In 2023 we anonymously surveyed our students aged 11 to 14. 94% reported feeling connected to the adults in their school, 90% feel 'hopeful' and 87% are at least generally 'happy' in their lives. This is against a backdrop of extreme poverty and associated abuse and stressors which research has widely indicated would be expected to increase mental health strain (Energy Sources, 2020; Bethel University 2022).

SCHOOL SPACES IMPROVING STUDENT WELL-BEING

THE CASE STUDY OF THE SCHOOL ALDO MORO IN PONTICELLI, NAPLES, ITALY

The school in Naples decided to revolutionize its setting to make the students happier. They have done that not only by creating larger and better equipped classrooms, but also with the introduction of an 'emotion room'. A place where anxiety and stress can be released, where students are supported and guided to give them different opportunities. In this way, school drop-out is countered and prevented as the school becomes a safer place where feelings are understood and managed properly. School here becomes a place where students realize that they are valued.

THE CASE STUDY OF THE SAINT-ANDRÉ SAINTE-MARIE SCHOOL, SAINT-ANDRÉ DE CUBZAC, FRANCE

The school has designed a Learning Resource Center, a common space for both students and staff. Positioned in the heart of the school, it is a place to live, work and exchange knowledge. The interior is inspired by office activity-based designs, allowing the students to work alone, in pairs or in groups. The space is particularly designed for thinking, reading, learning, relaxing, meeting in small groups and seeking information on all types of media.

Italian Ministerial Guidelines

The new guidelines set in 2013 finally propose and envisage modular spaces, easily reconfigurable and capable of responding to ever-changing educational contexts, and flexible environments, functional to even the most advanced teaching and learning systems. In fact, if teaching methodologies are changed, overcoming the purely frontal approach, the construction of school buildings and classrooms will also have to respond to appropriate architectural parameters and criteria, and the organisation of space will also have to be consistent.

Still I Rise Approach

We have found that a well designed centrally accessible collaborative space for students and educators provides a benefit to the well-being of the entire student body. The creation and use of a common hall also provides a cost-effective initial shift toward flexible and responsive school spaces, demonstrating the concept to educational leadership, students, and teachers.

THE ETHOS OF THE COMMON HALL: SCHOOL AS HOME

Still I Rise has four educational pillars that form the foundation of our international and emergency response schools. These pillars are that the school is a home, our teachers are mentors, we are student centered, and we apply global thinking. School as Home is the pillar on which the Common Hall is designed.

Students spend so much of their young lives at a school, and it should therefore be set up with the love and care it deserves. Fundamentally, our schools should be somewhere its students are excited to be and wish they could stay longer.

Beauty is key to creating a homely atmosphere, yet it is almost universally underrated in school design. Even countries which highly value beauty in most aspects of their culture and lives tend to ignore its benefits when they design a school. Italy, sadly, included.

Yet the better a school looks, the more likely we are to feel good being there. And the better we feel, the better our disposition to learn and thrive.

Still I Rise Common Halls are welcoming, comfortable and beautifully designed in a modern way with modular seating, ventilation and heating as required, good lighting and a blend of furniture materials including natural wood. Local decorations are found throughout, from the walls to the cushions.

These are indispensable components in the design and realization of places of learning and concentration. Sociological and pedagogical research has established that the learning environment has an 80% influence on pupils' performance and teachers' motivation.

A Common Hall's purpose is to recenter children in a location that feels comfortable and safe. Students have the opportunity to relax and connect with each other or simply reflect on their day. The space is inviting and provides a variety of seating spaces for interactions between people- students or adults. It is perfect as a neutral location to play a board game or read a book. Teachers might talk about progress with a student, eye to eye and without an imposing desk between them.



The Common Hall embraces the idea of connected growth with plants and natural materials throughout. Carpets and wall decorations bring local art and design into the space. If possible, the Common Hall has clear glass doors and easy visibility to the outer hallway providing easy visualization of who is inside.

The Common Hall provides opportunities for groups to meet or for individuals to study in a more relaxed atmosphere than they might experience in their usual learning spaces. Common aspects include:

01**CENTRAL LOCATION**

Learning can spill over from the classroom

02**COLLABORATION**

Classwork and recreational activities done together

03**COMFORTABLE**

Variety of seating options allow students to focus in a relaxed posture suitable to them

04**TRUST**

Students independently use the space

05**CREATIVE**

Games, books, technology, and art supplies are available

06**VIBRANT**

Good lighting and growing plants combined with regular use by teachers and students

PEDAGOGICAL BENEFIT

How can the Common Hall be incorporated into the daily schedule of a school? And what does it look like to ensure that there are adult monitors as well as regular opportunities for the students to use the space?

We want to give you a snapshot of how the Common Hall is utilized within Still I Rise Nairobi International School. Since 2020, this school has been growing into the School as Home pillar with its beautiful Common Hall.



NAIROBI: COMMON HALL SCHEDULE

Time	Common Hall Activities	Who supervises?
MONDAYS-FRIDAYS		
7am to 8am	Solo quiet reading, group storytelling, research on books and laptops, homework.	One teacher
Breakfast time	Class tasks, chatting, reading, chilled music played out external speakers, checking school timetable on tv	Cleaners
During Clubs, Homeroom and lessons	Checking school timetable on tv, generally empty (used as waiting space for interviewees & visiting parents etc)	No supervision required
5 minute transitions	Timetable viewing	No supervision required
15 minute break	Chatting, homeroom points rewarded by filling 'jars' with teacher supervision, research and notetaking on ipads and books.	Office-based staff member
Lunch	Research and notetaking on ipads and books, Board games, reading, teacher-student interaction, chatting, homework	One teacher
Jimarishe (A flexible period for self-chosen constructive activity)	Spill-out readers from library, group storytelling, thematic corner creation, students tidying Common Hall and watering plants, footage shown on tv of school highlights and notices of upcoming events	Library-based staff member
5pm to 6pm	Board games, reading, teacher-student interaction, chatting, homework, lively music played out external speakers, students tidying Common Hall, footage shown on tv of school highlights and notices of upcoming events	One teacher
SATURDAYS		
11am - 1pm	Spill-out readers from library, thematic corner creation, group storytelling. Footage shown on tv of school highlights and notices of upcoming events	One teacher
Lunch	Videos of students' choice watched together while supervised	One teacher
SPECIAL OCCASIONS		
	Karaoke, charades & other one-off games and activities	Teachers

YOUR COMMON HALL CHECKLIST



Take a Peek! Scan this QR code for a view of a Common Hall in action!

If you're inspired to repurpose your school's entrance space or any other room as a Common Hall, use this checklist as a starting point and customize it according to your team's desires and goals.

And don't forget to reach out to us if you're thinking of doing so - we'd love to listen to you and help you!
schools@stillirisengo.org

- Variety of comfortable seating options
- Warm lighting
- Big windows and, where feasible, glass walls
- Low tables that allow for collaboration
- Carpets and rugs to create warmth
- Art supplies, newspapers, board games, books
- Wall artwork and fabrics of local origin
- Technology is available yet doesn't dominate
- Indoor plants bring life and freshness
- Fresh fruits and filter water freely available
- Students have easy regular access
- Sufficient ventilation and air flow
- Natural materials are embraced in design



REFERENCES

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