

Case Study

KENORA CATHOLIC DISTRICT



**KENORA
CATHOLIC
DISTRICT
SCHOOL BOARD
CASE STUDY
K-12 SCHOOL SYSTEM IN
KENORA, ONTARIO**

Back in 2013, the Kenora Catholic District School Board was strongly traditional, with limited exposure to the 21st century flexible learning space concept. Situated on the shores of the Lake of the Woods and surrounded by majestic pine trees, the town of Kenora (population 15,000) is anchored by tourism, though many families also depend on logging and mining. The school district itself, with four elementary schools and one high school, has roots stretching back to the 1880s. Today, the Kenora Catholic District School Board serves a student body of 1,500, with a wide diversity of cultures and languages.

Departing from the typical top-down pattern, the groundswell for change in Kenora's classrooms began with teachers taking pragmatic, concrete action to transform their outdated, industrial-era classrooms into open, transparent learning environments. Teachers went digging through storage and scoured warehouses to assemble the furniture they needed, even bringing in their own pieces from home. With their willingness to challenge the possibilities, these staffers had taken the first steps in what became an era of real and meaningful change.

Next, says Jamey Robertson, Innovation and Creativity Coordinator for Kenora Catholic District School Board, "We actually had an entire class of grade 5 and 6 students approach us with a proposal to help them rethink their classroom space." The children had done their homework, bringing valid concerns to the table and asking the adults to buy in to their case. Clearly, Kenora was having a cultural movement. Students, teachers, and librarians across the board were ready to embrace collaborative learning spaces. The problem was their current furniture - acquired over the past several decades - wasn't suitable for much beyond the static classroom with rows of desks set up for lectures and slideshows. The Kenora Catholic District School Board committed to making change a reality. That meant exploration, planning, participation, and dialogue at all levels.

RETHINKING LEARNING SPACES





COMMITTING TO TRANSFORMATION



As a remote rural school district, the staff felt keenly that the latest trends in future-forward education were taking place far away in wealthier, urbanized areas. Even a visit to Toronto, the educational hub of the region, is a commitment: the provincial capital lies some 1,800 km (1,100 miles) from northwest Ontario. Despite the challenges, district staff committed to gaining in-depth knowledge of contemporary best practices and seeking out demonstrations of state-of-the-art products. “We knew we needed to do more than replace old desks and chairs,” says Robertson. “We needed to reshape our learning spaces at a very

basic and fundamental level. But at first, we weren’t even sure what spatial work involved – what we could get in terms of products, what the spaces could look like, or what they could enable the students to do.”

The first step was sending staff to the Merchandise Mart in Chicago to meet with potential vendor partners. The second step was gathering extensive input from staff and students. “Since we didn’t have a framework, we created our own,” Robertson explains. “For example, we redesigned our grade 7 and 8 space based on seven design drivers that we identified and

documented. It's not a top-down approach. It's really 'what do you want to see, and what do the staff and students value?'"

Staff members were released from their normal duties for meetings to discuss and brainstorm about what they needed from the learning environment. Students were also given a voice, and engaged in small group activities in their current classrooms, libraries, and labs so that district staff could make observations and assess firsthand how a spatial redesign could positively impact learning. These dialogues became

far more than an exercise. For each spatial redesign, staff and student input was documented in a project playbook that detailed the learning goals for the space. The project playbooks were prioritized as a critical path step, to be completed before any consultants or vendors were invited in to display prototypes or give advice on spatial strategies.



“The beauty in creating these types of spaces is that they are going to be just as functional 10 or 20 years from now.”



INTENTIONAL CHANGE IN ACTION

Just five years ago, most of the district teachers and staff of the district had little or no exposure to spatial strategy. A self-driven, inquiry-based approach has resulted in a complete turnaround. Kenora's staff has evolved their own professional learning community where knowledge is developed and shared. From the project playbooks to the final purchasing decisions, the school board has elevated teacher voices and supported teachers in making their own design decisions. Today, deep, detailed input from staff inspires the entire process. As a result, teachers are empowered to use a design portal where they create ideas for new and more capable spaces.

As the staff zeroed in on specifics, a school furniture manufacturer emerged as the core component. "VS offers things we really value, such as build quality, warranty, and local support," Robertson says. "They were exceptionally supportive in helping us envision what's possible with their products and the kinds of learning conditions we could create. But the first factor was the flexibility of the products themselves – the fact that they're so adaptable, so customizable, and offer a million different options for what you can create."



BRIGHT SPACES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The Kenora Catholic District School Board has identified two key levers that drive the redesign of their learning spaces and the teaching that takes place there. First, the re-envisioning involves no new construction, instead focusing on transforming the spaces that already exist. In a typical project, the work begins with discussions and fact-finding at the beginning of the school year in September and progresses to the stage of ordering new furnishings by April. The actual spatial transformation then takes place over the summer break.

Second, the school district has opted not to burden the spatial redesign process with a sense of urgency. The reasons are many. Being located in a remote area can impact access to real-time support and design advice. From snowstorms to budgets, other factors can impact



a school year and cause a project to take longer than expected. "We don't rush it," says Robertson. "We really try to be intentional about the work - there's no mandate to simply 'get the job done.'"

For example, the major rethink of the spaces for grades 7 and 8 unfolded over two and a half school years. The results were worth the wait. Since the spatial redesign, students can transform their classroom setup from lecture mode to a collaborative space for group work in just two minutes. The secret? From the standpoint of staff, it's the use of interchangeable products - like VS' Shift+ line - that work together consistently. For their part, students have given rave reviews to furniture that is fun, uplifting, and features vibrant bright colors.

