

SCHOOLS

# D101 to change up classroom seating

Mike Ellis

Classroom seating is about to evolve in Western Springs District 101, as the district prepares to implement its Renovation for Innovation plan at all four schools.

Over the next five to ten years, across District 101, the traditional classroom furniture consisting of individual desk spaces will be replaced with new “flexible” and “mobile” seating.

According to Dr. Sarah Coffey, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the district, for the past several years, District 101 has been working towards shifting from conventional to “construction-

ist” instructional practices in the classroom.

“Part of that is rethinking and reimagining what classroom spaces look like to support that shift in instructional technique—from teachers in front of classrooms with kids in rows and seats, to [a] more student-centered approach, where we have flexible spaces where kids can work together; they can work independently,” Coffey said. ... “Renovation for Innovation is essentially evolving our classroom spaces to being 21st century-ready for kids and learning, to match the innovative teaching that’s going on at all four buildings within the district.”

Coffey said in the past few years, a number of con-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAH COFFEY

**District 101 is in the process of converting its classroom furniture from traditional desk seating to more flexible and mobile “constructivist” seating.**

structivist spaces have been created at the various district schools, such as a class-

room at Laidlaw Elementary School that has roughly 20 students, but only six desks.

Last month, at the district’s S.T.E.A.M. (science, technology, engineering,

arts and mathematics) night at McClure Junior High School, sample furniture was on display for parents and students to view. This furniture included mobile chairs and desks, as well as Hokki stools without seat-backs.

The furniture remained in the classroom at McClure for two weeks, after which time Coffey and superintendent Dr. Brian Barnhart interviewed the students who used it.

Coffey said the overall student reaction was very positive, and the most desired item for future classroom incorporation was the Hokki stool.

While the absence of a

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# BIG IDEAS UNDERWAY

## PARTNERING WITH D101 RENOVATION FOR INNOVATION

**Have you heard about Renovation for Innovation?**  
Renovation for Innovation is a district-wide multi-year initiative to re-imagine classrooms as innovative learning spaces. WSFEE will match district funds for furniture upgrades for the next two school years.

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seat-back might appear to contribute to a defective posture, Coffey, who has a Hokki stool in her office, said research shows that the stools actually benefit posture.

For the next two years, the district will be partnering with the Western Springs Foundation for Educational Excellence (WSFEE), which will match the district's \$50,000 annual contribution to accelerate the project timeline.

"We're excited to be able to partner with the district on the furniture aspect of this program, and be able to accelerate the process to impact more students and teachers sooner," WSFEE chair Laura Rankin said.

Rankin said WSFEE's support of Renovation for Innovation will not inhibit its ability to support other small grants that it currently

awards to students, teachers and parents who submit requests.

The classroom furniture will not be identical at all four schools, with elementary students having a different set of needs than junior-high pupils.

"I think there are developmental differences in what kids need and want," Coffey said. "At the primary grades, there is a need for a lot more tactile movement and motion; at our higher grade-levels, kids need, I think, less input of movement or motion; they need more ability and access to technology, to collaboration spaces.

"So the furniture definitely molds and matches to the different ages of kids."

Furthermore, each of the four district schools—Laidlaw, Field Park and Forest Hills Elementary and McClure Junior High—has its own building team, which

will make individual requests to suit its particular perceived needs.

"Every building has its own 'ideas team' with a liaison from WSFEE," Coffey said, "and each of the buildings is creating their own vision for what renovation will look like at their particular building."

Coffey said funds will be allocated "equitably" at the respective schools, based on student population.

"All four schools are getting spaces that are equitable to the size of the school," she said. "Obviously, McClure is biggest; so McClure has the most spaces to start."

Next year, Renovation for Innovation will be implemented at the respective District 101 schools as follows:

Field Park	Fourth grade
Forest Hills	Third grade
McClure	All grades by content area
Laidlaw	To be determined

Coffey said barring any imminent infrastructure emergencies at its facilities, the district expects to be able to recreate all of its classrooms over the next decade.

"We believe that we can address most of the classroom spaces within a five-year period," she said.

Among the specific differences parents will begin to observe in classrooms are mobile desks and chairs, with emphasis being placed on "flexibility" and "mobility."

"When you go into one of these renovated spaces,

what you're going to see are defined learning spaces—opportunities for kids to work independently, opportunities for kids to work on the floor, opportunities for the desks and spaces to move," Coffey said. ... "Probably the biggest distinctive difference will be an absence of classroom desks like you or I had in classrooms."

As far as the potential for the mobile and flexible furniture to create distractions or disciplinary issues in class, Coffey said teachers will outline behavioral expectations at the beginning of the school-year, just as they do at present.

"I think when you set an expectation with the kids that we have, they meet that expectation," she said. "So it's just a matter of classroom management."

In addition to the furniture upgrades, the Renovation for Innovation plan will also in-

clude updated lighting at all four buildings.

"The reason why I think [flexible seating] is a better solution for all kids is because it provides a solution for every kid," Coffey said. "In a traditional classroom space, there is one way to be, and that's in your desk, facing the teacher. ...

"In a classroom that we are creating, you have space and place and choice with how you learn best. So you might still be that kid who prefers a desk and a defined space and facing forward; you have that opportunity. But you might also be a student who needs to move, and wants a standing desk; or who needs to converse with someone else to effectively learn.

"This really affords the opportunity for kids to evolve as learners and be comfortable as learners with more of a natural fit for their preference."

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