



Music teacher Stephanie Drymalski leads a group of students in a clapping and chanting activity to learn how to count out the rhythm in written music. The black curtain panels that loom over Drymalski's classroom are part of the MacArthur auditorium stage, which has been sectioned into three separate classroom and work spaces for the past three years. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

Students at award-winning school meet in hallways, on stage

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Space is tight at MacArthur Elementary, Liberal's northernmost school. Science projects occupy tables set up in the hallway outside the administrative offices. Shelving units crowd every inch of wall space in the library, which has been split into three areas with shelving-unit room dividers that don't quite reach the ceiling; chatter spills from the computer lab to the reading area, and a paraprofessional's make-shift office corner is anything but quiet.

Yet award-winning principal Shawna Evans is cheerfully resigned to the challenges of educating kids in a less-than-ideal space. Last week's news that MacArthur School had received a

governor's award for excellence in education was encouraging, but the staff still had to perform its daily five-minute turnaround to transform the gymnasium into a cafeteria, and back into a gym. That's just one section of a school stretched to its seams.

"We started feeling the crunch about six years ago," Evans said as she conducted a school-day tour of the building. "I don't like to be a whiner or a complainer, but we're maxed out."

Aware that her attitude sets the tone for the school's faculty and staff, Evans has adopted a "we'll make it work" approach. With its sunny windows and pie-shaped classrooms, MacArthur might be crowded but an air of bright optimism infuses the building.

In the school's combination gymnasium/auditorium/cafeteria, a desk for P.E. teacher Tyson McGuire sits flush against the north wall; the public "office space" means the coach can't have a computer to make lesson plans or reply to emails. Across the tiled gym floor, a milk cooler, salad bar on wheels and heating table used to serve school lunches claim the south wall. Six fold-up table-bench combos tower over the appliances.

"We used to keep them all in the storage closet, until we ran out of space," Evans explained. At the end of the "gym-teria" the school's stage curtains hide stacks of supplies: paper, bottled water, "whatever we could fit in that narrow spot," Evan said. "You get creative with the space you have. You make do."

The curtains hide a temporary, fold-out wall, which was part of the school's original design. Up a short flight of stairs backstage, MacArthur has transformed a curtained stage area into three workspaces: teacher workroom, with large rolls of colored paper, bulletin board supplies and the like; a counselor's area, with a desk, small table and chairs; and, through a door in another foldaway wall, a music room.

"The laminator has to be right here, near the door," Evans said, gesturing at the high-heat machine, "because of the way the electrical wiring is set up. The kids are pretty good about not touching it."

As for the counselor's space, "we put up a privacy wall, as best we could," Evans said. "At least it's not totally open and students cannot see who is in the counselor's office." The area, however, is far from soundproof: the sound of basketballs bouncing on the tiled floor echoes from the gym-teria and on the other side of the foldaway wall, the music students have begun to clap and chant as they master the basics of how to count musical rhythm.

It might be possible to view MacArthur's adaptations as a "making lemonade out of lemons" situation, Evans said, but the reality is that "we're completely out of room now." The results are not always immediately visible, but they present vexing problems for parents and educators.

For example, Evans said, "for the past couple of years, we've had to send 12 to 13 of our students, who had been in the same class, on forced transfers to other schools. They can't attend their own neighborhood school. We just don't have the space."

In some cases, parents objected with tears and anger.

"They'll tell me, 'we bought a house in this neighborhood so our kids could attend this school,'" Evans said. "That's hard. And we can't always tell them too far ahead of time, until enrollment is complete." For parents who want to prepare their young children for the upcoming school year, maybe even practice walking or riding a bicycle to school, the situation layers frustration with disappointment.

"It always brings up a lot of emotion," Evans said.

One veteran teacher who asked not to be quoted by name said that smaller class size — the reason some students end up being transferred to other school facilities — is critically important.

"One thing I hope is that the class size stays where we have it right now," she said. "The kids now come to school with very different issues than when I started teaching." They might have problems at home, they might come from families where education is not valued, they experience stresses that were not part of childhood 20 years ago, she said.

In her current classroom of 19 students, 15 are boys, this teacher said, “and not having proper gymnasium space for recess is a challenge.”

On snowy or rainy days, this teacher’s first-graders must stay in the classroom for recess, playing board games or working on puzzles. It’s not ideal, particularly for restless boys who want to stretch and run and jump outdoors.

“They need the gross motor skill activity,” their teacher said.

Like the first-grade teacher, everyone at MacArthur Elementary has had to devise makeshift solutions to the space problem. Though it’s the only elementary school in the district that still conducts a spelling bee, the students cannot compete on stage. School programs often move to Liberal High School’s Maskus Auditorium for the same reason. A recent science fair set set up displays in the main hallway.

On a daily basis, students who participate in special groups, either for high-achievement work or remedial study sessions, do so in the hallways of the building, sitting on the floor as they practice reading and math skills. Evans is philosophical about the situation.

“None of them feel singled out,” she said, “because the kids are used to going all over the place. Everyone is doing something out in the hallway at some point in the day.”

Would she like to eliminate education in the hallways?

Evans nodded, but added with a smile, “you do the best you can with what you have.” Yet doing the best you can is not the same as doing the best job possible, the long-time teacher pointed out.

MacArthur uses every scrap of space

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“It comes down to space,” she said. “Yes, we have spaces for children, but we don’t have the proper space.”

Until that changes, students at MacArthur will gather in the hallways, before, after, and even during class.