Even after the new furnishings were installed, the redesign was not considered complete. District staff and teachers continued to work together for the first school year and beyond to experiment with products and refine the use of the space. New equipment is selected with care and attention devoted to factors such as safety, reliability, and the ability to move and create new learning opportunities. Currently, the school district is selecting products for its next major project, the redesign of the spaces for grades 1-3.







SHAPE AND RESHAPE SPACES

As the transformation continues to roll out across schools and grade levels, the Kenora Catholic District School Board has evolved its own unique philosophy of spatial use. Robertson explains, “The old spaces weren’t capable of doing more than one thing. Take the elementary school library – you check out a book, you listen to a story. Now that same space is a multi-purpose learning lab with a STEM focus. With the new products, we can do science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and art in that space – without sacrificing the library along the way. The furniture is entirely mobile. It works for junior kindergarten and it works as an adult meeting space. It can serve as a maker lab. It is a Swiss Army knife of spaces.”

The furniture has enabled the school board to shape and reshape their spaces without the insurmountable costs of construction or remodeling. The result is a natural interconnectedness of multiple forms and functions. For example, at the secondary level, a computer lab was retrofitted to become an industrial design lab that includes 3D printing. The space includes VS products such as Shift+ FusionFlip tables, Ergo-III skid tables, and Compass-LuPo chairs. The tables can serve equally well as standing drafting tables or seated spaces for sketching, test taking, or working with a laptop. Robertson notes, “Today, the furniture doesn’t limit us. It enables us.”

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FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The evolution of the Kenora Catholic schools has been characterized by flexibility and adaptability. Large-scale change is never easy, and some of the district's earliest explorations in spatial design had to be abandoned. Rather than consider these efforts failures, the district recognized the setbacks as the price of admission for making major changes to the status quo. Among the lessons learned? There are no shortcuts to creating a 21st century learning environment. Before they found VS furniture, unsuccessful products were pulled out while the groundwork went on to understand what was needed to create the responsive learning spaces that staff and students envisioned. Now, with durable furniture designed for seamless functionality, Kenora Catholic District School Board has created spaces that both staff and students have fully embraced.

The result has been a change in pedagogy. Teachers are free to experiment with their spaces, and the traditional lecture-style classroom is a thing of the past. Instead, students are moving in living classrooms that change on a daily basis. The spatial transformation has become a catalyst for change throughout the district, even for teachers who haven't yet transitioned to the new spaces. The spatial redesign is seen as a career development opportunity, representing growth, the chance to push what's possible, and to be heard as never before.







PUTTING LEARNING FIRST

At the Kenora Catholic schools, the physical changes are easy to spot. Classrooms have become dynamic learning centers that enable learning not possible with the traditional setup. But the transformation runs much deeper. By fully engaging with all stakeholders and pushing the limits of space, Kenora is experiencing a renewal of learning and a powerful shift in creating a compelling, effective experience for students.

“Everyone has to spend money to replace classroom furniture,” Robertson notes. “But when you can take that opportunity to shape the learning in terms of form, in terms of function, in terms of the types of learning activities they can support - the benefits are tremendous. The beauty in creating these types of spaces is that they are going to be just as functional 10 or 20 years from now. We don’t know what the future of learning will bring. Making thoughtful selections for our learning commons will allow us to deliver programming, plain and simple.”

Project Profile: Kenora Catholic District School Board

Vision:

JOURNEY represents our walk with our students as they explore who they are and the opportunities for who they will become.

FAITH is what guides, directs, sustains, and supports us on our journey.

JOY is a distinctive and enduring characteristic of our school system and we strive to discover and celebrate it in all we say and do.

Project Team:

Kenora Catholic District School Board Administration
Mary Cunningham, Superintendent of Instructional Services

Alison Smith, Superintendent of Business Services

Andrew Poirier, Manager of Operational Services

Paul White, Principal

Robert Valentini, Vice-Principal

Trudy Cederwall, Principal

Nicole Kurtz, Principal

Kenora Catholic District School Board Instructional Staff

Tammy Bush, Curriculum Coordinator

Jamey Robertson, Innovation and Creativity Coordinator

Dallis Novelli, Teacher

Nicole Lentz, Teacher

James Trudeau, Teacher

External Partners:

David Jakes, Chief Design Officer and Manager, David Jakes Designs LLC

Richard McDougall, Paul Bradford, Russell Evans, Accent Learning Environments
VS America, Inc.

Design Drivers:

- Create a new invitation into learning
- Promote a connected learning experience
- Empower learner choice and agency
- Transform the classroom to a studio
- Create an ecology of space
- Create spaces that support an increasingly virtual experience

Applications:

13 classrooms, four learning commons/libraries, media lab space, and break out areas

Project Scope:

Rethinking and transforming all formal and non-formal learning spaces over a 10-year period and beyond.

Year Completed:

Ongoing transformation process; first schools completed in 2016

Products:

- Compass-LuPo Chairs
- PantoMove-LuPo Chairs
- PantoSwing-LuPo Chairs
- ClubLounge Soft Seating
- Quattro-Teach Desks
- Shift+ ThumbPrint Desks
- UnoBean-Step Skid Desks
- Ergo-III Skid Tables
- Uno-M-Step Skid Tables
- Duo-Media Tables
- LiteTable-ST Tables
- Puzzle Tables
- RondoLift Tables
- Shift+ FusionFlip Tables
- TriTable-II Tables
- InteractiveTeach Workstations
- Shift+ Transfer Storage
- Series 600 Storage

Photography:

Andrew Lowes



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