Post Occupancy Evaluation
Milpitas Unified School District Learning Centers

BURNETT AND RANDALL ELEMENTARY
By David Reid. December 2013 evaluation of both elementary schools conducted by David Reid, Bob Baum and Lauren Maass.

Foreword

Gould Evans Education Practice Studio is a team of passionate design professionals immersed in research and the application of ideas to better embrace the principles of 21st Century Education. We look across industries and bring forth ideas from an array of research that informs new design strategies and leads to increased success for our clients’ students.

We have developed a rigorous Post Occupancy Evaluation process as a part of our dedication to evidence-based design and continuous design improvement. We rely on a variety of tools to capture both quantitative and qualitative feedback on the success of learning spaces including on-line surveys, poster surveys, ethnography, photo surveys, and round table discussions. It’s important to never rely on rules of thumb – the landscape of education is changing rapidly. Maintaining relevant formulas of educational design is integrated into our practice.
As the Milpitas School District continues to improve educational facilities to accommodate 21st Century learning, Gould Evans has applied a research-based approach to assess the quality of our design through the schools’ user groups. Our approach to designing new schools and modernization efforts includes assessing the spectrum of designed learning components so we can benefit from key findings on other projects within the District. Questions about furniture options, student focus ability, flexible space utilization and more were brought up.
What Students Find Attractive About the Learning Centers

Freedom & Autonomy
Students are making the Learning Center their own space with the freedom to sit in various areas, especially with the ability to sit with friends. The Center becomes a social, learning experience and illustrates that a “shared experience” can be more powerful than an individual experience. The level of engagement increases as friends teach each other and learn together. Students carry this learning style home and to other out-of-school activities in which they socialize.

Stimulating, Multi-Sensory Environment
The students embrace the color, the relaxing atmosphere, the peacefulness of the experience, the spaciousness. They commented on the smell of the space as something they appreciate: “Smells like wood.” The furniture is enjoyable to sit on since it’s designed for their enjoyment (rather than hard desks & chairs). It is a respectful space: the customized environment gives them a greater sense of dignity in the learning process.

Fun Learning Tools
The Learning Centers are equipped with tools that the students embrace, that they relate to, and gravitate toward – digital tools. They treat these tools with respect. For example, there is very little damage or turnover of the Chromebooks. These are “Net-Generation” students so providing them with the tools of their preference is critical to their engagement.

Issues to Improve Upon:
(1) Students are only appearing to be engaged on what they are doing on the Chromebooks (even if they are on I-Ready or JiJi, they are really not engaging the tasks to the best of their ability), and
(2) Students are doing other things on the Chromebooks than what they are supposed to (i.e., going on other websites, and playing games like those on their Google Chrome accounts).
SURVEY RESPONSES:
MY FAVORITE THING ABOUT THE LEARNING CENTER IS...

SIT ANYWHERE

COMFORTABLE

COLORFUL

RELAXING

SMELLS LIKE WOOD

COOL

CONCENTRATE

SPACIOUS

BIG

I-READY

LEARNING

EXPLORING

NEW TECHNOLOGY

CHROMEBOOKS

CALMING

NICE FURNITURE

FRIENDS

MATH

GOOGLE SEARCH

READING

WRITING

PROJECTS

BEAN BAGS

CLEAN

FUN

CONCENTRATE

PEACEFUL

SMART

NUMBERS

I-READY

BEANS BAGS

GOOD

COOL

COOL
What Could Further Enhance Student Engagement?

Self-Directed Learning
The students aspire to more self-directed activities. They’ve been given a taste of autonomy in their learning experience (less common in their past experiences in the lecture-dominated classroom). Now they’re learning the benefits. With incremental “training,” this understanding of responsible behavior rewarded by further freedoms is a tremendous motivator to support further self-directed learning.

Use of More Learning Tools
To date, the wall-to-wall whiteboards have been off limits. To many students, they’re the coolest thing about the space, yet they aren’t allowed to use them. Likewise, the beanbags are often “in timeout.” Randall Elementary has managed to build a reward system around select furniture and spaces – those students that stay on task and don’t disrupt others are given first preference on these pieces of “prime real estate.” Under this model, the furniture that was once a liability (from the teachers’ perspectives) is now an asset. (The only time this system breaks down is when the Learning Center is filled to maximum capacity.)

Greater Diversity of Activities and More Hands-On Learning
Students have fond memories from their lessons with Mr. Julian. The topic was robotics. The students yearn for hands-on opportunities, project-based learning and teachers that are excited to share new lessons with the students. Following the round table debrief with staff (sharing the students’ survey feedback), Mr. Julian and Ms. Thompson were inspired to move beyond the “maiden voyage” stage of the Learning Centers. This first semester was akin to a shakedown cruise, allowing teachers and students to get familiarized with the space and its dynamics. It’s now time to test the capabilities of the space, the responsibility of the students, and to stretch the comfort zone of the teachers!
SURVEY RESPONSES:

IF YOU WERE THE TEACHER, HOW WOULD YOU MAKE THE LEARNING CENTER MORE FUN?

- Science
- Use whiteboards
- Posters
- More beanbags
- Art projects
- Make robots
- Hands-on projects
- A reading place
- Attend every day
- Talk quietly
- Give prizes
- Decorations
- Choose activities
Key Insights

Student Motivation in the Learning Center

- Moderate increases, high increases or exceptional increases in student engagement. (No detrimental effects to student engagement.)

- Majority of teachers believe the Learning Center increases students’ ability to achieve a higher grade (either moderately or exceptionally). A minority of teachers feel it has no impact.

