K-12 BLUEPRINT

A planning resource for personalizing learning

Activating Learning

Baltimore County's Hawthorne Elementary Sets the Stage for Student Success

The classroom is alive with color, with a vivid mosaic of mats on the floor, and eye-catching posters and graphs on the walls. The first graders of Hawthorne Elementary fill the room: some sitting together at small clusters of desks; some sprawled on the floor; and others by themselves, wearing headphones, and reading. But despite all the vibrancy and activity, there is a sense of calm to the room. A focus. What could easily devolve into chaos is, instead, collaboration and concentration.

"All of our students want to learn, they just need to do it in different ways," says Hawthorne Elementary principal Yvonne Barhight. "It's fascinating to see them in a space that they really want to be in and have them just go for it. It's about understanding what some people—even the greatest thinkers of all time—need, in terms of opportunities to work and create. Oftentimes we don't honor that in learners. We forget sometimes that you need to nurture certain habits and ways of learning."

Hawthorne Elementary At a Glance

Total enrollment (2013-2014)
623

FARM (Free And Reduced-price Meals) Enrollment
80%

Classroom teachers
39

Classrooms
35

Average class size
21.9—24.9

Computer/student ratio
1:1.2

Attendance (2014)
94.3%

Teacher Qualifications

Standard Professional: 55.6%
Advanced Professional: 44.4%

Hawthorne Elementary School was built in Middle River, Maryland, in 1954, with additions made in 1971. It is a very old, industrial-looking building, without fancy furniture or modern designer trappings. But once you get inside one of the school's thirty or so classrooms, you could suddenly find yourself on a beach in Tahiti, or in a movie theater, or in a park with picnic tables, or even a game-themed room, taking thematic and visual cues from games like Scrabble and Operation, with areas labeled with fun plays on words.

This is all part of the school's sweeping active learning initiative: a paradigm shift in both how and where learning happens. Administrators and educators knew that their school's learning spaces needed to change: that was critical. Students couldn't simply sit in rows and be lectured to anymore. The whole school—but particularly the classroom—needed to be about learning and achieving. The learning environment needed to be an engaging and empowering place for kids to learn that felt, above all, safe. And new education technology allowed for more authentic learning that was in-step with students, providing opportunities to show this learning in different ways to varied audiences, as well as opportunities to receive information in more meaningful ways.

"Our whole message is that we value children and that our students deserve a wonderful space for learning," Barhight explains. "And the physical learning 'space' has to respect and support that value. While our classrooms need to accommodate collaboration, discussion, reading, writing, and problem solving, they also have to feel like they belong to the students: reflecting their unique personalities and preferences. All of our classrooms are unique and functional in their own way."

Learning By Design

The active learning process began for the school roughly three years ago with a dedication to making literacy more "active." This led to models and "proofs of concept" of what Hawthorne's learning spaces could accomplish: a move that started with teacher volunteers before moving out to the rest of the staff. Next, expectations for space and technology were folded into the mix: open pathways; areas to accommodate and support small groups as well as whole groups; flexibility to support areas for collaboration; and ample tools and resources for students to choose from, to suit their learning preferences and needs.

There was, however, one caveat: there were no funds for new buildings or remodeling. With a very strict budget, Hawthorne Elementary let the teachers be as creative as they wanted to be. It was a process of give and take, where the school—for instance—would buy instructional materials such as easels and bins but not yoga mats and cushions, so the teachers had to come up with some resourceful workarounds. Home Depot donated buckets, for instance, so the kids can take buckets outside and use them as chairs to sit and read. One teacher took a collection of milk crates, tied them together, and put cushions on them: turning them into couches to form collaborative spaces and areas for independent study. Another teacher went on Facebook, found someone getting rid of an old picnic table, painted it and refinished it and it's now it's in their room along with some old couches: creating a cozy and highly functional learning environment.

"The process was very fun to watch unfold: I loved the creativity of it!" Barhight says. "We don't have a lot of money, but our teachers are very resourceful, using what they can to do amazing things. Each area is conducive to a certain way of learning or learning preference. And this gets the students to take more ownership in their learning, and to take better care of their spaces. The key is the intense pride they have in their learning spaces. It has been an amazing year to see this transformation take shape and take hold."

Helping Students With Less Do More

Most of Hawthorne Elementary's students face some level of poverty. But the greatest issue facing the school isn't necessarily poverty but one of mobility. New students will often come to school mid-semester, arriving with large gaps in their learning. Active learning is an attempt to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed, no matter what their backgrounds.

"When a child moves, they tend to lose roughly six months of instruction," Barhight explains. "We put a lot of time, energy and strategy in place to address this. One thing we do is to provide options as learning is all about choice. Ideally, we want students to truly know themselves as learners: what do they need, where do they learn best… that sort of thing. So we set up collaboration spaces, areas for small groups, whole class groups, a STEM integration room, a music room…most every room in our school is dedicated to facilitating and maintaining a student's ownership of learning: giving students what they need to be successful."

Shedding Light on Innovation

Hawthorne Elementary is one of ten Lighthouse Schools in the district: schools serving as model demonstration sites for the implementation of digital curriculum. In addition to sharing lessons learned with the rest of the district, Hawthorne's Lighthouse status has it being the site of numerous school visits and tours: not just from educators and administrators, but even CEOs and members of the corporate world. And, according to Barhight, Hawthorne students love that people want to come and see them as it makes them feel special. The Lighthouse experience has enabled them to not only grow and learn, but to reflect upon and share their learning journey with visitors.

