

# SCALABLE SOLUTIONS

## FOR UNIQUE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

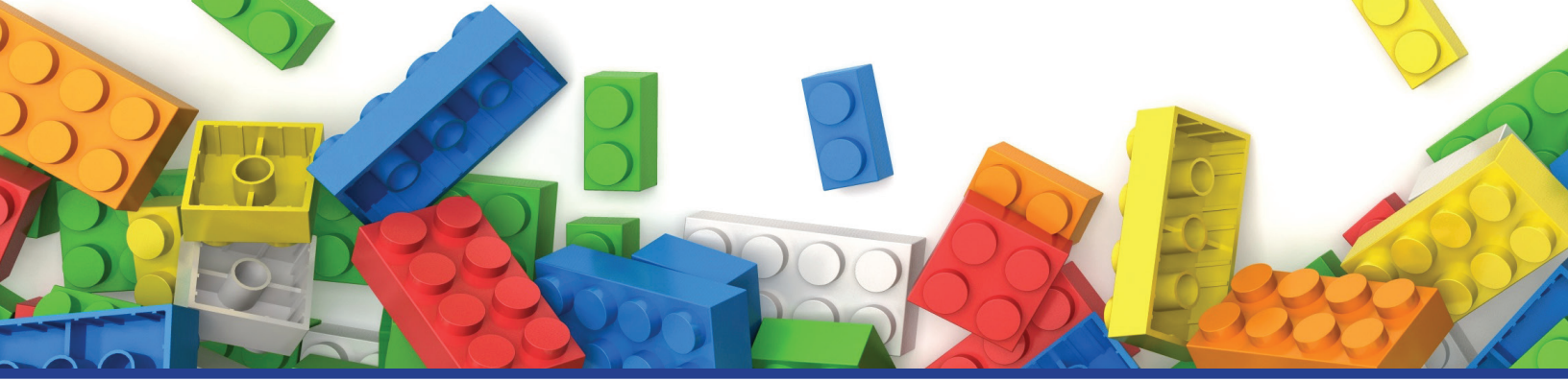
The creation of flexible, unique learning environments seems to be on every school administrator's radar. It sounds appealing, but what exactly does this mean, and in challenging fiscal times...what could it cost? The three types of spaces that every school should consider are Extended Learning Areas (ELAs), STEM/STEAM Labs or Incubator Labs and remaking the general classroom. Each can send clear messages about the values your district wants students, teachers and even your community to share in. Remarkably, each option is scalable and includes choices that do not require major construction budgets. Read on to explore some of the new ways that educators are thinking about learning environments and specific examples of how schools are implementing these ideas.

**ARTICLE**

**By Peggy Hoffmann IIDA, LEED AP, REFP**  
PRINCIPAL  
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## Student-Centered Learning

One of the most powerful ideas in education design today is the shift to student-centered learning — enabling students to make choices about what they need to feel better supported in their learning activities. As an interior designer specializing in the design of schools for more than 25 years, there has never been a better time to be involved in education design! The world finally seems to have embraced the idea that all students learn differently, and we should support these differences through the design of our learning spaces. Applying the same physical solutions cannot be expected to yield the same results for every student.

Giving students the freedom to choose what they need is a demonstration of our respect. When students are genuinely supported, they feel safer, more at ease and in turn are more likely to behave better. Empowering students to participate in discovering the keys to their success builds their independence and teaches them to take increasing responsibility for their own progress. Students should be able to modify their physical environment, instantly and intuitively, to support their changing needs. If a student can focus better by standing while they work, their desk should simply rise with them to support the flow of activity. Uncovering this kind of self-awareness is a powerful tool for individual success.



