



Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
Prior Lake American/Savage Pacer
Column run date: October 17, 2020

COVID-19 has changed how we educate students in ways we could never have imagined. At Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS), flexibility is key as we implement our new learning models with safety requirements, while ensuring student's individual learning needs continue to be met.

Back in 2017 when the community approved two school funding requests to add staff and space for our growing enrollment, we never could have predicted just how well the design of our new learning environments would serve us in today's world of educating students during a pandemic.

From flexible furniture and movable walls, to outdoor classrooms, our spaces are meeting the needs of students by ensuring they can collaborate while maintaining a safe social distance.

The newly opened Hamilton Ridge Elementary was designed specifically to meet the individual learning needs of students. The guiding principles shaped the design to include classrooms with movable walls, furniture on wheels to make learning flexible on a daily basis, and areas where students can easily convene in small groups to work, while also including areas for individualized learning. In addition, there are plenty of windows to allow daylighting throughout the building.

Another new design feature that has been installed at Hamilton Ridge as well as Prior Lake High School (PLHS) are "learning stairs," which are not only functional stairs but also serve as informal seating space. The versatile nature of the learning stairs offers flexibility where students in today's environment can spread out and socially distance, while still being able to connect with one another either formally through project-based learning, or informally with one another.

PLHS has undergone major renovations with new classroom additions, a secure front entrance, an expanded kitchen, and parking lot, and a four-court activity center. Moving forward, work continues on the PLHS cafeteria expansion and a second, three-story classroom addition, both set to be complete this winter. Many of the new PLHS classrooms were constructed with a removable wall that opens directly into collaborative spaces with flexible furniture which compliments group work.

Bridges Area Learning Center, our alternative high school, opened in 2019. This building was designed specifically for flexible use and student choice, with open spaces, flexible furniture, and opportunities for collaborative student learning and socialization, including academic and social/emotional learning areas that are conducive to all styles of personalized student learning. One of the highlights of the building is the makerspace patio area which allows outside access for our students and a dedicated space designed for hands-on creativity.

Two of the Bridges classrooms have sliding glass doors allowing for open meeting spaces and now overflow options if the room is at 50% capacity for Hybrid learning. The common areas that make up the spaces in between the flexible classrooms, along with the cafeteria, are large, open and bright, designed for student collaboration. In this time of COVID-19, these spaces are now fundamental learning areas that allow for social distancing as well.

PLSAS is known as an E-STEM district (Environmental Education, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). Problem solving and hands-on projects are central to E-STEM, and whether it's in our nature-based preschool program or at our high school where students are maintaining a vegetable garden, a great deal of learning happens outdoors.

With the safety requirements due to COVID-19, outdoor learning spaces are more important than ever before. Throughout PLSAS, teachers have created outdoor classrooms to promote learning while social distancing.

One example is at Jeffers Pond Elementary where teachers received professional development on safety and sustainable outdoor learning at the beginning of the school year. From there, teachers developed classrooms with an identified "sit-spot" outside the building. The sit-spots include a variety of seating options, such as tree stumps, grass, sit-upons or other plastic flexible seating. Classrooms have weather-resistant wagons to haul student and teacher supplies, and large, portable whiteboards are being tested by some teachers this fall at their outdoor classrooms.

In addition, both Jeffers Pond and Redtail Ridge Elementary have newly constructed kindergarten classrooms on the main level with doors that re-direct student passage away from classrooms and provide direct access to outside learning.

WestWood Elementary, La ola del lago at Grainwood, Hidden Oaks and Twin Oaks Middle Schools have each taken advantage of new multi-purpose rooms that allow flexible space for project-based learning, co-teaching, meetings, student collaboration and small-group instruction.

Our students live in a fast-paced and ever-changing world full of choices. At PLSAS, we want our classroom environments to keep pace with the world we live in and be conducive to open collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking.

It's hard to predict how the rest of the school year will unfold amidst the pandemic but it is our hope that our flexible indoor learning spaces and outdoor classrooms will help students adapt and serve them well in the months and years to come.