



TODAY'S CLASSROOM DESIGN:

Coming Together to Create a Method for Success

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BIO

Lauren Christenson is an Associate of TMP Architecture and an integral member of the firm's Educational Interior Design and Planning group. She currently holds leadership roles for K-12 projects with Northville Public Schools, Huron Valley Schools, Novi Community Schools, and Dearborn Public Schools.

Christenson has over 8 years of experience and has dedicated her career to the design of learning spaces. She is passionate about creating innovative learning spaces that facilitate 21st century skill development. Her strengths include her ability to collaborate and engage with students and administrators, focusing on making an impact on the educational experience. Her work has resulted in flexible, fun and often colorful environments for a variety of age groups.

Education is experiencing a renaissance, reinventing what curriculum, space, and the educational experience should be. Students are asked to engage in different, deeper, richer learning experiences and to develop skills that will make them more successful in future college and employment endeavors. Although technology and curriculum are changing rapidly, our spaces look very much like they did 100 years ago. There is a visible disconnect between the activities we are undertaking in the classroom and the furniture in these rooms, which often hinders these activities from flourishing. There's a game of catch-up to be had. Let's ditch the old and bring in the new!

Educators are resourceful and have been implementing change on shoestring budgets, using grants, or MacGyver-ing their existing surroundings to create active learning environments.

Some creative solutions include:

- Transforming old milk crates into soft seating by sewing upholstered cushions to the tops
- Cutting down table legs to create a table height compatible with a student sitting low to the ground
- Using bed risers under table legs to transform a traditional student table into a standing height work surface as an option for students
- Re-purposing discarded or secondhand residential furniture as lounge seating in the classroom
- Adding affordable yoga balls as a seating alternative to support movement

These MacGyvers are the teachers who are seeking change and getting creative with the resources they have access to; all in an effort to create an environment that is flexible, allows for student choice on where they learn best, and supports an evolving curriculum.

But wait; is this newfangled active learning furniture all it's cracked up to be? The glossy magazine photos of shiny new furniture with bright colors and irregular shaped tables dazzle us. However, creating Pinterest worthy environments is not the goal. It can be detrimental to blindly invest in furniture without understanding the options available and determining the type of active learning environment that fits your space and curriculum.



Creative Use of Existing Furnishings to Promote Student Choice



Yoga balls as Alternative Seating

PEDAGOGY

There are several methods to deliver curriculum. Whether it's **Active Learning**, encouraging students to get up and move during the day; **Student Directed Learning**, where students are taking ownership of their own learning and working with their peers; **Blended or Technology Enhanced Learning**, where physical learning intersects with digital learning; **Project Based Learning**, learning by doing; or **Cross-Disciplinary Learning**, blending multiple subject matters into one project based unit; these activities and spaces are very different than a traditional classroom setting. The ultimate goal is to find the right tools and resources to support modern learning.

Modern learning environments require flexibility. Furniture that is agile, mobile, intuitive, and supports all types of learners and learning will allow multiple modalities of teaching and learning. When embarking on transforming educational spaces to active learning environments consider the following:



*Modern Learning Environment with Choice and Flexibility
Meads Mill Middle School, Northville Public Schools
TMP Architecture, Inc.*

SPACE

Active classrooms with active furniture need floor space. All of the right tools can be in place, but without adequate space, the desired outcome will suffer. Trying to cram too many pieces in a room can actually inhibit movement. Negative space, or open space, must be taken into consideration as well. While designers may not be able to accomplish the district's comprehensive wish list all in one space, classroom furniture can support most needs. A solution may include utilizing other areas that extend beyond the four walls of the classroom to satisfy those needs. For example: large group instruction, STEM Labs, makerspaces, and project rooms.

VARIETY

Does every student require the same seat and table? No. Students are diverse and have assorted needs. Allowing for variety and choice within learning spaces allows students to choose where they will learn best that day. Providing options for sitting, standing, rocking, reclining, lying down, and enabling student autonomy can tap into deeper and longer periods of engagement for students.

