

Active 8th Graders

Hall Middle School's eighth grade embraces active learning

“I’ve talked to many people from others schools and districts, and it’s tough for people to get off the ground with active learning,” says Valerie Pitts, superintendent of the Larkspur-Corte Madera school district in northern California.

“They might buy the furniture but don’t have the facility, or they don’t want to spend a lot of money on a facility if teachers aren’t ready for active learning.”

A renovation of one of her district’s schools, Hall Middle, helped propel the administration and faculty to embrace active learning.

“It’s common for faculty to be at a different stage of readiness for active learning. We had a couple of teachers who were ready, eager, and enthusiastic, well positioned to be supported by the learning suite and to utilize the Steelcase furniture.”

SO LONG TRADITIONAL CLASSROOMS

Pitts says Hall Middle School went from a traditional layout —“big hallways with lockers on either side, and classrooms down either side”— to learning suites. A suite has two learning spaces, both of which accommodate up to 32 students (though their average is 28) and a small breakout space for each class.

Having mobile furniture in the active learning space was the biggest benefit for the class, says instructor James Fester.

The Node school chair is mobile and flexible. It’s designed for quick, easy transitions from one teaching mode to the next, unlike traditional school desks and chairs.

“To be able to reconfigure in the middle of a lesson is huge. You can reconfigure a room of hard to move furniture, but you have to do it at the beginning of the day, you have to lift and grunt and all that.

“Mobile furniture allows us to optimize our setting within each lesson, so we can do pair work, group work, whatever fits the learning, and it becomes that much more effective.”

Mobile furniture enables the teacher to incorporate various teaching modes in each lesson. Students can go from lecture mode with desks in rows to small group collaboration mode in a matter of minutes.

In one lesson, for example, students role played individuals from history and that made the lesson come alive. “They started in four-person groups, then moved into small meeting discussions, and finally into theater mode for a mock trial.”

“Well-designed, functional furniture raises your game, and gives you a totally better way to do things.”

Node chairs inspire classroom mobility. They also provide a psychological boost, says Pitts. “The chairs are very adult like. Students really like them. The eighth graders had a new sense of pride and were really eager to be in the learning suites. That was really cool to watch: kids being excited, kids feeling like they had been given something special, respected. I think it helped really connect the kids to their learning much more.

“In fact, when I would walk in, just as an observer, I never, ever saw kids off task in those rooms. That’s partly because the teachers were so great, but I think it also is the result of a combination of things that you leverage to engage students.”

“I never, ever saw kids off task in the active learning rooms.”

Her observations are borne out by a survey of students in several classes who used the Steelcase active learning classroom.

As a teacher, Fester says he always thought workplace design and furniture “were important for a business office. But this furniture completely changes the paradigm in your classroom. Well-designed, functional furniture raises your game, and gives you a totally better way to do things.”

LEARNING BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Call it active learning, inquiry-based learning, challenge-based learning, or project-based learning, “for the most part, the terms are interchangeable,” says Valerie Pitts, superintendent.

Students use the Verb whiteboards to problem solve and share their ideas with the class.

“What I like about the term ‘active learning’ is the notion that kids are not just sitting in one place, sitting still. Even if they’re working together, they are moving around and, in fact, maybe moving in and out of the classroom a lot.”

She would add “community-based” to the definition, “because it means you need the whole package, faculty instruction, space, furniture and equipment to create the best scenario for learning.”

LEARNING TO LOVE ACTIVE LEARNING

James Fester was, to say the least, apprehensive about his new eighth grade active learning classroom. “I thought, this is not the age group to try this with. Everything’s on wheels! I had visions of kids rolling across the room, doing 360s, total chaos.

Fester was apprehensive about teaching in an active learning classroom with mobile furniture, however it didn’t take long for the students to discover the freedom they have to reconfigure the classroom, making the space far more effective.

“In hindsight, it was probably only natural to feel that way.”

A teacher at Hall Middle, Fester had researched active learning as part of his prep for moving into the new Steelcase active learning classroom. “But the literature I read was about higher ed and K through 5, the old ones and the young ones. I couldn’t find much on middle school. And a lot of it was about the walls, not much about the furniture itself.”

One week into the semester, “the novelty of moving the furniture wore off. The students got over that excitement of being able to move. But in the process they’d learned they have the freedom to reconfigure the classroom. That makes it that much more effective. Distraction goes way down, and you get better results.”

For example, “once the kids got over the excitement of being able to change height with the Verb tables, they helped them be more comfortable. Especially with special learning students, the ability to go from sitting to standing, without distracting everyone, was huge. It allowed them to focus better.”

He recommends teachers new to active learning spaces keep a few things in mind:

- “Understand it’s unlike any other furniture you and your students have used before. There’s an adjustment period for both of you.”
- “Be flexible as students learn how the furniture works and moves.” Some of his students swing gently from side to side, “about twenty degrees each way, in a kind of rhythm. At first it bugged me. But as long as it’s not distracting others, it helps some students focus.”
- “Be open to thinking about different configurations to maximize what you can have students do: move from groups to pairs, to groups of four. Or move from rows to horseshoes. You can do that in the same lesson, so have a lot more freedom to use space and configure it to your advantage.”

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