

school building



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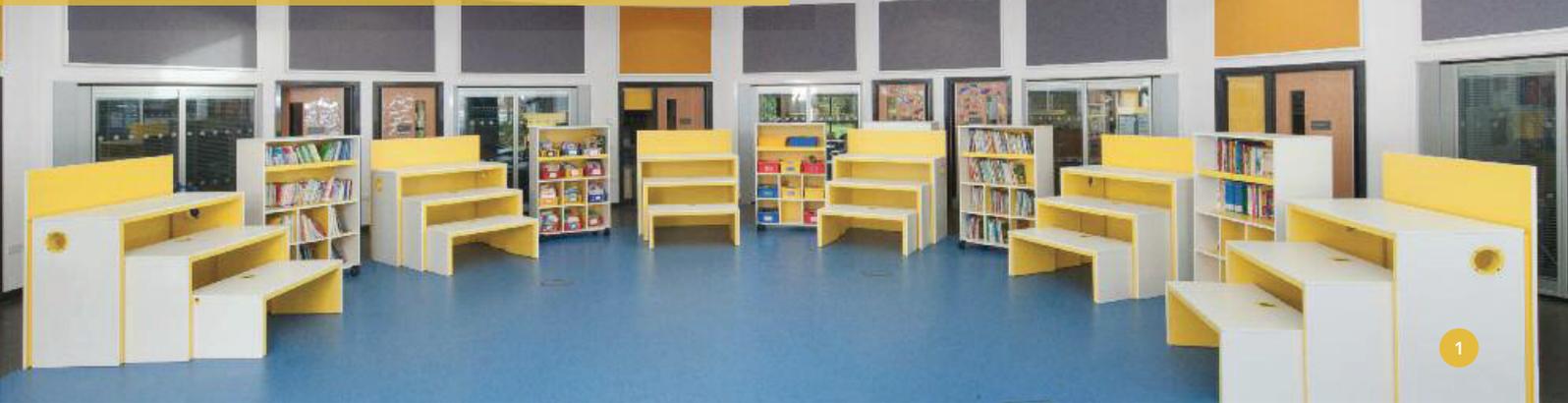
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Intelligent interiors



With the importance of interior design increasing all of the time, more is being asked of school furnishings - it's no longer the case of simply incorporating rows of desks and seats! We ask some of the sector's designers and suppliers what they are seeing as current trends.

Schools are increasingly incorporating multifunctional areas and facilities to accommodate new learning and teaching styles.

"The very idea of what can be considered a 'learning space' is being redefined, thereby redefining what makes furniture 'fit-for-purpose,'" explained Kevin Geeves, Sales Director for KI - Education. "Our iconic UK-manufactured, KI Postura+ chair continues to stand the test of time as the perfect all-rounder."

Postura+ had a record number of sales in 2014 and is now attracting more interest from Continental Europe and the Middle East. Its fundamental benefits of comfort, durability and affordability are just as pertinent now as they were when it was first introduced in 1996.

"Schools continue to select these chairs for classrooms owing to their superior ergonomics which leads to better attentiveness and learning outcomes," said Kevin. "The robust design and construction makes them ideal for today's dynamic learning environments, including that impromptu outdoor lesson on a sunny day. Proven to outlast their ten year warranty, they are also extremely cost efficient."

To meet requests for more niche settings, KI have recently extended the Postura+ range to include a family of task chairs for IT classrooms, and metal-based stools and high chairs for science labs.

"High-traffic environments such as cafeterias are no longer considered to be exclusively for dining," Kevin added. "Laptops and mobile devices have been the catalyst for making these areas vital for collaboration and informal peer-to-peer learning. The chairs provided here have to therefore be comfortable, easy to clean and flexible enough to accommodate frequent movement and activity. Our new one-piece polypropylene Plaza chair has recently been launched to meet these aesthetic and functionality requirements."

However, the evolving purpose of areas such as libraries, halls and social gathering spaces are also driving the popularity of some of KI's other products.

"For example, the lightweight and virtually indestructible Maestro chair is frequently selected for its ability to transform a space within minutes," described Kevin. "Stackable to 38 high on a transport dolly, it allows a school hall to be reconfigured from a sports stadium to a performing arts venue quickly and easily."

Melanie Laing, Director of Innova Design Solutions, told us that every classroom and every school has different needs, but some requirements are universal; the need for good storage, ease of classroom management and, increasingly, the incorporation of new technologies.

"Great layouts are the key to focusing students'

attention and enabling classroom management," Melanie said. "Pressure on space in science labs means many schools opt for Innova's flexible Hot Corners layout, a dual-purpose benching layout providing a working classroom and practical laboratory within the same space."

