

Movable Classroom Concept Moves to Waldorf School in St. Louis

Julianne Smutz,
Missouri, USA)

(published by kind permission of the
author- first printed in *Webster Groves
Patch Newsletter*, 16 April, 2013, and later
in *Waldorf Today*).

Shining Rivers Waldorf School in Webster Groves (Missouri) introduces innovative Movable Classroom concept to Grades 1 and 2, balancing children's need for movement with their desire to learn creatively.

At Shining Rivers Waldorf School, the most recent innovation in the classroom is decidedly old-school. It doesn't have any batteries or bells and whistles, and it doesn't run on a computer. It is a bench – a beautiful, handmade, hardwood bench. Actually, seven of them, arranged in a circle.

These benches form the backbone of the Movable Classroom, a new approach to children's learning that Shining Rivers Waldorf School is pioneering in its Early Childhood classrooms in Webster Groves.

Moving from the play-based education of Pre-K and Kindergarten into a grades classroom traditionally means having to sit in chairs at desks for long periods of time, which can be challenging for some children. In order to support young students during this transition, Shining Rivers Waldorf School teachers do not tell fidgeting young schoolchildren to "sit down." Instead, the teachers encourage the children to "get moving."



Each day, the children will re-design their classroom in advance of every lesson, placing the benches into different configurations that promote active learning.

In a Movable Classroom, desks are replaced with wide, hardwood benches. The wooden benches serve as seats, tables, workspaces and play surfaces – they can even become a stage for a puppet show. The teacher can arrange the benches into rows, but they can also be placed end-to-end to become a long lunch table, a circle, an obstacle course or a horseshoe. Flip over the bench and you have a balance beam.

This innovative classroom design offers teachers ultimate flexibility to create an environment that meets the needs of the lesson at hand, supports the child's body in a way that frees the mind to focus, and eases the transition from play to classroom studies.

The Movable Classroom idea first appeared in Scandinavia about twenty years ago but was further developed in Germany. Today, a third of the 222 Waldorf schools in Germany have classrooms of this type. Shining Rivers is the only school in the Midwest to feature this innovation.

The benches and seats in the Movable Classroom are far more than just a nostalgic look backward at a simpler time, far more than simply another way to bring fun and games into the school day. They actually serve as a remedy for what children today seem to be lacking – movement at school, and all of the benefits that flow from that.

The benches and pillows also promote a healthy kinaesthetic awareness in children. The Movable Classroom, with its thousands of possibilities for use, enables full-body learning that naturally encourages the child's sense of balance and movement. The Movable Classroom

also supports proprioceptive awareness (sense of the location and motion of different parts of the body) that is the necessary forerunner to skills like writing and reading. Proprioceptive awareness becomes increasingly important as children's lives have become more sedentary in the Internet and Smartphone era. For children learning in a Movable Classroom, the body works in partnership with the mind.

At Shining Rivers Waldorf School, the Movable Classroom was a parent-driven initiative. In the summer of 2012 parents in the Grade 1 and Grade 2 classrooms came together before the beginning of the school year to build the benches and sew the pillows. The wooden benches are handmade out of maple and birch hardwood, finished with natural lacquer and sealed with a beeswax finish. For this project, the parents were inspired by their children: doing it by hand delivers a sense of pride, accomplishment and community that builds confidence, teamwork and problem-solving skills. Not to mention, creating the Movable Classroom benches really got the parents moving, too.

For more information, please contact Ann Weidemann at aweidemann@shiningrivers.org.♦

