

Oliver Brown Elementary School

CASE STUDY



WITH FLEXIBLE, INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS, OLIVER BROWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HELPS STUDENTS 'FIND THEIR PLACE'



NEW FACILITY IS WELL EQUIPPED TO FOSTER STUDENT WELL-BEING

The global pandemic has taken a huge toll on students' social and emotional well-being over the last few years. Having a school environment that students are excited to spend time in makes a big difference.

The brand-new Oliver Brown Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas, fits that description. This \$17.6 million facility serving more than 400 students in kindergarten through fifth grade was designed with comfort, connection, and stimulation in mind.

Instead of a drab, institutional look and feel, with rows of desks facing the front of each classroom, Oliver Brown features dynamic, highly adaptable learning spaces that pop with color. Teachers can easily reconfigure their classrooms to support various learning styles and activities, and students are empowered with choices in where to sit and work.

The result is an engaging and appealing environment in which students feel welcome and are eager to participate in active, collaborative learning.

“THEY LOVE IT,” SAYS PRINCIPAL ERIN LOPEZ, DESCRIBING THE STUDENTS’ REACTION TO THE NEW BUILDING. “IT’S BEEN PHENOMENAL TO SEE HOW EXCITED THEY ARE.”

BROADENING MINDS

The planning and construction for Oliver Brown Elementary began prior to the pandemic. In 2018, voters passed a \$130 million bond issue for construction projects within the Manhattan-Ogden School District.

The district worked with BG Consultants and Alloy Architecture on the design of a new 67,000-square-foot elementary school that would include flexible, agile learning spaces to support modern learning.

The new Oliver Brown Elementary School contains separate “learning pods” for classrooms in grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5, and each pod is defined by its own distinct color scheme. The pods share a large, open common area with modular soft seating, where students of all ages can gather, learn, socialize, or just relax.

The furniture within these learning spaces plays a key role in creating the type of learning environment that district leaders envisioned.



“WE WANTED TEACHERS TO BE ABLE TO MOVE THE FURNITURE AROUND,” SAYS PATRICIA BROOKE-FRUENDT, CONSTRUCTION OWNERS REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE SCHOOL SYSTEM. “WE WANTED TO OPEN PEOPLES’ MINDS TO OTHER WAYS OF DOING THINGS.”





Brooke-Fruendt and other district leaders teamed up with School Specialty and its Projects By Design division to plan and equip the school's learning spaces.

With input from School Specialty, they chose furniture that easily could be arranged into different group sizes to support collaborative learning, such as NeoMove desks from Classroom Select that come in various geometric shapes.

They also outfitted each classroom with multiple seating styles, including NeoRok stools that enable students to rock back and forth as they sit—as well as standing desks and bar-style stools in the fourth and fifth grade pods.

CLEAR BENEFITS

Oliver Brown Elementary School opened its doors to students in August 2021. Although planning started well before the pandemic, the timing of the new facility's opening couldn't be better.

The effects of social isolation over the last few years, coupled with the fear, grief, and trauma associated with losing family members to COVID, have led to an increase in anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among youth. In one survey, 71 percent of parents said the pandemic has affected their children's mental health.

Oliver Brown is designed stimulate creativity, foster connections between students, and help them feel comfortable as they learn. The fact that students have choices in where they can work and what type of seating to opt for gives them agency over the learning process and allows them to "find their place" where they can function most effectively.



All of these factors can greatly improve students' social-emotional state. In fact, research has established a clear connection between flexible, inclusive learning environments and better student health and well-being.

Lopez says she appreciates how the flexible seating options cater to a wide range of student needs.



Student Art Work in Right Hand Photo Created by Jose Laurel – 5th Grade – Oliver Brown Elementary School

“My favorite pieces are the wobble stools,” she says. “Students are able to get the ‘wiggles’ out without identifying as needing any special accommodation. Our vision as a school is for diversity and acceptance of everyone, and the furniture we’re using supports that goal.”

LOPEZ SAYS THE SOFT SEATING WITHIN THE COMMON AREA ALSO EXTENDS LEARNING THROUGHOUT THE BUILDING. “I REGULARLY SEE STUDENTS SITTING OUT THERE, COLLABORATING AND WORKING ON PROJECTS,” SHE NOTES. “THE SPACE IS BUILT FOR KIDS, AND KIDS ARE USING IT.”

As School Specialty strategic account manager Heather Whealy observes, a classroom that can look different every day “stimulates students’ brains.” It also helps reduce the trauma they’ve experienced during the pandemic. “They’re not just sitting and getting bored for six hours a day,” she concludes. “They’re actively engaged in learning.”