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THE MANHATTAN SCHOOLS PROJECT

Transforming Educational Spaces



LOCATION: Manhattan, IL

PARTNERSHIPS: Henricksen, Pepper Construction, STR Partners, Installation Specialists Inc

Manhattan Junior High School, nestled in a close-knit community southwest of Chicago, underwent a remarkable transformation as key stakeholders worked together to create flexible, inviting spaces tailored to modern educational needs. This ambitious project united design and education experts, including Sarah Rodefeld from HON, Holly Clarke and David Clay from Henricksen, David Shea with Installation Specialists Inc, and community members like Jeff Dvorak, Group Superintendent, and Kirk Beutke, Project Manager at Pepper Construction. Their collaboration exemplifies the impact of teamwork and thoughtful design.

Product Solutions:

Build™ student desks, Build™ makerspace tables, Smartlink® student seating, Smartlink® teacher desks, Class-ifi™ storage, Storyline™ bookcases, Tangram™ seating, Confetti™ seating, Flock® ottomans, Preside® tables, Motivate® seating, 10500™ series desks, Workwall systems, Ignition® task seating, Solve® task seating, Mav™ seating, Astir™ seating, Birk™ tables, Contain® storage, Accelerate® workstations, Unika Vaev screens



"This project showcases the impact of thoughtful design and collaboration in shaping educational spaces that truly serve their communities."

Vision and Objectives

The Manhattan Schools project focused on two primary goals: enhancing classroom flexibility and reimagining the cafeteria into a multifunctional, welcoming space. Superintendent Jeff Dvorak, a longtime community member, shared his personal connection:

"This project meant so much more to me because this is my community, and my son will experience something I helped create. The memories we made throughout this process are ones I will cherish forever."

Classroom Innovation

Sarah Rodefild, Business Development Manager at HON, emphasized the need for adaptable classroom furniture. "We introduced trapezoid-shaped Build student desks to maximize reconfiguration options and incorporated varying desk heights for a dynamic learning environment," she explained. This flexibility allows teachers and students to tailor the space to different activities, enhancing engagement and collaboration.

Holly Clarke from Henricksen highlighted the importance of early planning. "We created mockups for teachers and students to test," she said. "This feedback was instrumental in crafting solutions that met the district's unique needs. Our role as a furniture dealer goes beyond just providing products; it's about being an advisor and problem solver for the client."

Reimagining the Cafeteria

The cafeteria, once described as having a “harsh and unwelcoming” atmosphere, was transformed into a vibrant hub for both the school and community. The redesign featured soft seating with durable vinyl coverings, ensuring the space could serve multiple purposes beyond lunchtime, such as study sessions and dance practices.

Community Collaboration

This project was a true community effort, involving input from teachers, parents, and board members. “Manhattan’s commitment to their students and community was evident in every decision,” Clarke shared. This collaboration ensured the final design met the diverse needs of students and residents alike.

Construction and Design Collaboration

Kirk Beutke, Project Manager at Pepper Construction, praised the teamwork: “The balance of small-town values and access to Chicagoland resources created a unique dynamic. Every team member stepped up, making it a truly collaborative project.” He also highlighted the project’s unique location: “Building a brand-new school in the middle of a farm field was a rare and rewarding challenge. Watching it transform from concept to completion was special.”

Dvorak echoed this sentiment: “From STR Partners’ architectural design to Henricksen’s furniture planning and HON’s manufacturing expertise, everyone worked together seamlessly to deliver a fantastic school.”





The collaborative process also left a lasting impression on Beutke. "The Manhattan community's trust and involvement were unparalleled," he noted. "They brought a sense of pride and ownership to the project, which inspired everyone on the team." Holly Clarke reflected on the relationships forged throughout the process: "Working with the HON team and the Manhattan community was incredible. Everyone's commitment to excellence ensured that we delivered spaces that will serve this community for decades. This was more than a project; it was a partnership."

Key Milestones

For Clarke, the grand opening was a highlight: "Hundreds of community members filled the school, and the excitement was substantial. Seeing students' faces light up as they entered their new library was incredibly rewarding."

For Jeff Dvorak, the grand opening held a special significance. "Walking into the building with my son, seeing the community's reaction, and hearing students say, 'This is amazing,' were moments I'll never forget," he shared. "It's rare to witness such immediate and overwhelming appreciation for a project."



Lasting Impact

The new spaces have already exceeded expectations. Feedback from students, staff, and the community highlights the project's success in creating an environment that inspires learning and fosters engagement. Rodefild noted, "This project showcases the impact of thoughtful design and collaboration in shaping educational spaces that truly serve their communities."

As Manhattan School District 114 continues to grow, this project stands as a testament to what can be achieved when vision, expertise, and community spirit converge.