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SEPTEMBER 2024



Effective Learning Spaces

LIVE IT, LEARN IT



I talk openly and often about my older son's autism diagnosis.

There are some who would say that's wrong of me to do so—that it's not my diagnosis to share.

While that might be true, what I always circle back to is by keeping this too close to our chest, it sends Sebastian and others the message that this is something to hide, or be ashamed of.

I'll be damned if that's what I teach him.

We are very intentional about letting both our children know, in no uncertain terms, that they need to be proud of their whole selves, not just parts of it. And like it or not, autism is a big part of who Seb is.

So we address it, head on, which I believe helps spread acceptance and awareness—just like many of those featured in this issue are also doing. These professionals are facing the challenges that come along with creating classrooms that are equitable with openness and honesty, taking *all* learners' needs into consideration—which is no easy task for designers and educators alike.

Thankfully, in this day and age we are all listening to each other much more actively, as you'll see in our feature "A Lesson in Equity" on page 28. We interviewed teachers with Silverwood School in Poulsbo, WA who reported that the team at Rice Fergus Miller truly heard and translated their needs into a variety of new spaces for their students. And talk about new rules of engagement: find out how The Collaborative has reenergized the student body of Rossford Schools in Rossford, OH, with a multi-use complex featuring an Esports arena and a fieldhouse used in part for drone racing (see page 34, and yes, you heard that right.)

We've also found that flexible seating programs are driving so many of today's decisions when it comes to classroom design. We dive into a couple of them with HON and collaborators Qdesign and Whitney Architects on how they created their Confetti and Tangram lines (page 46.)

What collections like this promote most importantly is movement and mobility—the one thing both teachers and students are now in need of more than ever to promote an optimal learning experience for all.

Just ask Seb, who can be seen here with his brother Gino, rockin' on their new Barrel Slant chairs, so kindly sent to them by market experts Artcobell. It found a perfect new home in his self-contained classroom, where he puts it to very good use, says his teacher.



It's proof of the most important lesson from this education issue: given the right tools, all learners can succeed.

We do hope you enjoy reading through it. It's chock full of new solutions and ideas to create some truly dynamite learning experiences. Let me know what it inspires in *your* designs!

AnnMarie Martin



FEATURE

A LESSON IN EQUITY



Every student needs a different set of tools to succeed. Here's how the classrooms of tomorrow should be equipping them.

BY ANNMARIE MARTIN

Our post-pandemic world has left today's educators faced with more challenges than ever before.

School distress and avoidance mixed with chronic absenteeism due to everything from economic status to neurological disabilities and their related behavior disorders are plaguing their students in record numbers, leaving

teachers holding the bag when it comes to running their classroom in a way that works for everyone. And the possibilities for outfitting that learning space in order to do so are beholden to the politics behind public vs. private settings within a district, as well as their urban, rural,w or suburban locations.

"I work with designers and our dealer network to make sure they're asking those questions when working with their schools: What are the population's needs? Are we talking about students in a hybrid program? Mainstreamed? Self-contained?" said Patricia Cadigan, chief development officer for Artcobell, a furniture manufacturer that exclusively serves and supports K-12 educational environments.

Cadigan came out of the trenches, with a resume that reads former teacher, elementary, middle, and high school principal, as well as school administrator. And one thing she has come to know for sure is that helping children with the most extreme needs helps every child in the classroom. "Then we don't always have the need to categorize or pigeonhole."

So no matter the student's profile or neurotype, there are so many opportunities to make sure all feel safe enough to learn to their fullest potential—and more often than not, they are hiding right within the classroom itself.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

While quiet corners or rooms and "time out" touchpoints can still have a role to play, teachers have begun to shift their mindset from the "why can't you" attitude those spaces promote to the "how can we" approach.

"Instead of spotlighting the children who are having a hard time focusing, we try to ask ourselves what this behavior is communicating to us and how can we change the environment to better respond to it," explained Ashley McComas, lead teacher 5th/6th grades at Silverwood School, a registered 501(c)(3) in Poulsbo, WA. This enables



See a variety of flexible seating arrangements from Artcobell throughout this feature including NXT MOV chairs and tables, as well as FLOT featured here, great for floor activation at just a 6 in. height.

students to eventually begin to self-advocate for what they need:

PROBLEM: "It's too bright in here for me."
SOLUTION: Installing dimmers and lighting/shading controls; bringing in lamps; access to natural light through elevated windows that offer a connection to the outdoors, but not views of people and cars that can distract.

PROBLEM: "It's too loud in here for me."
SOLUTION: Integrate decibel monitoring; apply acoustical ceiling tiles and treatments; smart placement of HVAC; proper door gasketing.

PROBLEM: "This chair is too hard for me."
SOLUTION: Flexibility of seating options from rocking to cantilever chairs, soft seating, wobble stools or chair accessories such as exercise bands for feet; options to sit on the floor or lower to the ground.

Once children feel empowered with the answers above, they take ownership of their space and by

extension their learning, creating micro-environments that work for them and keep them in the classroom rather than isolated elsewhere.

"They begin to take pride in it," explained Cadigan. She cites a 2015 study called the HEAD (Holistic Evidence and Design) Project from the University of Salford Manchester as a heavy influence on architects and designers of education spaces today, as well as on her own professional development and training she provides teachers on how to use Artcobell furniture to help students achieve their learning goals.