- Large majority of teachers believe the Learning Center has a high impact to motivate students to be in class.

- All the teachers believe the Learning Center contributes to an increase in students’ abilities to be creative (ranging from a low increase to an exceptional increase).

SURVEY RESPONSES:
BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCE IN THE LEARNING CENTER, PLEASE INDICATE HOW YOU BELIEVE THE ROOM IS CONTRIBUTING TO AN INCREASE IN:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exceptional</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement in the Class</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student’s Ability to Achieve a Higher Grade</td>
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![Graph showing survey responses](image-url)
**Lower Student-to-Teacher Ratio in the Classrooms**

The Learning Centers are having significant impacts on the curricular opportunities in the classrooms as well as more opportunities for teachers to engage in collaboration and professional development. With half the class under the guidance of the learning center teacher, the remaining class enjoys a low student-to-teacher ratio in the classroom, enabling more 1:1 instruction. With the full class, or even an entire grade level in the Learning Center together, the grade level teachers have time to develop collaborative projects, mentor one another, and engage in professional development to expand their comfort across more pedagogical models.

**Successful Approach by Randall Elementary**

The successful approach to using the Learning Center by Randall Elementary may provide a best-practice approach for other schools. The Faculty and Staff at Randall Elementary utilize a reward system based on the points accrued by students within their learning programs on the Chromebooks, when they complete certain tasks, meet goals, etc. At the end of each week, the LC instructor tallies up the points and the students with the most points are rewarded. The bean bag chairs along with a few other pieces of “prime real estate” have become incentives used to motivate the students in performance and behavior.

**Key Insights**

Rewards offered to students based on points accrued through the learning program:

- **Game Day or Enrichment Day** in the “Green Room;” ability to occupy the central area room and play special games (board or otherwise); students are given more flexibility
- **Use of bean bag chairs** (although not popular with teachers, they are highly coveted by students); students must earn a “spot”
- **“Despicable Me” Minion Badge Button Pins** (we all got one and love them!); kids love them
- **Full class reward** is sometimes a movie in the Green Room, kids spread out over the floor.
Furniture Adaptations

The Kindergarten students utilize every piece of furniture, doubling up on the personal tables and the soft benches and utilizing the Harvest Benches as work surfaces. Older students take liberties to rearrange the furniture in a variety of ways. This freedom to create their own settings appears to increase their enjoyment in using the Learning Center.

The After-School Group took the most liberties with rearrangement of the furniture. Multiple grade levels, co-habitating the space, quickly moved the furniture into their preferred configurations. It serves to reinforce the wide variety of preferences seen among students across all age groups – some are “desk studiers” and some are “lounge studiers,” some prefer to be in the open, central to everything, and some prefer to build forts along the edges of the room.

1, 2, 3 - Teachers and older students reset the “classroom” side of the LC in a variety of settings to respond to various needs. This area of the LC is used extensively by teachers and staff for after-school meetings and activities. The larger scaled furniture, smaller room size, and ability to acoustically separate it from the rest of the Learning Center has been extremely valuable and functional.

4 - The narrow open area between the LC entrance and the “classroom” area is used the least. Only when the LC reaches maximum capacity is this area actively utilized. The Harvest Benches tend to isolate this area from the rest of the open commons.

5 - The bean bag chairs were temporarily in “time out” during observation. A select few older students have misused these, but school’s Principal confirmed that he wants these back in circulation and that permission to use these chairs will be granted based on good behavior.
Lessons Learned

There are some valuable lessons learned to support the next generation of Learning Center designs.

Furniture Optimization

Experimenting with a broad range of furniture in the early pilot Learning Centers has provided good depth of feedback. The outcomes are pointing toward the following.

Furniture Optimization

The furniture is nicely scalable as is, a higher density of furniture over crowds space, offsetting functionality and performance of the LC.

We will need more: Elements that are working well and should be maintained:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MOBILITY</th>
<th>A LARGE PALETTE OF FURNITURE</th>
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<td>a few large pieces and everything on wheels</td>
<td>to appeal to the various preferences of students and support diverse configurations</td>
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<tr>
<th>HEIGHT-ADJUSTABLE TABLES AND CHAIRS</th>
<th>USE OF SMALLER FURNITURE PIECES</th>
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<td>to support a range of users from Kindergarten students to adults</td>
<td>(such as bean bags and ottomans) to utilize every nook and cranny of the Learning Center and optimize capacity</td>
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<tr>
<th>AUGMENTED LARGE WORK SURFACES</th>
<th>42” HIGH PINWHEEL TABLES</th>
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<td>into the LC to support project-based learning</td>
<td>have height adjustable chairs and tables; great for maintaining students’ attention</td>
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Division of Space

The division of the Burnett Learning Center has been very valuable (1/2, 2/3 split of the room with overhead doors between them). The creation of “the Green Room” at Randall has also been valuable to lend the space greater diversity of uses, but the blind spots created by the existing structural shear wall are detrimental to supervision and teacher instruction. The subdivision of space should be strongly considered as a part of future Learning Centers.

Support Needs

Support needs include: Teacher work space and observation area (especially for Kindergartener classes), storage area (maybe outside the Learning Center in the corridor) for students to stow note pads and textbooks (especially for 6th grade students), and dedicated electrical circuits to allow more charging locations for laptop carts.
"The Learning Center is supporting activities at its very best when Kinder and Grade 6 students are sharing the space."

– Richard Julian
Principal, Burnett Elementary