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BREAKING THE MOLD: When Classrooms Become as Dynamic as Their Students

By Amy Uelmen and Kate Larson

Educators know that factors such as a strong curriculum, teacher connections, and collective efficacy drive student success. But one often overlooked factor is the classroom environment's impact on learning. The classroom environment can have a positive impact on behavior, discussion, deliberate practice, intervention, space, problem-solving teaching, creativity programs, and so much more! The shift from traditional rows of desks to dynamic, responsive environments that honor how students learn best isn't just about furniture — it's about reimagining what education can look like when we prioritize student agency, comfort, and diverse learning needs.



EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM DESIGN: MODULAR FURNITURE IS KEY

The World Economic Forum's [Future of Jobs Report 2025](#) emphasizes the importance of analytical thinking, curiosity, creativity, and flexibility. To help students develop these essential skills, educators must create classroom environments that support varied learning activities through thoughtful furniture selection, technology integration, and visual design. Students need flexible classrooms with multiple learning zones that can be adapted as needed. If the space doesn't support multiple zones set up at the same time, then moveable furniture allows teachers to quickly shift the space to support different learning activities and seating options.

The key lies in modular, multipurpose furniture that is mobile, stackable, and easily reconfigured. Imagine a fourth-grade classroom where students begin their day choosing seats that work for them — one child selects a stool at a tall table to swing their legs, while another settles into a cozy beanbag chair. Throughout the day, wedge-shaped desks roll into clusters for math groups and moveable partitions create quiet reading spaces. During science experiments, desks and tables are pushed against walls to make room for rolling supply carts. The entire room transforms to support different learning activities.

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Pulaski's Flexible Classroom Success Story

BACKGROUND

To help support their students, the Pulaski Community School District in Wisconsin piloted flexible classroom designs, and the data tells a compelling story. Students reported better concentration, improved listening skills, and enhanced communication when given choice and voice in their seating arrangements. Simply allowing students to select their seating based on their needs and the specific learning activity created immediate benefits for focus and engagement.

RESULTS

86%

average improvement in concentration, listening, and communication across all grades*

*Grade levels surveyed: Grades 2, 5, High School

100%

grade 5 classroom engagement*

*Students liked being in their classroom, felt creative in their classroom, and were able to find seating that fit their learning style every day and most days.

Teachers also experienced a transformation in their workspaces because they could quickly reconfigure to match learning activities. Whether students needed individual focus time, small-group collaboration, or whole-class discussion, teachers could move freely throughout the room and teach from anywhere — they became true facilitators of learning.

“It’s really made a change for me as a teacher because now instead of always directing the learning, I become a facilitator of learning. Students are getting information and then helping one another and teaching one another. Students demonstrated a deeper learning of the content.”

— Mr. O., High School Teacher

INSIGHT

The benefits expressed by students and teachers in teaching and learning in an active, flexible classroom helped improve skills for learning in the classroom, but also in preparation for the workplace and life.

INCLUSION THROUGH DESIGN: BENEFITS EVERY STUDENT

The most powerful aspect of flexible classrooms is their inherently inclusive nature. Design features intended to support students with diverse learning needs — noise-reducing materials, ADA-compliant furniture, and movement-friendly seating — benefit all learners. Marie Tate, occupational therapist at Prospect Elementary School in Clarendon Hills, Illinois, observed this inclusivity in action.

According to Tate, ever since fifth-grade classrooms at Prospect Elementary School embraced flexible seating, neurodivergent students feel fully integrated throughout the day. When inclusive furniture integrates seamlessly into the classroom, it allows students with disabilities to experience the same sense of achievement as their peers. A classroom that adapts to the needs of its most sensitive students is one that can also adjust to meet the needs of its fellow learners.

STUDENT VOICE AS THE FOUNDATION: FURNITURE AND BEYOND

Tom Deris, a veteran elementary educator in a Minneapolis suburb, embodies the collaborative approach that makes flexible spaces truly effective. Each year, he adds one new type of seating to his eclectic collection — ball chairs, wheeled tables, wobble stools, office chairs, and scoop rockers — alongside lap desks, standing stations, and traditional chairs. But furniture alone doesn't create transformation. Deris introduces students to rules and expectations, lets them explore all options, then asks them to help completely redesign the classroom layout. Having student input is important to him; he wants them to want to come to school and learn in a space that reflects them. Students collaborate to write rules for each piece of furniture and choose monthly work spots for different activities. Deris' goal is always to create a space that's student-centered, comfortable, and feels like home.

... flexible classrooms don't just help students learn better — they help students become better learners.



THE PATH FORWARD: ACTIVE, FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS

The flexible classroom advantage extends far beyond comfort and engagement. Flexible learning environments prepare students for a world that increasingly values creativity, curiosity, and adaptability. When students learn to assess their needs, choose appropriate tools, and shape their own learning environment, they develop metacognitive skills that serve them throughout their lives.

As more schools embrace this transformation, the evidence continues to mount: flexible classrooms don't just help students learn better — they help students become better learners. In a world where the only constant is change, perhaps the greatest gift we can give our students is the knowledge that their environment can adapt to serve their growth, rather than constraining it. ☀️

St. Vrain Valley's Systematic Approach to Flexible Learning

BACKGROUND

Colorado's St. Vrain Valley Schools provides a powerful example of systematic change. Rather than simply purchasing new furniture, the district offered a course on research-based practices for creating flexible classrooms and accommodating different learning styles. Educators studied sensory integration and [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#).

RESULTS

The results were immediate and measurable. Emily Scott, Director of Special Education, reported that both students and teachers in redesigned rooms felt more engaged in learning. Teachers simplified wall displays to reduce visual noise, created quiet spaces for students needing sensory breaks, and experimented with student choice in seating during lessons.

