

Classroom Makeover Transforms Learning

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ONE YEAR LATER: CLASSROOM MAKEOVER TRANSFORMS LEARNING

“When I first brought my class in here, they said, ‘Mr. Yeh, we want to be here everyday. We love this place!’” Elbert Yeh, Forest Hills Northern High School science teacher and department chair, relayed after a classroom makeover for the school’s new STEM Academy.

When Yeh’s school in Grand Rapids, Michigan launched its inaugural STEM Academy focused on science, technology, engineering and math, teachers were tasked with creating a new kind of classroom to generate an engaging learning experience. STEM students are focused on learning how to solve problems and the classroom itself needed to support students and teachers in this effort.

ACTIVE LEARNING CENTER GRANT

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Traditional classrooms are geared toward lecture mode and do not foster student participation. The goal for this new classroom was to transform an old computer lab into a space that promoted active learning through collaboration and student engagement.

“With active learning, students have to be engaged and more active in their learning. So that means getting up and moving around, that means talking to one another. Not just relying on the teacher to give them the information and provide them with all the answers,” said Yeh.

BEFORE: MONOTONOUS, STATIC

To accomplish this lofty goal, the school applied for the [Steelcase Active Learning Center Grant](#) to transform its classroom. After being awarded the grant, the transformation began. The soon-to-be STEM space went from stationary to flexible. It started as a room filled with rows of uneven brown desks butted up against each other. Each desk included the same computer, same monitor and same stationary black chair. The room itself was not inspiring or agile. It limited the kinds of interactions students could have with each other and the instructor.

AFTER: VIBRANT, FLEXIBLE

The new classroom took shape at the start of the 2015-2016 school year. It included movable, versatile desks on castors which are easy to reconfigure quickly. The desks also came with embedded storage to make sure students always have what they need to perform at their best. Colorful chairs placed throughout the room were also on wheels, making them easy to move around at a moment's notice and include storage underneath to cleanly stowaway backpacks or other materials.

This classroom gave us that flexibility of moving quickly from lecture space to discussion space.

ELBERT YEH | Forest Hills Northern High School science teacher and department chair

“This classroom gave us that flexibility of moving quickly from lecture space to discussion space,” said Yeh. “But, also with the size of these tables, we have a lot of workspace. So, students are not just constrained to uneven desks when they put them together. But, this space is just designed for working in groups.”

Forest Hills Northern principal Jon Gregory believes active learning best prepares his students for the real world.

“Any job they go into, they are going to have to interact with others to solve problems. So, this gives them the chance to do that at the high school level,” said Gregory.

TRANSFORMING MORE THAN SPACE

Now, one year later, Forest Hills Northern teachers and students have seen much more than the STEM Academy classroom transform.

- More discussion – Teachers report the tables and chairs breed student discussion. With the tables able to face each other, students sight-lines encourage them to talk to each other.
- Improved lesson planning – Teachers tell us that the environment has transformed lesson planning. Now, they consider how the surroundings can help them cover the materials and messages being taught to students.
- New ways to learn – With a flexible environment, students are easily able to move from a lecture setting to small group work to large team work. The variation in learning styles invigorates students and keeps them mentally engaged.

“It really affirmed that trying to introduce more innovation and collaboration into our schools is the right way for education,” said Yeh.

The application period for Cycle 4 of the ALC Grant begins on Friday, December 1, 2017 and will remain open until Friday, February 2, 2018.

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Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.