## Extended Learning Areas

ELAs encourage student groups of different sizes to collaborate outside of traditional classrooms. By defining a shared space and outfitting it with unique resources, ELAs can inspire and support a wider range of learning opportunities than a typical classroom. At Wingate Elementary in Mascoutah School District 19, each neighborhood of six classrooms in their new school has its own ELA, a central gathering space to foster a variety of activities: messy, hands-on projects needing a sink and tables, movable display walls for whiteboarding ideas, plentiful counters for displaying student work and technology to support large group presentations. While new construction is not a possibility for every school district, Wingate's ELA showcases the art of the possible and may help schools refine what they want to offer.

**"Our common learning area has been an invaluable resource as it has increased student engagement and excitement for my math and science lessons. Our shared space proves to be multi-functional as we use it for: science labs and activities, team teaching through combined classroom and cross-curricular activities, monthly meetings for our 5th grade Safety Patrol and more. The whiteboards allow students to justify their reasoning and critique the reasoning of others through gallery walks in a fun and engaging way."**

**Mr. Reggie Duncan**  
5th Grade Math and Science Teacher,  
ICTM Elementary Math Teacher of the Year  
Wingate Elementary School

ELAs such as those at Wingate are the largest of these flexible learning environments, easily supporting two classes working together with up to 50 students. It can be a challenge to find this amount of space — ideally located near classrooms — within an existing school. But ELAs don't have to be large — they can be equally beneficial for small group collaboration. At J. Sterling Morton West High School's new Freshman Academy addition, students can work right outside their classrooms in smaller ELAs designed to support two to six students. Teachers can keep an eye on everything while allowing students to demonstrate their independence. These spaces, equipped with flexible furniture and monitors for displaying student work, encourage small group interaction without interrupting classrooms.

When looking for opportunities within your school, even small alcoves along a corridor can be re-envisioned as unique, student-centric learning spaces. By improving display surfaces, adding comfortable furniture and updating interior finishes, any school, even those with older buildings, can create inviting ELAs.

Extended Learning Areas can also contribute to improved socialization – especially important to high schools wanting to encourage and reward better behavior as students learn to manage their free time productively. Interviewing high school students and understanding the stress they can feel, reinforces the need to create more casual spaces where students can refresh and regroup. At Grayslake Community High School District 201, administrators are committed to developing available space within their corridors as comfortable, inviting places for students to feel more collaborative and engaged at school.

### **STEM/STEAM Labs and Incubator Labs**

The second example of flexible learning spaces is among the most popular is the creation of STEM/STEAM Labs for elementary and middle schools. It is possible to quickly set up a basic STEM Lab, within a standard classroom, by introducing furniture such as mobile project tables and storage for supplies. For schools still developing their STEM curriculum, this can be a good way to get started. At River Trails Middle School in District 25, their sophisticated STEAM program had outgrown its existing space. When the inboard school office was relocated to create a new secure entry, the vacated space was transformed into a vibrant learning lab. The RTMS STEAM Lab now features a flexible central project space with high ceilings and exposed structure. Students have access to a courtyard learning garden.

There are flanking glass enclosed project rooms for green screen and small group work. Flip-top tables and a variety of mobile storage units enable quick reconfiguration. Students can also see into the spaces from the main corridor, generating interest.

**“Being able to collaborate with a team of professional architects and designers has allowed us to work in the very same manner we are striving to teach. We want students to know that each one of us doesn’t need to be an expert at everything. But each one of us has an expertise to share with the team, which strengthens the team to bring about the best outcomes. This has served as a model for success that I share with my students.”**

**Jeannine Wagner**

**STEAM Program Teacher, Project Lead The Way, Gateway to Technology  
River Trails School District 26**

There are parallels between STEAM Labs and the Incubator Labs many high schools are creating to support their CTE programs. One effective solution is to transform an outdated computer lab made obsolete by 1:1 devices into a professional-style studio space. Incubator Labs can be remodeled over a summer and outfitted to support small student teams working collaboratively. At Prairie Ridge High School CHSD 155, their Incubator Lab was partially funded by generous, local business leaders who wanted to give back to their community and encourage students to become entrepreneurs.

