

Blended Learning Classroom Design

TOOL: Large classrooms and breakout rooms for blended learning and team-teaching

GOAL: Professional development of teachers and increased student success through personalized learning

BREAK THROUGH MODEL: Touchstone Education

Why was this strategy developed?

Merit Prep Newark, Touchstone Education's first blended learning school, enables students to advance at their own pace by demonstrating mastery of standards through online educational resources and



assessments. While the school began with less than 100 low-income sixth grade students—many of whom were performing well below grade level—Merit Prep Newark now has 240 sixth through eighth grade students and plans to add a cohort each year until the school serves approximately 500 students in grades 6-12. Touchstone's learning approach includes having teachers work in teams of three to teach up to 115 students at a time (when the school reaches capacity) in two-hour, subject-specific periods. This model calls for spacious classrooms that accommodate a large number of teachers and students moving fluidly and gathering in various sized instructional groups.

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Ben Rayer, CEO and Founder

Touchstone sees two distinct advantages to designing Merit Prep Newark classrooms to accommodate these large student/teacher populations. First, teachers work in teams allowing “master teachers” to provide professional development to less-experienced teachers throughout the school day. Second, students get the benefit of personalized learning (working at their own instructional pace) but in a large classroom community with peers they can work with for support.

How is it different?

Merit Prep Newark is a 40,000-square-foot former commercial office building. Touchstone acquired the five-story property from KIPP, a charter school organization that had already modified it to have a cafeteria, playground, and other typical school facilities. To further modify the space to suit its model, Touchstone knocked down walls to create 3,000-square-foot spaces called “stadiums” to serve as classrooms. Each stadium has three glass-walled “skyboxes” directly connected to it that serve as breakout rooms. The skyboxes accommodate various configurations of students, directed by teachers based on their instructional needs; students might work in small groups, meet in

individual conference with a teacher, or work independently on their school-issued MacBook Air laptops.

The large stadium space is useful when teachers provide direct instruction to the entire group, but it can also support many students working at small tables on independent learning paths; teachers might roam the room to provide support as needed or provide direct instruction to small groups of students. The stadiums are subject-based, and every two hours students move to another stadium focusing alternately on English, math, science, and “flex time” (physical education, music, art).

What is the advantage for students?

Ben Rayer, CEO and Founder of Touchstone Education, says that with three teachers in the classroom, “students have access to the best teacher for the best activity, any time they need it.” The space allows teachers to work in teams to provide the most effective instruction for individual students. The classroom design also allows students to learn in the various modes prescribed in the school's academic model: self-paced, mastery-based, blended learning.

When the school reaches capacity, the student-to-teacher ratio at Merit

Prep Newark will be higher than in a traditional classroom (about 38 to 1), but Rayer expects that student access to teachers, and teachers' overall effectiveness in the classroom, will be preserved since a large portion of students work independently and in groups. Although the open stadium space can be noisy and distracting, students working independently wear headphones, and the intent is that students will learn an important life skill: how to stay focused in spite of commotion.

How does it improve learning?

To effectively teach a large group of students, teacher teams are encouraged to use real-time data (provided through Touchstone's Scoreboard tool) to strategically group students so that they can support, inspire, and learn from one another. Students might be grouped according to mastery, in a peer coaching scenario, or to work on a specific project. The learning potential for students working in groups benefits from the larger pool of students in Merit Prep Newark's stadium classroom than found in a traditional classroom. In addition, the stadium and skyboxes give teachers flexibility to create groups of different sizes. The teacher teams, combined with the ability to group students according to instructional need—without limits that might be caused by the physical space—could allow many students to achieve grade-level standards and beyond more quickly than in a traditional school setting.

What is the advantage for instructors and administrators?

Teaming master and apprentice teachers in the classroom provides

daily in-service professional development for less experienced teachers. Because blended learning models are relatively new, many teachers have not learned blended classroom teaching strategies, such as effectively leveraging technology to provide core content knowledge, using direct instruction time to explore complex topics more in-depth, or assigning a line-up ("playlist") of online work for a student based on real-time assessment data. Teaming teachers allows them to also learn classroom management strategies from one another, such as rituals and routines that keep the classroom running smoothly, managing differentiated instruction, and dealing with stress. Touchstone hopes that the model will help teachers support each other as a team.

"New teachers must learn to develop their craft in a way we don't usually allow," said Rayer. "Take heart surgeons, for example. We don't expect them to finish med school and then take a heart out. They take many years to perfect their craft. Likewise, teachers need time and space to develop."

What are the challenges?

