

— MINDSHIFT

To Foster Productivity and Creativity in Class, Ditch the Desks!

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By Leslie Harris O’Hanlon

When elementary school teacher Erin Klein sat in one of her students’ desks last year, she noticed a few things about her classroom space.

For one, the room itself was long and narrow, and the space was awkward. Large, clunky student desks crowded the classroom. And the desks themselves got in the way of students being able to comfortably work together. Even though Klein had the desks in groups of four, her second-

grade students were far from each other because the compartments in the desks for student supplies were large, forcing the kids to communicate and work together over a vast span of desk space.

“The desks didn’t allow for much collaboration or comfort,” said Klein, who teaches at an independent elementary school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

What she wanted was a classroom where students could move around freely, sit comfortably, and work together. The more she thought about it, the more she knew she wanted her classroom to have a similar feel as the children’s section in Barnes & Noble or a creative play space in a museum.

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“So I decided that the desks were in our way,” she said. “I said, why not get rid of the desks.”

That thought led her to start the process of redesigning her room last school year to make it a more inviting space for her students. She continues to work on this project throughout the summer in preparation for the start of the new school year.

Research supports the link between classroom space and student learning, Klein said, including work done by [Susan Kovalik at The Center for Effective Learning](#). Just as stores, spas, restaurants, and other businesses spend so much money and time researching ways to make their environments appealing for customers to linger in those spaces, Klein believes teachers should be thoughtful about designing their classroom space.

But there's one important factor to consider: Get input from your customers -- the students.

“So often we know what we want, but not necessarily what the kids would like. So student voice is really important,” she said. “As a teacher, you are one person. The students are 20 to 30 people using the space. They are the ones the classroom is for.”

What her students wanted, she said, was a space they could leave out their games, puzzles and projects if they were in the middle of working on them, but had to move to another activity. They didn't want to have to put everything away, if they were going to come back to their projects later. Also, they wanted different chairs to sit in while reading.

“They love comfy places to sit. That was their biggest thing,” Klein said. “This past year, I put in a rocking chair and an ottoman that rocked as well.”

REDESIGNING THE SPACE



Erin Klein created a comfortable reading nook for her students." credit="

Klein started her classroom redesign project last school year by pushing all of her desks against the sides of the room, creating an open space for her students, which lent itself well for students being productive.

“When writing, we grabbed clip boards and spread out on the floor or lay next to each other,” she said. “The students could walk around the room. They could go to the computer, or grab an iPad. The children were getting up and moving freely to get the work done.”

For this upcoming school year, Klein will ditch the desks. But this doesn't mean her students won't have surfaces on which to work. Instead of desks, she bought a breakfast nook, similar to what they offer in restaurants. The nook tucks into a corner of her classroom and provides a place where students can work together, she said. Klein also bought two round tables to go on the outside perimeters of her classroom. In addition, she brought in a small, square table that fits two people, and is good for partner work.

Klein is also revamping her classroom library. It's common for elementary school teachers to keep their classroom library books in tubs, similar to plastic shoe boxes, Klein said.

“There's nothing visually appealing about going to a tub and digging out books,” she said.

So she bought a media cabinet for DVDs that will allow her to showcase many of her books with the front covers fully showing. She plans to rotate books through her library as well, focusing on different authors, genres and series. In addition, she has stuffed animals, lamps, stools and rugs in the reading space to make it a cozy nook and feel like a living room.

“The space lends itself well to having conversations about books,” she said.

She also tries to keep most of the items on her wall eye level with her students, and she changes what's on her walls to reflect the content the kids are studying.

“If the same stuff stays up all year it loses its meaning,” she said.

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She brought in items from home to liven up her classroom, including picture frames, live plants and wooden bookshelves that her parents no longer needed. In addition, Klein talks a lot about the colors in her class. They should be neutral and soothing rather than busy and bright with patterns or polka dots everywhere.

“When you go to a salon or a spa there are green plants, a water feature and the colors are all neutral,” she said. “It’s a soothing environment. For children the content of what you are teaching needs to be stimulating, not necessarily the environment.”

GREAT RESULTS

Last year, her students liked the changes she made to the classroom.

“I noticed that the kids’ behavior improved, and I asked them, why do you think that is?” Klein said. “They said, ‘well you know when your mom brings you to a nice restaurant and you can’t run around? It’s the same in here. When we come in here, it’s not like McDonald's. It’s like a nice restaurant.’”

Her students even got into the habit of removing the rocks from their shoes that they picked up from recess when coming into the classroom.

Redesigning spaces was already in Klein's DNA: she was just a few credits shy of earning her bachelor's degree in interior design before deciding to switch to education after her daughter was born. So she started all over again, earning a degree in education and then going on to earn a Master's degree in education as well.

Redesigning spaces doesn't have to be a complicated venture, though. Teachers can start by simply de-cluttering their room and bringing in real plants. Nor does it have to be expensive. Klein finds low-cost decorations in Hobby Lobby, an arts and crafts chain store. She also wrote a grant and received money from her school to purchase round tables and a breakfast nook. And she frequents garage sales looking for good finds she can spruce up and use in her classroom.

“It's easy to pick up a few lamps from a garage sale and get a can of spray paint to make them look nice,” she said.

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