**“The Incubator room allows students to get a feel for what a true real-world work environment is like. The learning space can be organized into a wide variety of layouts to satisfy almost every type of learning environment desired including small group, presentation, board meeting and traditional style classrooms. It allows students to practice anything from board presentations to team meetings with the feel of a “business environment.”**

**Kevin Koeppen**

**Industry & Careers Division Leader, Prairie Ridge High School  
Community High School District 155**

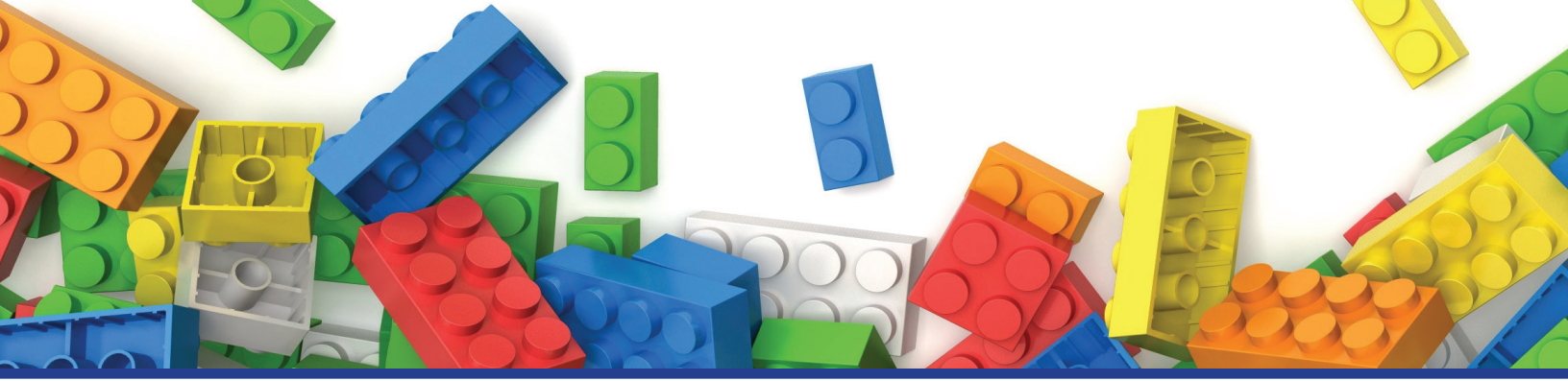
The center of the lab offers flexible lounge seating for relaxed engagement. Six team stations are located around the perimeter and provide a video monitor with power/data access for students. Three flip-top mobile tables at each station enable the room to be quickly reconfigured from project work to student presentations. Incubator Labs can support a variety of learning objectives and programs. An English class was seen actively engaged in small teams for their creative project, giving little attention to the technology. At Crystal Lake Central High School, CUSD 155... they did not have the same project budget, but wanted to achieve the same function and equity for their next Incubator Lab.

**“The Incubator room has been great not only for its great look, but for its versatility. I cannot count the number of configurations I have seen of the room. Besides Incubator, computer science, mobile app design, digital illustration and marketing classes also use the room. Students seem more professional, composed, natural, spontaneous and collaborative. We also hold some teacher meetings in the room, and I would say that the same student characteristics apply to the teachers. The technology is wonderful. It’s just a great modern learning space and experience.”**

**Robert Hewett**

**Division Leader, Industry and Careers and  
Wellness Divisions Instructor of Art and Design  
Crystal Lake Central High School  
Community High School District 155**





## Remaking the General Classroom

The third opportunity for flexible learning environments may be the easiest to get started with — rethinking general and special education classrooms. Comfort in classrooms should not be thought of as a luxury anymore. We should think of comfort as the prerequisite to better focus. While improved, ergonomic seating is more often the norm today, it is time to take the next step. We need to consider not just the student chair, but the entire classroom.