The blended learning model and the large classroom size and population are relatively new concepts for students and teachers alike at Merit Prep Newark. "I had to learn to think outside the box," said master language arts teacher Tiffany McAfee. "And I think that's the greatest thing that ever happened to me as a teacher."

Another challenge for teachers is smoothing out the logistics of working together in the classroom (such as figuring out who is in charge of what and when), and effectively managing a large group of students. It takes time,

planning, and a sense of teamwork to establish smooth working relationships. "We strongly believe that this is the most promising model for our students," says Rayer, and that's why the school is committed to work through the challenges of co-teaching.

What's Next?

As the school scales up to its full enrollment and grade span, Touchstone leaders will be flexible with grouping students in classrooms (whether they continue to be grouped by age versus instructional level) and consider different classroom configurations for middle and high school students. Rayer says that high school science labs might look more like traditional classrooms with direct instruction—they will make those decisions as students begin working on the high school science curriculum and administrators assess their needs.

Touchstone has recently joined Matchbook Learning, a school developer that emphasizes blended instruction and developing teachers in a public school turnaround model. As the Merit Prep Newark model scales in this new partnership, the emphasis on coaching teacher teams to personalize instruction will continue to grow.



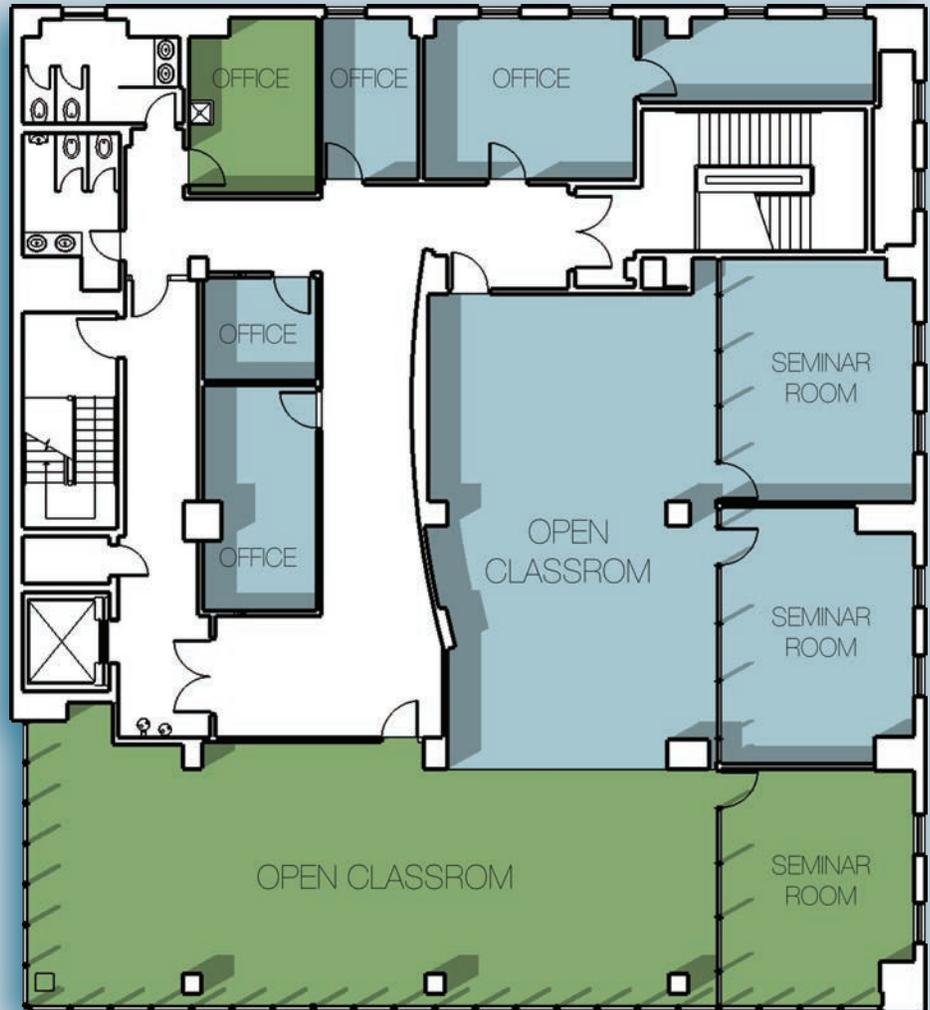


NEXT GEN TOOLS

Strategies and Innovations for Implementing Breakthrough Models

ARTIFACT:

Architectural floor plan of the stadium space (Open Classroom) and skyboxes (Seminar Rooms)



USE IT:

- Merit Prep Newark
- Touchstone Education: An Opportunity Culture Case Study

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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