

Foundation grant helps bring students to their feet

Research starting on whether standing affects achievement

Students in Abby Brown's sixth-grade classroom can stand, lean, or sit at their desks – but most prefer to stand.

Brown's classroom, as well as the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms at Marine Elementary in Marine-on-the-St.-Croix, is outfitted with adjustable-height desks that allow students to stand at them.

Brown is beginning research on the effects of students standing during the school day. The research will look to evaluate the students' activity levels, test scores and achievement, and attention skills.

The idea of having students stand throughout the day came to Brown last year.

After hearing about other schools' work with active classrooms, Brown started telling her students they could stand up and rest their knees on their chairs.

"Many of them were very grateful to stand," Brown said.

Brown then heard about the Education Minnesota Foundation for Teaching and Learning's grant program from her local president. Brown took the grant-writing tutorial and submitted her proposal for creating a new desk that allowed students to stand, be comfortable and learn and for monitoring its effects.

"Because of the nature of the project," Brown said, "I realized I could research it and prove whether or not it is worthwhile."

"She was immediately seen as a model for teachers doing action research," Foundation Director Pat Reisenger said. "She had a theory and was able to test it in a variety of ways."

The Foundation's grant, along with community support and donations, led Brown to contact Sunway Inc., a company in Wisconsin that specializes in ergonomic furniture.

Sunway created a desk design with a large work space, adjustable legs, a swinging foot rest and book shelves.

Students are also given stools, but are not encouraged to use them unless they need a rest.

Students are already showing signs of improvement in their energy levels and stamina, Brown said.

"It took a little getting used to, but I like it a lot," sixth-grader Andi Markham said. "I like that you have the option to sit on the stool, but it's comfortable either way."

The children, as well as their parents, have also reported that the students have more energy when they get home from school.

Evaluation of the students in grades three through six at Marine Elementary was scheduled to begin in December and will continue through the end of the school year. Evaluations will be done by school psychology interns, Dr. Mary Jo Smith of Ypsilon Associates and Education Minnesota staff.

The observers will look at different aspects of the students' behaviors, such as if they are sitting or standing, leg movement and their upper body movements.

"I would be very surprised if this doesn't go the way I think it will. There's just a different feel to the classroom," Brown said about the change to the experimental desks.

The observers will also be monitoring classes at Withrow Elementary in Hugo, a school in the same district with comparable class sizes. Classrooms at Withrow will act as the control group, as the students there have conventional school desks with chairs.

Students and teachers are also journaling about their reactions and feelings.

"It's possible that this very simple idea could have an educational bang to it," Reisenger said. "If it pans out, this will make a difference in teaching and learning."

Reisenger is also hoping this will start a trend in Foundation grant applicants.

"Our hope is every one of the projects every year is open to this kind of professional evaluation," she said.