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## Agile Learning Spaces at St Paul's Lutheran Primary School

The Reggio Emilia approach to education refers to the classroom (learning environment) as the 'third teacher'. Montessori schools adopt a similar philosophy. The premise is that the learning environment is an essential ingredient in igniting learning.

Traditional rows of desks and chairs do not typically exist at St Paul's. Our classrooms are fitted out with furniture that is described as agile or flexible: stadiums, community booths, standing desks, floor tables, wobble stools, ottomans, carpet mats and more. Students are given choice in where they undertake learning tasks.

Why?

The reasons are many:

- When we started reassessing our classroom furniture in 2015, we learned from occupational therapists that desks and chairs do not suit the bodies of 83% of school students. We found that students will naturally gravitate to positions that suit their body type when given choice.
- Most furniture is easily adjustable and portable, meaning teachers and students can change the configuration of the furniture according to the learning taking place. This also includes each teacher now having a mobile Kaboodle rather than a stationary teacher's desk occupying a significant space in the classroom. The design of learning experiences is limited only by the imagination of teachers and students, and not by the rigidity of the traditional classroom.
- The industrial model of education promoted uniformity amongst students, requiring them to be seated in a consistent and regimented fashion. We aim for our classrooms to be comfortable and inviting, where unity eclipses uniformity. Our classrooms resemble airport lounges in that, in order to optimise learning, students can choose their seating (or otherwise) according to the activity they are engaged in. For example, students might choose a standing desk for collaborative work, a bean bag for sustained reading, and a traditional desk and chair for independent writing..
- Active furniture such as wobble stools, balance boards and pedal units give students opportunity to unobtrusively fidget and wriggle. This satisfies a young body's need for movement, while not disrupting the learning of their peers or themselves.

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- Writeable surfaces encourage risk taking and prototyping, in an attempt to ensure learning remains activated. This addresses an element of the Commitment and Consistency Principle, which suggests that learning can switch off when a student puts something in writing, due to the feeling of permanency. This also allows us to capture the learning moments on our iPads, enabling students to come back to their pre-knowledge and train of thought when next engaging with that particular learning event.
- Standing desks, community booths and grouped desks promote connection, communication and collaboration, which are attributes recognised globally as essential in the 21st century.

Each St Paul's classroom has a diversity of furniture that allows teachers and students to adopt Professor David Thornburg's archetypal learning spaces. Examples of these spaces include: (i) the campfire, a space where students can gather to learn from an expert or guru; (ii) the cave, a quiet and reflective space where students can activate their diffuse thinking and shift their learning from external knowledge to internal belief; and (iii) the watering hole, an informal space where students can collaborate, share information and discoveries and bounce off each other, thereby serving as an incubator for ideas.

Students are explicitly taught how to engage with their agile learning environments. They are exceedingly capable of rising to the maturity required to make responsible choices and to be accountable for their decisions. We often underestimate what our children are truly capable of when we invest time in instilling quality values, and then step back and trust them to make discerning decisions.

Student engagement has improved significantly since the introduction of agile and flexible furniture at St Paul's. We attribute this in part to the spaces meeting some of our students' basic physical (e.g. comfort and movement) and psychological (e.g. choice, trust and control) needs, freeing their minds to better focus on the tasks ahead.

Our approach to school furniture is adopted not only for students, but also for staff. When staff come together in our shared space, they have the freedom to sit on traditional chairs, high chairs, stools or couches. They can stand with their back against a wall or they can sit on the floor. They can recline on a lounge with a leg folded under them or stretch their legs out. We know that each member of staff has different physical needs and our desire is to provide a variety of options to enable them to secure a comfortable position in order to focus on the task at hand.

We do appreciate that the look and operation of our classrooms are a significant departure from the schooling experience of most adults in our community. As such, the invitation always exists for parents/carers and other adults to see our learning spaces in action. You don't need to be a new or prospective parent to book a personalised tour of our classrooms. No matter how long you have been in our community, you are always welcome to have a close inspection of the reality of a contemporary classroom by booking a customised tour.