

Five Keys to Creating Healthy Learning Environments That Support Staff and Student Wellness

By Sue Ann Highland PhD



The Teachers' Lounge at Dallas Hybrid Prep, Dallas, Texas. Named the "Change Your World Room" it was designed and furnished by School Specialty® Projects By Design® based on input from their teachers and administrators.

When students are healthy, happy, and physically active, research shows they perform much better academically—and learning healthy habits at an early age can set them up for a lifetime of success.

While PK-12 leaders are rightly focused on the well-being of their students, staff health and wellness are just as important for student success. Teachers can't focus on helping their students unless their own mental, physical, and emotional needs are met—and staff wellness is also a key strategy for boosting teacher recruitment and retention.

School districts can support the well-being of their students and staff by designing and furnishing learning environments with health and wellness in mind. With the right approach, PK-12 leaders can create and equip classrooms, lounge areas, and other school spaces in a way that enhances, rather than inhibits, wellness for everyone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLNESS FOR STUDENT AND TEACHER SUCCESS

As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) **observes**, research demonstrates that students who are healthy and physically active tend to have better grades and attendance at school. They're able to focus on instruction more effectively and exhibit less time off task.

Mental health **is as critical** to students' success as their physical health. Students' mental health affects their ability to focus, learn, manage stress, and form positive relationships, among other areas. Stress and anxiety aren't just high among students. Many educators also suffer from these conditions, and **it's hindering the ability** of school systems to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. In fact, new research suggests that the teacher shortages many districts have experienced since COVID have only **gotten worse** in many cases—and they weren't just an aberration of the pandemic. As we shift our thinking back toward interactions and supports that can be given to students and teachers, we are moving our thinking from trauma to triumph mentality.

Supporting teacher wellness is a key strategy for reducing attrition rates and improving teacher retention. **Nearly three out of four teachers** say

they experience frequent job-related stress, and 59 percent say they're burned out. K-12 leaders can minimize this stress by creating a positive and healthy working environment for their teachers.

HOW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS CAN ENHANCE WELLNESS

The physical design of a learning environment can have a profound effect on both student and teacher well-being. Here are five key strategies for designing learning spaces that are warm, welcoming, and foster improved wellness for everyone.

DESIGN SCHOOL SPACES FOR MAXIMUM COMFORT AND ENGAGEMENT.

When students are physically comfortable and have the supplies that they need, they can relax and focus on instruction more effectively. To ensure that students can work comfortably, tables, desks, and chairs should be ergonomically designed and age-appropriate.

One way to promote physical comfort is to use adjustable furniture where possible. For example, the height-adjustable **Tilt-N-Nest** desks from Classroom Select help to create a more comfortable learning environment for students by



Flexible classrooms, where most or all of the furnishings are easy to move, allow the room to change as the mode of instruction or subject matter needs change. The Tilt-N-Nest Desks mentioned above are featured in both of these renders – both in use and folded for storage. Interior design by School Specialty® Projects By Design®.

letting them easily raise or lower their desks to a height that works best for them.

Another way to ensure comfort is to give students plenty of seating choices. Providing a variety of seating options—including not only class desks or tables but also **soft seating options**, bistro-style **chairs** and **tables**, and even **standing desks**—empowers students to choose an option that works best for them. It allows students to “find their place” where they’re most comfortable within the classroom, which can help promote a sense of psychological safety and security.

Teachers deserve comfortable seating options as well. Providing a comfortable place for teachers to relax, reconnect, and recharge goes a long way toward establishing teacher wellness. For instance, provide soft seating and other comfortable furnishings in teachers’ lounges. Give educators plenty of seating styles to choose from, including individual lounge chairs, rockers, couches, and tables. That way, teachers can find seating that works best for their needs in the moment.

USE FLEXIBLE FURNISHINGS THAT ENCOURAGE MOVEMENT AND CONNECTION.

Social connection is an important aspect of wellness. “Social connectedness influences our minds, bodies, and behaviors,” the **CDC writes**. “Research shows that social connectedness can lead to longer life, better health, and improved well-being.”

Flexible learning environments with movable furniture that can be configured easily to support various group sizes and activities make it simple for students to work together to complete tasks and projects. This, in turn, can help forge stronger social connections between students.

Flexible furnishings also allow for students to move around easily. When furniture is on casters, it can be shifted around to create wide, open spaces that can accommodate larger group activities or let students take frequent “movement” breaks from their lessons.

This idea is **supported by research**. A team of Australian researchers examined eight primary and



This rendering shows the many options for a teacher’s lounge. You can pick-and-choose the furnishings that fit both your space and your budget. Interior design by School Specialty® Projects By Design®.

secondary schools in that country and concluded that flexible learning spaces increased student well-being by enhancing the students' comfort, movement, and connectedness.

For instance, the researchers found that flexible learning spaces encouraged more active group learning and movement, which was beneficial to students' physical and emotional well-being. One student was quoted as saying, "We get to move a lot, and that's really comfortable because you're not always sitting." Another student said, "I think I've made more friends with the group work. I know we've been in the same school for about three years, but with the group work, you become a bit closer."

INTEGRATE CALMING AND SOOTHING ELEMENTS INTO THE DESIGN OF LEARNING SPACES.

Furniture and equipment that allows students to rock, stretch, and move can help them calm down, manage stress, and regulate their emotions. For instance, self-soothing furniture such as fidget stools can help students effectively manage their behavior, while **bubble tubes**, **fidget devices**, and other **sensory objects** can help relieve stress as well.

