Winnetka's Hubbard Woods School turns library into 'libratory'

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Winnetka educators try a different kind of school library

Last summer, staff and parent volunteers at Hubbard Woods transformed the school library's computer lab into an open space where students can make use of more than 20 pieces of educational equipment to explore computer coding, crafts, robotics, design and architecture, among other subjects.

"It really began with the idea of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics)," said Todd Burleson, resource center director at Hubbard Woods. "It's all about bringing to life the idea of integrating STEAM into all subjects. If you think of beautiful designs, there's often a mathematical element, so students don't have to think of those subjects in isolation anymore."

Looms, pipe cleaners, a large assortment of robotics tools, construction paper sorters, dry erase boards, color-coded Lego bins, gallons of paint and upholstery for design boards are just some of the additions to what is now known as the Hubbard Woods Idea Lab.

"This is a transformation from a library into a 'libratory,'" Burleson said.

On Oct. 22, Hubbard Woods kindergarten students studied physics with plastic race tracks and Matchbox cars. Hubbard Woods Principal Daniel Ryan said one new revelation the young students realized was that marbles, because they are lighter than Matchbox cars, travel at a higher rate of speed. Ryan said the school's fourth grade has an intensive reading unit. At the end of that unit, he said, the students actually create their own books using materials in the idea lab.

"It's kind of a whole philosophical shift," said Ryan. "It grows with the children as they grow. The kindergarten unit is much more manipulative, where the fourth graders are using iPads to integrate the program."

Because children learn in varying styles and paces, Burleson and Ryan said another advantage to the idea lab is the prominent hands-on element that allows inclusive learning for all students, which decreases the likelihood of students falling behind and feeling singled out.

"This allows them to really engage," he said. "You don't see the learning differences because they're engaging on their own."

Along with the new tools available to Hubbard Woods students in the idea lab, the library has retained a quiet area for students to engage in traditional reading.

"We need books and time to focus on those things as well," Burleson said. "As an elementary library, we're balancing the books and the bytes."

Ryan and Burleson said prior to creating the Hubbard Woods Idea Lab, officials visited an elementary school in Wisconsin with a similar library space. They said these spaces have also been integrated into the libraries at Skokie and Carleton Washburne schools.

Citing recent research they said shows at least 20 percent of a child's school day should be focused on design thinking, Hubbard Woods officials said the school is maintaining detailed documentation of the effectiveness of the idea lab with possible plans of integrating similar spaces at Crow Island and Greeley schools.

"By designing pilot spaces, we're defining what a STEAM environment should look and feel like with a focus on student voice and choice," said Maureen Miller, director of technology for District 36. "It's an exciting time to be a student and an educator."