Modern Learning Spaces: What the Research Tells Us

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The classrooms that most of us grew up with are a thing of the past. Worksheets and one-size-fits-all instruction have given way to project-based learning, flexible seating, and individualized instruction. But, although the instruction methods have changed, many times the physical spaces that support learners have not.

Educators are faced with trying to rearrange classrooms that have bulky, heavy, and immobile furnishings that are, on average, 48 years old. A growing body of research indicates that reimagining our students' learning spaces and incorporating modern, flexible furnishings can have far-reaching benefits, from improved health to better academic performance.

Below are four key takeaways from recent learning environment research:

1. Educators Teach Differently When the Classroom Environment Changes

According to research done by the Center for Educational Innovation at the University of Minnesota, modern learning space design can affect how instructors teach, even when they're deliberately trying not to let it.

In the study, the teacher was asked to provide instruction using the exact same methods in both a traditional classroom and an active, modern learning setting (a mobile, flexible, technology-rich classroom). His attempts to provide the same instruction failed, as he lectured more in the traditional classroom and promoted discussion more in the active learning setting. These findings indicate that the arrangement of the classroom furnishings alone can promote student-centered instruction.

2. Active, Modern Learning Environments Impact Learning Outcomes

The Center for Educational Innovation's research also looked at expected outcomes for students in traditional classrooms versus active learning classrooms. In one study, participants with lower ACT scores were placed in an active learning environment, with researchers predicting that their grades would be lower as well. Surprisingly, they performed just as well as their high-ACT-scoring peers who were taught in a traditional setting.

Another study compared participants who were taught in a large, theater-style classroom three days a week with those who met once a week in a smaller, active learning environment to work on problem-solving and watch recorded lectures. The latter set of students performed as well or better than their peers who met three times as much in the traditional setting, indicating the scope of the impact that working in active learning environments has on learning outcomes.

And, as educators in MDR's "The Impact of Learning Spaces on Student Success" report noted, one of the biggest outcomes they saw from their modern learning space renovations was the positive effect it had on school culture and student engagement. This finding underscores the importance of creating high-impact learning spaces, as student engagement is the largest indicator of academic success.

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3. Active Learning Environments Promote Healthier Students and Boost Academics

According to Ergonomist Josh Kerst, kids spend 50–70% of their time sitting down (often in hard plastic chairs) in traditional classrooms. You've probably heard the warning "sitting is the new smoking," but what exactly does that mean? Kerst notes that over the past 200 years, children's calorie intake has gone up, while their lifestyles have become more sedentary. This puts them at increased risk for obesity and related diseases. For instance, in 1960 the risk of a child developing diabetes in his lifetime was **only 1 in 4,000 — by 2016, the risk rose dramatically to 1 in 4**!

Flexible room layouts that provide a variety of seating options, including stools that allow students to move and rock and tables set at standing height, encourage students to get up and move throughout the day and find seating arrangements that help them do their best work. Not only does this type of layout promote healthy habits, the fidgeting and movement that active seating encourages actually help students focus better, especially students with ADHD.

Research published in the American Journal of Public Health and from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation lists the benefits of active learning spaces for children, including the following:

- Increased calorie burn rate
- Increased student engagement
- Increased test scores
- Better classroom management

The studies also found the following:

- Students were 20% more likely to earn an A in math or English when they had the chance to be physically active.
- Students' standardized test scores jumped 6% in just three years after physical activity was incorporated into their school day.
- Starting the school day for elementary students with 10–20 minutes of teacher-led physical activity led to a 57% drop in discipline referrals.
- With this same 10–20 minutes of physical activity at the beginning of each school day, school nurse visits declined 67%.
- Children lowered their insulin levels by 33% when they broke up three hours of sedentary time with short, moderate-intensity walking.

4. Educator Voices Are an Important Consideration in the Design Process

In their report "The Impact of Learning Spaces on Student Success," MDR details their survey that included 1,600 K–12 educators. The results are clear: Educators who are in the classroom day in and day out believe their learning environments influence student learning, and with the desire to meet all students' needs, flexibility is a key consideration.

- 94% of survey respondents said they believed the physical space had a high to moderate impact on learning.
- The addition of flexible furniture was one of the top changes teachers desired for their classrooms.
- Respondents wanted teaching styles and goals to influence changes to their learning environments.
- One of the most important goals teachers mentioned was being able to accommodate different learning styles by increasing opportunities for physical movement while learning, providing collaborative and solitary areas for students, and having more resources for visual learners.

The very act of redesigning your learning environment won't guarantee its effectiveness — educator voices, flexible furnishings, and activity-permissive classrooms all play an important role. Every school and every classroom is unique — but with modern pedagogy paired with intentionally chosen furnishings, they can be designed to support students now and into the future.

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Liz is the former Marketing Content Manager for Demco. In her role she helped develop classroom games, learning centers, and professional development resources that garnered 46 industry awards for excellence in education.

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