

RESEARCH SUMMARY

ACADEMIC + BEHAVIORAL GAINS IN A FLEXIBLE CLASSROOM

Timber Ridge School
Northwest Suburban Special
Education Organization

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, ILLINOIS

Steelcase Education Active Learning Grant Recipient, Cycle 2

With a vision to create flexible environments that support 21st century learning for students with unique learning needs, Timber Ridge School received a Steelcase Active Learning Center (ALC) Grant to transform its middle school classroom. The school serves students with a range of social and emotional challenges that impact learning. Its ALC would need to support the school's therapeutic mission while also helping instructors adopt teaching strategies designed to foster collaboration, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation.

During the two-year grant period, the school intentionally shifted from more passive, teacher-centered experiences to more active, student-centered experiences. Those in the ALC achieved an increase in on-task and respectful behavior, a decrease in students needing to leave the classroom and higher test scores.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

At the start of the first school year in the ALC, teachers and students became acquainted with the space and worked through strategies for using the ALC well. They set boundaries for mobile seating – “no drag racing in the classroom!” And they practiced reconfiguring the classroom for different learning modes. Teachers took pictures of various configurations to help students visualize and recreate them. One teacher established a “home base” so students could easily recall and configure on cue. Early on, staff determined that rolling chairs would not work for all students – and in these cases, they selected seating that would provide degrees of movement without wheels.

Timber Ridge School staff advocate professional development and ongoing coaching to ensure that classroom furniture, tools and technology are used in ways that support desired learning modes.

CHOICE + COMFORT

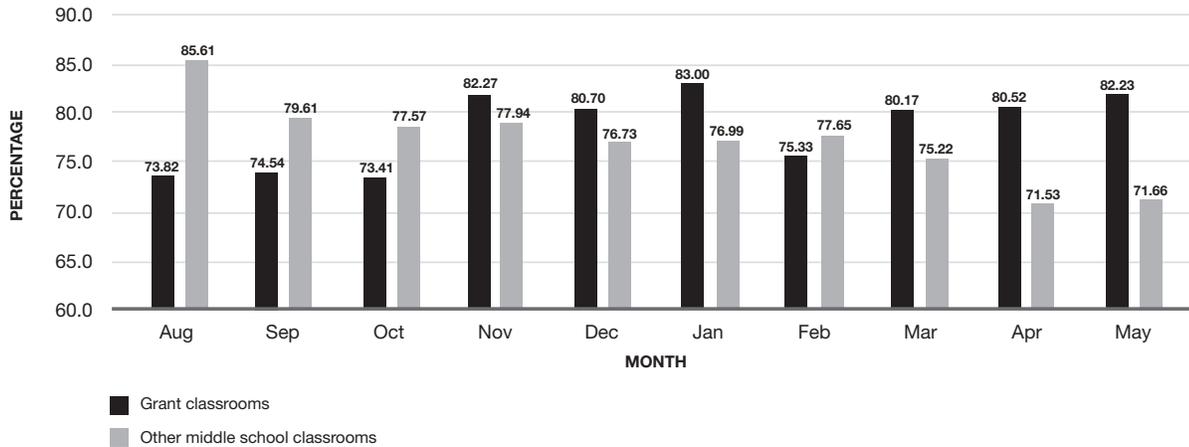
The new classroom provides extreme versatility – through mobile Verb desks and tables, mobile Node chairs and Buoy stools that promote movement. Adjustable tables support student focus at both seated and standing height and provide a custom fit for those using wheelchairs.

“I find that the biggest advantage is the flexibility – I am able to move furniture on the go while students are able to choose the seating that best meets their needs.”

Teacher, Timber Ridge School

ACTIVE LEARNING CENTER GRANTS

Average percentage of points earned per month



75%

OF THE STUDENTS SAID THE ALC HELPED THEM FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES

By intention, each room includes a variety of learning zones: a library, a quiet space with soft seating, as well as places for individual, small group and large group instruction. After the ALC had been in operation at Timber Ridge for two years, student survey results affirmed this variety. In a nearly even three-way split, 37.5% felt they learned best at their own desk, 35.7% felt they learned best in the soft seating area and 25% felt they learned best at a table working with other students.

ACADEMIC GROWTH

Students using the ALC were significantly more likely to earn more points per month in the school's level system than schoolwide averages. They also met or

surpassed their Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment goals at a higher rate. In year one, 51% of students across the school met their growth target while 61% of ALC students did so. In year two, ALC students exceeded their own MAP reading goals by 10% and their oral retell goals by 22%.

ON TASK AND IN THE CLASSROOM

In year one of the grant period, staff conducted walk-throughs to collect observational data on student engagement behaviors. In the first semester, 69% of students in the ALC classroom were observed to be on task. By second semester, walk-through staff reported 84% on task.

Teachers observed that the mobile furniture and soft seating met the sensory needs of many of their students, allowing them to stay in the classroom for longer periods of time. Analysis of removals from the classroom due to disruptive behaviors bore this out. In both years of the grant, monthly removal averages were dramatically lower for the ALC classroom than in comparison classrooms – often by 10, 20 or more instances.

ONGOING ACHIEVEMENTS

While Timber Ridge School staff acknowledges that there may be other contributing factors, they also believe the positive results in the ALC support the philosophy that flexible learning environments that accommodate the unique needs of learners also support effective teaching and learning.

With gains in multiple areas at the end of year one, the school expected

the differences between ALC and schoolwide outcomes to diminish in year two for a few reasons. They had carried active learning practices into other settings throughout the school. And they had begun exposing more students to the ALC for portions of the day through a new subject level rotation model. But students based in the ALC continued to exhibit more academic and behavioral growth than their peers.

During year two, Timber Ridge School adopted a new cross-curricular STEM program that features online, project-based learning. Staff using the ALC through this change said, “the flexible furniture from Steelcase made it easy,” because it “helps students move between group collaboration and focus work while learning – key to this applied-knowledge approach.”