MULTIMODAL

Flexible furniture should be multimodal, which allows shifting from one setting to the next. Moving from lecture, to group work, to heads down individual tasks can be accomplished with the right set of tools. Tables and chairs with casters can move from one position to the next in a matter of seconds. A swivel chair gives the student the ability to shift seamlessly from working with a group to redirecting their attention to the teacher when needed. Tables that nest together can create a larger work surface when needed for group work, but can be pulled apart for individualized work.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To begin the planning process for transforming the educational environment, it is important to determine why we are seeking change before rushing to the solution, otherwise there is potential for derailment. The question may arise - how do we do this? As designers, we take time to listen and to understand and uncover the existing hurdles and shortcomings. We recommend testing solutions with pilot classrooms or partake in furniture fairs to review physical samples of proposed furniture solutions. The most successful outcome occurs when the district brings teachers and students along through the process to create stakeholder buy-in on this change. Lastly, ongoing professional development is critical. You wouldn't hand someone the keys to a helicopter and expect that person to automatically know how to fly it, would you? Communication, collaboration, and dedicating time to the process are the keys to a successful outcome.



Too Much Furniture



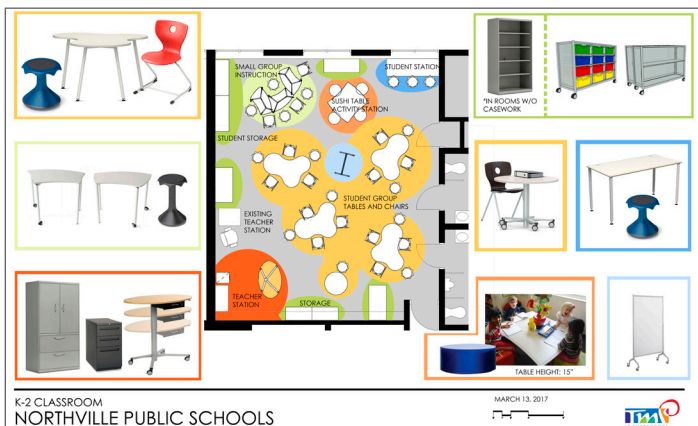
Active Learning Classroom with Space

CASE STUDY NORTHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Working with Northville Public Schools (NPS) to navigate their journey to transform existing classrooms into active learning environments was a rewarding process for all involved.

The process began by focusing on elementary classroom spaces. Initially, the District invested in two pilot classrooms. These were highly customized to each of the selected teachers needs and budgets were slightly larger to ensure the ability to test different types of furnishings. The following year two additional elementary school classrooms were piloted, expanding upon the solutions from the prior year.

By the third year, NPS was ready to make a larger scale investment in change and determined Kindergarten through 2nd grade would be the first group to undergo the transformation. The design team reflected back on the solutions tested during the two years of piloting, which helped inform the larger scale solution. NPS desired flexibility to encourage student movement in the new spaces. Working in tandem with the elementary school principals and administration, the design team refined the classroom design. The solution consisted of centralized student storage, multiple seating options for students, mobile tables and storage, and height adjustability for teachers and students.



Typical Grades K-2 Classroom Furniture Plan
Northville Public Schools
TMP Architecture, Inc.



Typical Grades K-2 Classroom
Ridge Wood Elementary, Northville Public Schools
TMP Architecture, Inc.

One hurdle encountered after implementation was the realization that several teachers felt uncomfortable with the change, and were unclear about the vision for flexibility and mobility. Accompanied by a compressed project schedule, this led to some initial resistance to the change.

The following year a bond passed and NPS was ready to invest in the classroom transformation for grades 3-5. As a result of the experience in furnishing the K-2 classrooms, the 3-5 classroom group reconvened right away to allow for more time in the schedule.

Students and staff from the previous efforts were surveyed to gain feedback on the successes and hurdles from that effort. The district formed a committee of teacher representatives from each building. They met bi-weekly for several months to research, collaborate, and form the guiding principles for this large scale furniture implementation. This group advocated on behalf of their peers to share information and gain feedback when needed. The furniture committee was also charged with participating and assisting in professional development with their peers and formed a furniture purging and moving committee to help support the monumental change teachers were undertaking.



