

RELAX, IT'S TIME TO LEARN

Comfort is key for LI's adaptive classrooms

BY JOIE TYRRELL
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Learning for fifth-graders at Northside Elementary School in Levittown is an object lesson in flexibility, mobility and adaptive spaces.

The chairs are on wheels and offer two ways in which to sit. Students stash their books and belongings in bins beneath the seat. Instead of desks lined up in rows, there are tables, each with an erasable whiteboard surface. The children can choose taller tables or lower ones. The walls are painted bright colors and sectional couches are available as alternative spots for reading and studying.

This trend in classroom redesign is picking up steam across Long Island and the country — changing from the traditional setup to an approach that educators say promotes an enriching, comfortable learning atmosphere. Levittown's Northside, one of six elementary schools in the 7,000-student district, appears to be a leader on the Island by transforming an entire grade in this way.

Other school systems, including Mineola, Half Hollow Hills and Bayport-Blue Point, have taken similar steps.

Educators say that flexible seating and a more relaxed classroom atmosphere can make learning more inclusive and lessen a sedentary lifestyle among their students.

"I love it and I think it lends

itself to a different type of learning," said Theresa Heaney, who teaches English Language Arts and social studies to fifth-graders at Northside. "The children are able to get up, stand up at a tall table if they need to. Sometimes it is hard to sit in a classroom for 50, 60, sometimes 90 minutes at a time."

Some experts caution, however, that in settings where students have more freedom to move about, it is important to have educators who can maintain control of the classroom.

Frank Mortillaro, principal of Northside Elementary, has a positive take on the school's experience so far.

Keeping kids motivated

"The idea behind flexible seating is that when kids are uncomfortable when they are sitting they can be disruptive or they can be detached from learning," Mortillaro said. In his view, "allowing children to be comfortable when they learn will keep them more motivated."

Officials in the Levittown district decided to transform the five classrooms this year in conjunction with a pilot program to "departmentalize" classes for the 100-plus fifth-graders. The children change classes for subjects such as math, English and social studies, and like students in middle school, Northside's fifth-graders have lockers.

Other schools in the district have adopted some furniture changes. At MacArthur High School, for example, many of the math teachers have moved from desks to large round tables.

Across the system, the cost for redesign generally runs from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per class-



Fifth-graders at Northside Elementary in Levittown work Feb. 28 at tables with erasable whiteboard



Students sit on couches in an English class at Half Hollow Hills High School West in Dix Hills on Wednesday. It's part of a growing trend in classroom redesign on Long Island and across the country.

room, school officials said.

On a recent school day in one of the classrooms, some students used erasable markers to solve math problems on whiteboard tables. Others worked with small stackable blocks for a lesson on volume.

Mateo Chiaramante, 10, said it is much different from his fourth-grade classroom.

"I really do like the setup," he said. "I like working on the couches. It is really good that you can write on the tables."

His classmate, Kathleen Jeudy, 10, agreed, and said she also appreciates that the chairs have bins below the seats. She has used the couch seating for group projects.

"The seats are more com-

fortable," she said. "And when you had a desk it would get messy. Here, it is easier; you have a bin."

Most classrooms at Northside, which has kindergarten through fifth grade, remain set up in the traditional way, with rows of desks for students and the teacher stationed at the front of the class.



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— Robert Haas, principal of Bayport-Blue Point’s James Wilson Young Middle School

dean and director of the graduate education program at Molloy College in Rockville Centre, said a student’s way of learning must be taken into consideration when designing a space.

“Different types may work for different kinds of learners,” she said. “Some kids may like to have a formal type of chair but with a cushion. I don’t think the furniture is as important as meeting the student’s needs.”

In Bayport-Blue Point’s James Wilson Young Middle School, educators offered flexible seating about five years ago in some sixth-grade classrooms and now have expanded that to the seventh and eighth grades, mostly in English and social studies classes. Students can use movable chairs and their desks can be combined into tables for group work. The school incorporated ottomans and beanbag chairs into the design.

“The philosophy and goal behind it is to allow the students to be comfortable in their learning environment and foster an environment that allows for better collaboration between students,” Principal Robert Haas said.

As an example, Haas spoke of sixth-graders in English class who were tasked with writing a poem and were given the choice of sitting anywhere in the classroom.

