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Students Stand When Called Upon, and When Not

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)



MARINE ON ST. CROIX, Minn. — From the hallway, Abby Brown's sixth-grade classroom in a little school here about an hour northeast of Minneapolis has the look of the usual one, with an American flag up front and children's colorful artwork decorating the walls.

But inside, an experiment is going on that makes it among the more unorthodox public school classrooms in the country, and pupils are being studied as much as they are studying. Unlike children almost everywhere, those in Ms. Brown's class do not have to sit and be still. Quite the contrary, they may stand and fidget all class long if they want.

And they do.

On one recent morning, while 11-year-old Nick Raboin had his eye on his math problems, Ms. Brown was noticing that he preferred to shift his weight from one foot to the other as he figured out his fractions. She also knew that his classmate Roxy Cotter liked to stand more than sit. And Brett Leick is inclined to lean on a high stool and swing his right foot under a desk that is near chest level. Helps with concentration, he and Ms. Brown say.

The children in Ms. Brown's class, and in some others at Marine Elementary School and additional schools nearby, are using a type of adjustable-height school desk, allowing pupils to stand while they work, that Ms. Brown designed with the help of a local ergonomic furniture company two years ago. The stand-up desk's popularity

with children and teachers spread by word of mouth from this small town to schools in Wisconsin, across the St. Croix River. Now orders for the desks are being filled for districts from North Carolina to California.

"Sometimes when I'm super tired, I sit," Nick said. "But most of the time I like to stand."

The stand-up desks come with swinging footrests, and with adjustable stools allowing children to switch between sitting and standing as their moods dictate.

"At least you can wiggle when you want to," said Sarah Langer, 12.

With multiple classrooms filled with stand-up desks, Marine Elementary finds itself at the leading edge of an idea that experts say continues to gain momentum in education: that furniture should be considered as seriously as instruction, particularly given the rise in childhood obesity and the decline in physical education and recess. Dr. James A. Levine, a professor of medicine at the [Mayo Clinic](#), advocates what he calls "activity-permissive" classrooms, including stand-up desks.

"Having many children sit in a classroom isn't the craziest idea, but look at how children have changed," Dr. Levine said of the sedentary lives of many. "We also have to change, to meet their needs."

Teachers in [Minnesota](#) and Wisconsin say they know from experience that the desks help give children the flexibility they need to expend energy and, at the same time, focus better on their work rather than focusing on how to keep still.

Researchers should soon know whether they can confirm those calorie-burning and scholastic benefits. Two studies under way at the [University of Minnesota](#) are using data collected from Ms. Brown's classroom and others in Minnesota and Wisconsin that are using the new desks. The pupils being studied are monitored while using traditional desks as well, and the researchers are looking for differences in physical activity and academic achievement.

"We can't say for sure that this has an impact on those two things, but we're hypothesizing that they may," said Beth A. Lewis of the School of Kinesiology, or movement science, at the University of Minnesota. "I think we're so used to the traditional classroom it's taken a while for people to start thinking outside the box. I think it's just a matter of breaking the mold."

While adult-size workstations that allow for standing are commonplace, options for young students are not, and until now, data on the educational effect of movement in the classroom have been scant. But at Marine Elementary, the principal, Lynn Bormann, feels as if she need not wait for the research results.

"We just know movement is good for kids," Ms. Bormann said. "We can measure referrals to the office, sick days, whatever it might be. Teachers are seeing positive things."

Marine Elementary lies in a small, fitness-minded, high-achieving school district where experimentation is encouraged. Ms. Bormann bought the desks with money from several grants awarded to the school, which is now in its second full year of using them.

Ms. Brown says she got the idea for the stand-up desks after 20 years of teaching in which she watched children struggle to contain themselves at small hard desks, and after reading some of Dr. Levine's work. "As an option," she said, "it gives students choices, and they feel empowered. It's not anything to force on anybody. Teachers have to do what fits their comfort level. But this makes sense to me."

At Somerset Middle School in nearby Somerset, Wis., the children in Pam Seekel's fifth-grade class rotate in their use of both traditional and stand-up desks.

"At a stand-up desk," Ms. Seekel said, "I've never seen students with their heads down, ever. It helps with being awake, if they can stand, it seems. And for me as a teacher, I can stand at their level to help them. I'm not bent over. I can't think of one reason why a classroom teacher wouldn't want these."

Pat Reisenger, director of the Education Minnesota Foundation, a teachers' union arm that awarded Marine Elementary its first grant to buy stand-up desks, is eagerly awaiting the results of the studies.

The new desks have "become something, to be honest, of a fad," Ms. Reisenger said. "We're talking about furniture here," she said, "plain old furniture. If it's that simple, if it turns out to have the positive impacts everyone hopes for, wouldn't that be a wonderful thing?"