Most classrooms provide matching desks for every student, hopefully no longer arranged in rows, but still the same solution applied to everyone. For several years now, we have been working with school districts to design test classrooms that offer a wide variety of furniture solutions. If we believe that students should be given choices about what will best support their learning, then the classroom should provide a wonderful mix of options to choose from.

**“Learning spaces refer to the combination of the physical environment and the social components of teaching and learning. We are talking about instructional shifts that capitalize on the flexibility and functionality of a new environment. The ability to maximize the flexibility and functionality throughout our pilot classrooms/libraries affords us the opportunity to evolve our instructional practices, embracing the daily needs of all students, while eliminating the barriers associated with traditional learning structures.”**

**Brian M. Engle**  
Executive Director of Instructional Innovation  
Glenview School District 34

There are plenty of workplaces for a class of 26 students, just not all the same type. This new mix can include standing height desks, a low “coffee table,” flip-top tables to clear the space quickly, a shaped table for small groups, pneumatic sit-stand desks, floor desks and different tables on casters for easy reconfiguration. Seating options include cantilever chairs, wobble stools and floor cushions.

Teachers told us that at first, some students did bicker about who gets to sit where. Learning to negotiate with others, to recognize that we must all share our community resources is an important life lesson - why not start young? Disagreements about who would get the cool seat were often settled with one silent round of rock, paper, scissors – impressive!

If a student is more comfortable and productive, sitting on a floor cushion, working at a coffee table, do we really have a problem with this? When we asked if students could even take their tests at the coffee table, the answer from administrators was a resounding “Yes!”

After a couple months, third grade students gave us feedback on their test furniture:

“I can focus really well on wobbly chairs.”

“I wish there was more up and down tables and more tall spinning stools and take out the standing desks.”

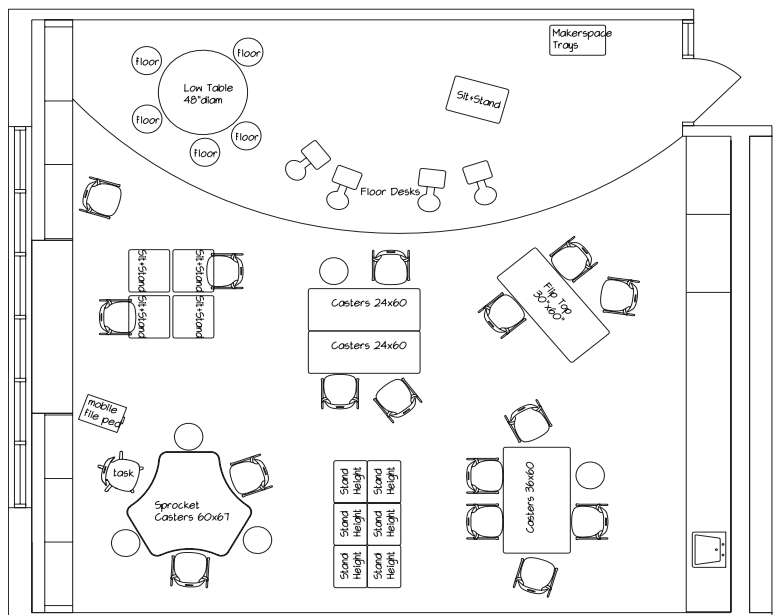
“The surf seats (floor desks) because they’re really comfy.”