“There were students on the floor, students seated in a circle,” he said. “What we have found is the students enjoy being in their learning environment and thus it translates into enjoying the learning process more.”

surfaces that educators say enrich the learning environment.

Mortillaro said he may look into expanding the new concept into other grades.

“A lot of my other teachers are like, ‘Hey can we order the furniture?’” Mortillaro said. “You want them to want to try new things. Academics in general, we kind of stay very structured, so to think out of the box is a tough thing for some people.”

Maureen Healy, a California-based author, speaker and leader in the field of children’s emotional health, has written and studied the topic of flexible seating. She said classroom management makes a difference when students are seated in an unconventional way.

“As long as teachers have very good classroom management skills, the flexible seating can only enhance that,” she said. “If you don’t have good classroom management skills, the kids get out of line and that only makes it worse.”

In the Half Hollow Hills district in Dix Hills, Jeremy Doran’s English class at Half Hollow Hills High School West is furnished with couches and round tables where students can gather. Doran transformed

the space about five years ago after a student in his 11th-grade Regents class commented that the classrooms reminded him of a prison and were boring and uninspiring.

“At the same time, I was reading the book ‘How Google Works’ and saw how Google’s business/environment model could be implemented in our educational facility,” Doran said.

A stimulating layout

He used a mix of donated goods to create a layout that is open, colorful and stimulating. He said he has noticed an increase in student work productivity, proficiency and engagement.

“The space really allows for differentiated instruction every single day,” he said, adding that other students sometimes ask, “How can I be a student in that room?”

Doran has made some other changes. For example, students can take exams on a clipboard or use a three-sided test screen that pops up, blocking others from seeing what’s being written.

Audra Cerruto, associate



JAMES CARBONE

NYIT has not operated a full campus in Central Islip since 2005.

NYIT to sell off most of campus

BY ANTONIO PLANAS
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NYIT could not immediately be reached for comment.

Developers are in contract to build on more than 100 acres owned by the New York Institute of Technology in Central Islip, about a mile from where the hamlet is expected to draw nearly tens of millions of dollars for downtown investment.

NYIT, which has not operated a full college campus in Central Islip since 2005, is selling 106 acres, or most of its campus, said Jordan Thompson, the school’s deputy general counsel. NYIT will continue to operate a 7,000-square-foot health care center.

The college, which has no full-time students on campus, will also donate an 8.5-acre parcel and a building on the property on Eastview Drive to the Central Islip Union Free School District, officials said. NYIT operates other campuses in Old Westbury, Manhattan, Arkansas and in Vancouver, Canada.

NYIT is in contract with three developers, including one for 87 acres east of Carleton Avenue spanning Admission Drive, and 13 acres west of Carleton Avenue, Thompson said. NYIT is also in contract with a third developer, for 6 acres on Eastview Drive, he said. He would not disclose the terms of the contracts, but said the 87-acre property is under contract with an affiliate of Steel Equities based in Bethpage. Thompson declined speaking about what the three developers planned for their parcels.

“We have always maintained that we wanted to leave Central Islip in good hands,” Thompson said. “We have sought credible developers and want to leave Central Islip a better place when we are gone.”

Developers in contract with

Caroline Smith, an Islip Town spokeswoman, said officials have not received any applications for development at NYIT. But two of the parcels in contract are zoned for educational purposes and any other use will mandate approval by Islip officials, Smith said.

Construction has already started on former NYIT property. Paul White, principal with Farrell Building Company based in Bridgehampton, said the company began construction last month on a 268-unit apartment complex on Carleton Avenue. The 30-acre property was last owned by NYIT in April 2018, Thompson said.

Farrell has closed on \$65 million in financing for the complex. Central Islip was an ideal spot for the planned community, he said.

“There are a lot of jobs, and a lot of people looking for high-quality housing,” White said.

NYIT is not the only college campus on Long Island unloading its land. Tritec Real Estate Company, based in East Setauket, went into contract with Touro College last August to purchase 10 acres for a “multi-family complex” at the college’s Bay Shore campus. Delaware-based Mercury International LLC bought Dowling’s Oakdale campus in 2017 for \$26.1 million.

Parts of the NYIT land are near the southernmost point of the Carleton Avenue corridor, which runs from Smith Street to the Long Island Rail Road station. The area has won a state grant for \$9.7 million for revitalization. A committee is mulling pitches for how to spend the state funds and millions more in investment for proposals such as new housing, office space and sewers.