

Repurposing Furniture to Support Learning in the Early Grades Edutopia.org

A kindergarten teacher gives five practical examples of repurposing classroom furniture to serve multiple uses.

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Earlier this school year, a few of my kindergartners caught my attention when they excitedly expanded their [block structure](#) across the classroom floor. Previous students had been more interested in building their block towers *up* rather than *out*, but these students were eager to see how far they could stretch their creation. Over the following days, they widened their building-block kingdom even farther. I ultimately rearranged the entire room to better accommodate a block area that encouraged width instead of height.

I'm a supporter of evolving classroom spaces—of redesigning the layout of the room as the needs and interests of students develop. The easiest way to accommodate students, I've found, is to use the furniture itself to set up a functional, spacious, and logical classroom. There are several benefits to this approach. It provides children with safe, low-stakes environmental changes; fosters flexibility; and creates opportunities for spatial adaptation and problem-solving. Additionally, rearranging the room throughout the school year enables teachers to address potential catalysts for challenging behaviors and social conflicts that may arise, while sparking curiosity in an otherwise-familiar space.

Repurposing classroom furniture not only maximizes space, but also encourages students to explore and engage with the classroom more fully, rather than predominantly staying in one area (their assigned tables or desks or a specific play area). The room becomes more versatile and easily adaptable for learning centers, simultaneous group work, small group instruction, and project-based learning.

Classroom design is a challenge for many teachers, due to constraints outside of their control, but there are still a number of practical, affordable ways for classroom furniture to serve multiple functions. Below are five such examples for pre-K and early elementary school teachers.

5 Ways to Reimagine Classroom Design

1. Adhesive dry-erase boards: These are a favorite in my classroom, and I have several versions because there are many ways to use them. One option is to use [adhesive strips of whiteboard material](#) and stick them to the backs of bookshelves, cabinets, or other furniture. Most adhesive whiteboards are easily removable without damaging the furniture. Teachers can also use Command strips or Velcro to attach mini or individual whiteboards to walls or furniture.

These vertical surfaces give students spaces to write and draw, which improves handwriting and fine motor skills. In my classroom, I have an adhesive whiteboard on the back of a bookcase that would otherwise be unused during work times. Students have made it into a handwriting practice station during our literacy centers.

2. Sensory walls: While many kindergarten and early elementary classrooms have a calm-down corner or a similar area, sensory walls are less common, often due to space constraints. But sensory walls are invaluable outlets for students who are seeking specific sensory experiences or need to self-regulate via sensory inputs. If space is an issue in your classroom, consider utilizing the sides and backs of furniture to create sensory areas, as opposed to dedicating an entire wall.

For example, you can use magnetic tape to attach textured materials to the side of a filing cabinet or Velcro to secure materials to a bookshelf. In my classroom, I've attached reversible sequin fabric to the back of a shelf near the door, which students enjoy interacting with as they enter and leave the room. Depending on your classroom setup, you might even be able to set up multiple, varied sensory stations, so that students can seek different sensory inputs depending on their needs.

3. Pegboard furniture: Some classroom furniture, particularly wooden pieces, comes with pegboard backing. If not, adhesive pegboard can easily be added. Hooks on the pegboard are great for holding materials during independent work or play. You can create reading fluency strips or math fact cards, hole-punch them, then hang them on a ring attached to the pegboard. My kindergartners love going over sight words and consonant-vowel-consonant words this way because they can choose what to practice and move to a different part of the room for their work.

4. Magnetic furniture: Another favorite in my classroom, magnetic furniture supports both play and learning. File cabinets, cabinet sides, and the backs of shelves can all be used for magnetic letter or number practice, sorting activities, and interactive play. Magnetic hooks are able to hold pocket charts as well as baskets for materials like sentence starters, pictures, or math problems.

In my classroom, I put magnetic hooks on a metal bookshelf to hang baskets and pocket charts, which students access independently during learning centers. Playing with the magnetic letters and numbers is one of my students' favorite activities during play centers, and as a result, my students have become comfortable with reading and spelling words, as well as writing number sentences.

5. Adjustable table height: Flexible seating is popular in many classrooms to support diverse learning needs, but it isn't always feasible due to financial, space, or safety constraints. However, classroom tables and desks with adjustable legs can be lowered to create floor-seating options or raised to create standing workspaces. These adjustments make use of existing furniture without the need for extra pieces, adding variety to the classroom layout.