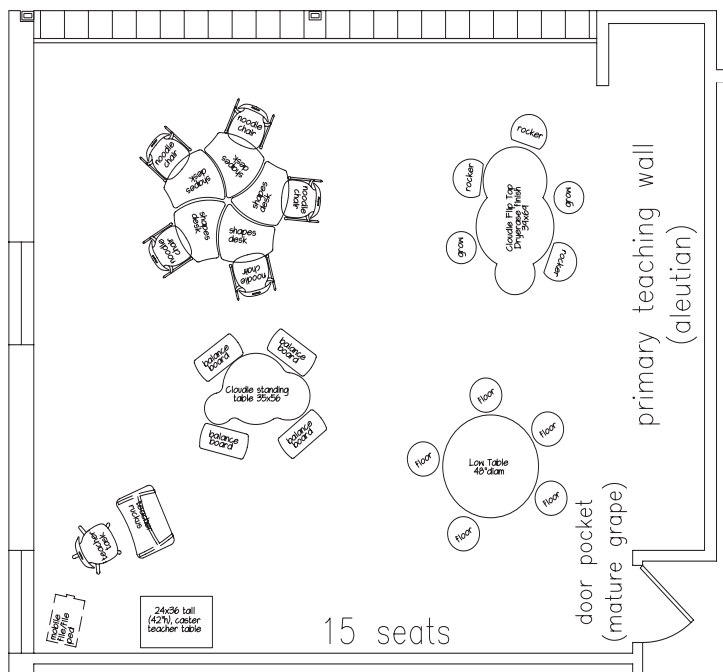
“I think the cushions should have a back on them.”

“My favorite is the adjustable desks.”

Classroom transformation can begin with modest budgets and existing furniture does not have to be replaced all at once. Consider giving teachers choices about which new furniture they are willing to try first, perhaps a coffee table and cushions or a few pneumatic sit-stand desks. Starting small is a great way to introduce new ideas and get feedback from students and teachers, before committing to more significant expenditures. It is critical to identify teachers who are open to testing new ideas. These early adopters can help identify any adjustments, reducing stress and increasing success for other teachers.

Special Education classrooms are no exception and these teachers, already attuned to finding new ways to support differing student needs, can prove to be great advocates!





## Meeting the Needs of All Learners

"All classrooms, but especially SPED rooms, should be designed to support a variety of student needs. SPED classrooms need to be welcoming —the physical environment needs to be set up in a manner that promotes learning, but also prevents behavioral issues. The physical arrangement of the classroom is key and I think it's important to keep every type of learner in mind. I love that flexible seating allows me to pull desks and tables apart as needed for those students who prefer their own space — yet I can easily push everything back together for groupings. I utilize the ability of movement to directly teach what "group work" looks and sounds like; I am also able to support children who are learning to control themselves within my safe, trusted, environment.

Just as teachers differentiate instruction, I feel they must do the same when it comes to seating. We set rules as a class as to what "smart seats" look like (I can sit and focus, get my work done, and share with others around me appropriately). When any one of these factors is jeopardized, my students understand they may get up and move at any time — no questions asked.

I initially was worried about flexible seating — I'd come from the "sit in your desk and don't touch others" schooling; yet, I have come to learn that in providing opportunities for my students to come in and get comfortable where they prefer, the on-task behaviors in my classroom have actually improved! I have

kids who choose each day to sit on the floor cushions in close proximity to me, while others who recognize they need to fidget go straight to the standing table with balance boards, where they will be able to move without distracting anyone. I can run groups while providing spaces for individualized learning for those who can work independently at the same time. Kids who were once hesitant in holding up small white boards to share their responses/show their work are now jumping at the chance to write on my dry-erase tables.

My room has been designed to support every type of student need I can think of, and my students are definitely benefitting! I absolutely love flexible seating!"

Noel Rajski - Special Education Resource Teacher  
River Trails Middle School  
River Trails School District 26

## A New Way to Learn

Many school districts are redefining their ideas about what makes for a successful student. Glenview School District 34 Student Dispositions are as follows, "I am: curious, resilient, a problem solver, collaborative, a critical thinker, creative and empathetic."

Changes to the physical environment can reinforce our commitment to provide personal choice and offer a daily reminder to embrace the diversity of learners. The design of unique learning environments must be a partnership with educators. Design can influence positive behavior and support greater success in learning. The abundant, positive responses from administrators, educators, parents and students confirms this!