The HEAD Project provides useful and easily digestible checklists for both designers and teachers as clients and users, on the findings of its three areas of research, one being individualization (ownership and flexibility). The other two are stimulation (appropriate level of), and naturalness (light, temperature, and air quality.)

These include but are not limited to:

Individualization

Flexibility

- A more complex floor plan provides options for activity areas for younger children.
- A larger area, with a simpler shape, is appropriate/more flexible for older children.

Stimulation

Color

- Light walls with a feature wall, highlighted in a brighter color, create an appropriate level of stimulation.

Naturalness

Air quality

- A typical classroom with thirty pupils will normally need active ventilation within a 1-hour lesson. Avoiding obstructing access to the window openings is important.

Sound

- Rubber feet on movable furniture can buffer any noise generated, if maintained.
- Small, carpeted areas can make a positive difference to noise attenuation.

Research like this is finally making its way to the forefront, albeit overdue. So now that we've got some tools laid out in front of us, how do you choose the right ones, and more importantly how to put them together? Let's investigate the best way to decide what goes in and what goes out.

BODIES IN MOTION

Today's learning space should be based off a symbiotic relationship between teacher and student that is constantly evolving, morphing, and growing, and driven in part by the reality of those elements out of its control. Once you've identified what those are,



building your toolkit becomes more intuitive.

The hypotheses tested in The Head Project include a number of these factors:

- Is there access to nature?
- What's the building's orientation when it comes to both glazing and shading control?
- Is there breakout and storage space attached to the classroom?
- What's the breadth and color of available wall space?

One element that can almost always be relied upon despite any of the above and beyond, is the prioritization of movement.

"Even as adults we have a hard time sitting and need to get up and move," said McComas. "The corporate world has met that need first and now it's trickling down into education."

Becky Rice, lead teacher for 3rd/4th grades at Silverwood School chose wheeled desks for her classroom, so on any given day they can be placed

into the necessary configurations.

"I wanted kids to be able to take their desks outside; or in the morning we're in pods of three and in the afternoon we're in pods of six; one day we're doing STEM activities and need to clear all of the desks to get the full floor space. I need that. If you're only giving me this tiny classroom, I need the ability to maximize the possibilities," she said.

"There's so many more options for kids to have autonomy over their seating







arrangements today," said Becky Wall, associate principal at Rice Fergus Miller, the architecture and design firm developing a variety of new spaces for Silverwood. "Whether that's with a sit-to-stand desk, or the ability to move a desk so they can work on their own and not be distracted by their peers. I'm seeing educators try to create moments for students to do what they need to do."

And as Cadigan stated earlier, once they are given the opportunity to choose for themselves and get the positive reinforcement to affirm it, they can learn how to self-regulate or de-escalate themselves right in the classroom, rather than needing assistance to do so. She also mentors schools on making sure students who have become reliant on these options for their success still have access to them as they transition from self-contained or inclusion classrooms into general education ones.

When it comes to such future planning, here are a few more things to keep in mind.

WISH LISTS

The Silverwood School is located on a 17-acre wooded campus where outdoor learning is a critical component of their program. But such immediate, expansive access to nature is a luxury not afforded to all.

"A kid in a city school can't just go outside if they need to de-escalate," Wall pointed out. "For children who elope it is also a safety issue."

So even Rice and McComas identified covered products and coverings for smaller outdoor spaces like an adjacent courtyard or rooftop, as also providing a pathway towards better equity in classrooms. Some students sadly can't afford a proper winter coat, let alone sturdy rain gear.

Thankfully, today's manufacturers are developing solutions that don't require remodels or extensive construction to get kids outdoors.

"Even prior to the pandemic, we were working with designers to explore ways to activate and

enhance outdoor spaces in educational facilities," explained Susan Claus, director of marketing for Ghent. "Through these collaborations, we learned how outdoor spaces offer valuable opportunities for experiential learning. It enables students to not just engage with nature but also explore concepts in real-world contexts."



Schools are searching for new ways to utilize smaller, less conspicuous outdoor areas such as this courtyard, and covered products like Ghent's Preserve (below) help teachers take full advantage of them.

When you're headed back indoors though, Wall said that educators will point toward air temperature and acoustics as the areas where their most fundamental (and profound) of needs lie.

"Don't address it with one air control for a whole wing or pod, because that's a nightmare. Give teachers the ability to at least control their own classroom," she said. Comfort levels have a broad range when it comes to temperature, so if given that ability, they should be able to easily meet them.

Finally, proper collaboration between designers and educators in helping craft all elements of these spaces should be on everyone's priority list.

"Being a neurodivergent kid who went through these learning environments and now being on the other side as an adult designing them, I can tell you we need to make sure we are being honest with ourselves and educators on what they are able to implement realistically, so they can be as successful as possible," Wall said. She finds most teachers more than willing to have these conversations, jumping at any opportunity to fix a problem for their students.



"Because the classroom is just one step toward helping kids be more successful at school," explained McComas. "Our education system needs an overhaul, but the classroom is the first hurdle. If they're in a space they just aren't comfortable in, it doesn't matter if you show up or not. If you can't get the learning done, then it helps them in no way."