Furniture Fair Held for Staff and Students to Review Various Classroom Furniture Options

The guiding principles developed by the furniture committee are as follows:

- Flexible seating options to support student choice and movement
- Mobile and adjustable - furniture can be moved/re-configured/adjusted
- Supportive of a wide variety of instructional approaches: Stations/workshops/centers/small group/independent work/collaborative work/technology use
- Supports organization and accessibility: Access to supplies, instructional items, classroom materials
- Student engagement and comfort

TODAY'S CLASSROOM DESIGN:

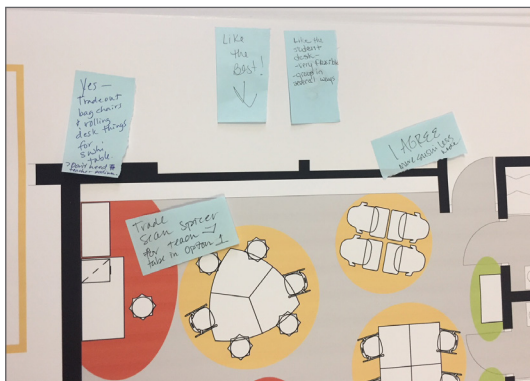
Coming Together to Create a Method for Success

ABOUT TMP

TMP Architecture was founded in 1959 with the goal of designing the finest buildings for education. For 59 years we have focused our practice on educational clients. Our vision statement "Life. Long. Learning." encompasses the passion, creativity, strength, and commitment we bring to each client. TMP's offices in Bloomfield Hills and Portage, MI have grown to serve the broad spectrum of needs for institutions across the country.

Through the years, as a natural outgrowth of our work for education clients, TMP has developed national recognized expertise in the design of libraries, recreation/sports centers, and performing/fine arts facilities. These challenging building types, in addition to our K-12 and college facilities, have been the primary focus of our practice. Over 500 national, regional, and state level awards for design excellence attest to our ability regarding innovative design within budget and schedule.

These principles were the framework that informed the types of furnishings the group wanted to consider. Next, at a furniture fair physical samples were shared with NPS students and staff to touch, feel, and evaluate.



Visual Feedback Exercise to Determine the Final Design

Based on the feedback received from the furniture fair, several options of furniture layouts were designed for the committee to consider. The staff and design team had several discussions and eventually came up with a hybrid solution.

It took time, communication, and collaboration to create a meaningful impact on Northville Public Schools elementary classrooms. Students and staff are exploring and growing in their new learning environments, and continue to reconfigure their new flexible surroundings to make their spaces the best they can be. Was the transformation worth it?

**"It took time,
communication, and
collaboration to create
a meaningful impact..."**

"Totally worth it. There IS a learning curve, I think the PD [Professional Development] is really important, and if I were to do it again I would build in more PD for the regular classroom teacher, focusing on alignment with our instructional framework, and conversations about student choice, student voice, accountable talk, and active learning. We're getting there." - Dr. Denise Bryan, Principal Moraine Elementary School, Northville Public Schools

It is important for classroom design to be impactful for all students and educators alike. Spaces should be designed as a framework for building collaborative, active, and engaging learning environments. But it is of equal importance to focus on implementation. The most effective change comes from the innovative teachers that are willing to put in the time and work to motivate their students. Adaptable spaces are only successful if the educators are adaptable to the change. Designers and educators must work together, using thoughtful design and pedagogy, in a joint effort to create spaces that will stand the test of time.

Directions for Students:

1. Welcome! Please come introduce yourself to Mrs. Kearns!
2. Find the nametag table and choose where you will sit the first day only! (With our fabulous new flexible seating furniture, we will be discussing our seating arrangement expectations next week!)
3. Have a look around! Make yourself at home!

Teachers Embracing the Change and Setting Student Expectations