One important aspect of Hawthorne's active learning initiative is technology. In the school's first, second, and third grade classrooms, all students have individual computers—HP Revolve tablet PCs—as well as projection boards. The initiative's next phase will provide devices for Hawthorne's kindergarten, fourth and fifth grades. The devices—which can be used as either tablets or laptops—have proved to be a very effective and adaptable solution. First graders, for instance, primarily use the device as a tablet, and can write with their fingers: capturing and projecting their thinking far more easily than through typing with a keyboard. As the students mature, they are more comfortable with the devices overall and tend to use them as laptops with keyboards.

The devices also gave Hawthorne Elementary students a sense of world experience—albeit virtually—that they've never had before, often bringing in content experts via Skype to provide their insight to a particular subject or theme. The school received grants to purchase STEM integration components so that students could explore engineering through Minecraft and robotics. Barhight says that these innovations help students to internalize and ultimately embody processes so that educators don't constantly have to teach these processes.

"You are teaching with different tools and strategies and giving students ownership," she explains. "First you have to model it, then the student discovers what choice works best for them. How they learn is how they start to see themselves. You begin to see the personality of child unfold: they know they need to sit in a quiet space, so some use headsets by themselves to keep themselves focused. Others need constant collaboration—to talk and share—so they will cluster together. Some kids need to talk things through with their teacher and peers. For other kids, that's just not going to work for them. Above all, it's vital to honor them as learners."

Although technology is important, Hawthorne Elementary been creating student-centered learning environments prior to purchasing devices: taking vibrant learning spaces and merging them with the application of 21st century skills—such as collaboration and inquiry—and student-centric learning methods. Technology simply allows educators to enhance and expand these 21st century learning methods in authentic ways. These devices also allow students to showcase and share their learning beyond the classroom, so students have an audience beyond their immediate peers and teachers.

"Technology has allowed our students to explore in so many ways: to create book trailers, public service announcements, infographics, and creative materials with a much wider range of audience than before: often communicating and collaborating with other schools using blogs and Skype," Barhight explains. "Technology is drastically changing the need for learning spaces to look and work differently. If we, as educators and administrators, are to create life-long learners, then these learners must have access to technology, and the space in which they use it just needs to look and function differently than a traditional classroom. If we empower students to know themselves as engaged, independent learners, they need to choose both where and how they learn."

HP EliteBook Revolve 810 G2 Tablet

Construction

Ultra-thin 2-in-1 magnesium laptop that converts to a tablet

Operating System

Windows 8.1

Processor

Fourth-generation
Dual Core Intel® Core™ i3/i5/i7 ULT processor

Screen

11.6-inch diagonal rotating multi-touch screen

Weight

3.08 lbs.

Installed memory

8 GB RAM

Battery life

10.8-hour battery

When Teachers Become Learners

Teaching students how to learn in a new way required teachers learning how to teach in a new way. Hawthorne Elementary provides ample professional development to support its active learning strategies. First, the school provides access to experts in the subjects of reading and math while also sending educators to relevant conferences. Educators also provide their own professional development in terms of content and instruction: exchanging ideas with one another and utilizing constant feedback. This approach gives teachers the choice—as the school does with students—in how they continue to learn, grow and develop. Hawthorne has since abandoned faculty meetings and, instead, has educators use that hour for their learning, from their menu of choice, in addition to an extra planning period every week. The school also employed a points system, where educators need a certain amount of professional development points by the end of the year.

"The teachers, themselves, need to be 21st century learners," Barhight says. "They have to be in order to facilitate this type of learning for students. That's why we immersed teachers with 21st Century skills training so they could prepare kids to become better problem solvers, more effective communicators, risk takers, and to take a lead role in teaching others. It's not simply substituting worksheets for online books. It's about taking students to a place they couldn't go before."

Smart Spaces for Smart Students

Hawthorne Elementary views its active learning spaces as crucial in getting students to see themselves as not only learners, but as readers, writers, mathematicians, and scientists. So far, the school's internal data—such as math scores—sees positive growth, though Hawthorne won't receive its PARC data until 2016. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the school is moving in the right direction, academically. Another unexpected benefit to Hawthorne Elementary's active learning push is in student behavior. The school's first, second and third grades have already seen behavioral referrals go down by 89 percent. Barhight attributes this trend to several factors. One is technology's ability to customize, personalize and differentiate to meet the unique needs of students. Another is that active learning keeps kids exactly that: active.

"Active learning is part of the reason why negative behavior in our school has been reduced."

"Our little boys and girls can't sit still all day—or for even an hour—and it's ridiculous to expect them to," Barhight explains. "Active learning is part of the reason why negative behavior in our school has been reduced. Today, a little boy—a feisty boy—needed help and he knew he needed help. So he respectfully asked his teacher, 'I need help to get started.' That was fantastic. It was a huge shift from the usual, 'I can't do it so I won't do it' type of attitude. The teacher and the boy had a relationship of respect, and the boy knew his teacher would come and help him if he needed it. The support is always there, but now students are more aware of their learning, and more excited to keep it going."

And this insight is evident when entering one of Hawthorne Elementary's dynamic classrooms. These spaces are less like traditional classrooms with their rigid rows and aisles and more like vibrant communities filled with diverse learners who aren't afraid to speak their minds and to use creative ways of solving problems. And the teachers aren't lecturing, they're facilitating: actively engaging to see how they can support these unique learners.

"Our active learning strategy goes back to the fact that everything we do has to be focused on learning: it's got to be," Barhight says. "As a school, we need to dig deeper and expand our definition of learning to create authentic experiences that speak to the whole child, and build skills through inquiry. We must encourage students to think, to create, to read, to write, and to investigate purposefully. If you keep these essential things in mind during the entire process, then you'll be amazed at the results!"