Learners who find themselves over-stimulated might need some time to decompress. This is why a growing number of schools are adding quiet spaces or "chill zones" — separate areas of the classroom that are available to students who need some down time. For instance, these **"privacy pods"** from Classroom Select give students a quiet space in which to retreat by themselves or work in pairs. **Many schools** are even creating entire **"sensory rooms"** for students who need a place to relax.



Any space big enough to sit in can be a sensory haven. This rendering features products from **Snoezelen®** and **Abilitations®**



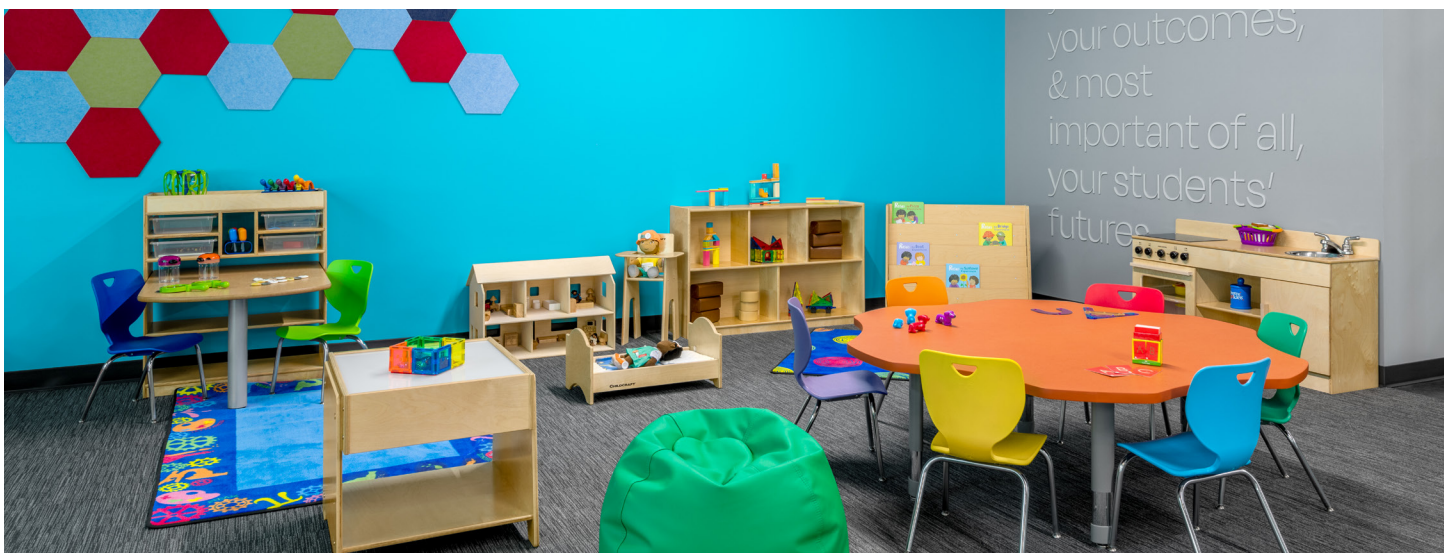
Designed and furnished by School Specialty® Projects By Design®, The Counselor's Office at Oliver Brown Elementary in Manhattan, Kansas shows seating options giving the student agency in choosing what suits them best. On the desk, the table, and in the mobile caddy are an assortment of fidgets and other sensory items to help students.

INCLUDE PROPER LIGHTING, ACOUSTICS, AND VENTILATION.

Environmental factors such as lighting, acoustics, and air quality should be at optimum levels for learning and well-being. For instance, schools should incorporate natural lighting wherever possible and avoid using fluorescent lights, instead choosing warmer, recessed lighting sources. If replacing bulbs or light fixtures isn't feasible, **light filters** provide an affordable option for softening classroom lighting.

Active learning environments can be somewhat noisy. Instead of sitting in their seats and listening to the teacher talk, students are moving around and talking with their peers. The noise this creates can make it hard for some students to focus, and it can have long-term effects on their health and well-being. Noisy classroom environments can affect teachers' health as well, such as by causing vocal strain as teachers try to make themselves heard above the din.

Sound-absorbing acoustic panels cut down on ambient noise in classrooms and other learning environments. Conversely, some spaces may need **sound amplification systems** to help students hear instruction more effectively while reducing strain on teachers' vocal chords - especially in larger group settings.



The three photos above show a wide assortment of sound-absorbing acoustical treatments in our **Dallas, Texas Innovation Center**. From small, easy-to-install wall units in the early childhood area, to hanging walls and structural shapes, these treatments are made with 55% post-consumer recycled plastics and provide both sound abatement as well as visual interest.

Proper ventilation is also essential for keeping everyone healthy and reducing the transmission of airborne viruses. Portable **air purifiers** and classroom air filtration systems can ensure clean, healthy air within learning environments of all sizes.

PROMOTE GOOD HYGIENE.

Providing **portable sinks, hand sanitizer** stations, and other convenient options for students and staff to wash their hands and remove germs can encourage proper hygiene. **Pre-packaged hygiene kits** can also promote healthy habits among students.

Students can't learn effectively if they're not healthy physically, mentally, or emotionally—and they also can't learn if their teachers aren't feeling well. As K-12 leaders look for strategies to enhance student and staff wellness, the design of classrooms and other school spaces plays a key role in supporting the well-being of everyone.

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