The concept shortens communication lines by moving the teacher to the long wall of the classroom, eliminating the fall-away in sound students experience in traditional classrooms. By positioning benches so all students face the front in theory sessions the layout helps to focus pupils' attention on the lesson.

Placing services out of reach on the opposite side of the bench prevents students from becoming distracted yet allows classes to move swiftly from theory to practical sessions.

"In ITC suites," continued Melanie, "zig zag benching layouts are a popular choice: the design increases space for equipment and books and improves visibility, enabling the teacher to see all students' screens and making classroom management easier. The seating arrangement also eases circulation, allowing teachers to quickly reach students who need help.

"When it comes to technology, teacher walls really can transform the classroom space. The flexible design can be customised to accommodate interactive sliding whiteboards, tv

monitors and display spaces, and conceal all power and data cables. A pull out step can even be added to help the very youngest pupils participate in work at the whiteboard."

Building shelving, filing, trays and lockable cupboards into teacher walls helps to leave classrooms clear, clutter free and well organised, making them the perfect choice for any learning space.

"We have seen an increased demand for flexible furniture across both Primary and Secondary education sectors," stated Caroline McMillan, Marketing Manager of British Thornton. "We are particularly seeing an interest in multi-functional and easy to move furniture with number of pupils increasing, varied teaching methods, and rooms having to provide a variety of functions. There are many flexible, multi-purpose products available to choose from depending on requirement."

Where schools want flexibility in their learning spaces they are opting for single pupil tables in the classrooms which can be grouped, formed into rows or spaced individually. These can be square tables or choose more interesting shapes such as wedges, triangles or the Tessellate table from British Thornton, which create multiple configurations for group working.

"Many modern school buildings have large open spaces which provide a variety of functions from library to assembly hall, break out areas and even providing additional teaching space," added Caroline. "Furnishing these spaces can be challenging and the key is to create zones which can either be fixed, or flexible to allow the space to be cleared.

"Availability of data and charging points is a key requirement and touchdown benching such as the Vista+ range from British Thornton provides a fixed work point for laptop or desktop use. Mobile screens can be used to create zones for workgroups, meetings and study. Soft seating with integrated power and data are a popular

choice in breakout spaces, as are mobile tables which can be grouped around power hubs."

Mobile storage units can be used to display library books and provide cupboard space, but can easily be moved aside when the space is required for another purpose. Units with whiteboard backs offer even more opportunities for group working and flexible teaching.

"Tiered seating units can increase the seating capacity of a space for assemblies and lecture style teaching," said Caroline. "Vista+ surface step seats also provide flexible touchdown style benching when split into separate tables and benches.

"We would advise schools to think about the variety of activities they may want to perform in a space, both now and in the future. Many 'spare' rooms or multi-use rooms are not given much thought when it comes to furnishing and are often simply kitted out with a few rectangular tables, some chairs and a storage cupboard. By furnishing with shaped tables, stacking chairs and carefully selected mobile units combining storage with whiteboards, seating or worktops, a room can become truly multifunctional."

Gregg Barton from interior architecture specialist Spacezero told us that the biggest challenge in determining a furniture strategy for education environments is the enduring need to balance the demands of space optimisation, practicality and aesthetics.

"Budgets have been cut by up to 50% in some cases, but the demand for adaptable and flexible spaces has increased," he said. "The skill is in delivering these spaces for an austerity-era education sector whilst keeping design credence. With an increasing need to plan and design more future-proofed spaces that can accommodate multiple uses, those imperatives now also need to be addressed within the context of adaptability."

Space optimisation and flexibility are very closely aligned: a move towards more



collaborative learning, particularly in the primary and secondary sectors, means that there is no longer a place for fixed desks and the traditional student workstation.

"Instead," added Gregg, "we are seeing a significant trend in bench desking, which can be reconfigured easily and accommodate 'teams' of students working on joint projects.

"When it comes to seating, the furniture strategy for any education environment must consider both task seating and break out area seating, in addition to seating for non-teaching areas of the school, including reception, dining hall and admin provision.

"Comfort and durability are key and a user-focused design must also take into consideration the elements of space planning and utilisation to incorporate seating designs that are both practical and flexible."

Colour also has an important role to play, both from an aesthetic perspective and as a practical means of way-marking and designating task or even (in open plan layouts) class areas. This is equally true in secondary, FE and HE environments, where way-making is an important factor for larger campuses, as it is in primary and SEN schools where colour coding of furniture is a simple technique for communicating location to younger children.

"The use of BIM as a collaborative work platform means that designs can be more integrated with the building, leading to innovations and a greater level of value for money.

"An independent design, free of the shackles of third parties means that there can be a wider scope to allow for innovation in both design and procurement," concluded Gregg.

1. Vista+ surface step seats from British Thornton
2. KI have recently extended their Postura+ range
3. An ICT suite with a zig zag benching layout (Innova Design Solutions)

