

# Innovations in Learning:

## Design enhances engagement



**A**t Pine Street School in New York City, we have dispensed with the traditional industrial model of schooling and are looking ahead to the future. The entire school was designed with optional learning environments.

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Projects can be done in the classrooms, hallways, creative nooks, common areas—essentially anywhere students would like to work. This supports implementation of big and small projects alike and allows passersby to experience the work, which stimulates everyone in the learning environment. This approach generates curiosity and new ideas.

Instead of desks, we have varied seating (floor cushions, modular movable tables, high tables and stools, window nooks) to invite a differentiated experience for each

student and a different day-to-day experience for the entire class. Instead of teachers directing all of the learning, teachers build conceptual frameworks within which they facilitate discussion among students (starting as young as ages 2 and 3), inviting students to share their opinions, ideas, background knowledge, and experiences.

This approach nurtures collaborative relationships, models a respectful attitude regarding alternative points of view, empowers and emboldens students to value their thoughts and opinions, and promotes confidence in personal expression. Students contribute ideas about how learning will happen, guided by the wisdom of teachers who are also making sure that all units of inquiry (what we call our 6-week journey) are outfitted with resources both within and beyond the school.

We do not view the building as a constraint on our learning, and all students explore the city (New York) as a seamless element of their learning, venturing out

weekly as part of the curriculum. Sources can be more than books. Sometimes, people, places, experiences, historical evidence, and other options provided by “the real world” offer the richest way to learn about a particular subject.

All of this is done in two languages, English plus either Spanish or Mandarin, with two teachers supporting all learning and representing their focus language. In everything students do—whether strictly academic or connected to a focused learning in the arts, music, athletics, or theater—they are learning and applying both English and their target language. The “target” language is treated as equally important. We do not put language learning “under glass,” but rather normalize it as part of all experiences.

Nothing in our school community is transactional. Even lunch is a deep and layered learning experience. Our food provider sources ingredients from local farms, building a thoughtful menu filled with varying flavors to celebrate the global nature



of our population. Food is selected and combined with thought about sustainability, local and seasonal eating, and carbon reduction.

The students eat family style, setting up and clearing their lunch area, passing dishes to one another, monitoring their food waste and being thoughtful about portions. Every week, a partner organization arrives to retrieve any leftovers and quickly redistributes them to





individuals who need food. Our students work closely with this organization to have firsthand understanding of how food is kept out of the garbage and made useful for those in need.

Instead of recess, our teachers build a dynamic menu of “interest options” driven by their passions. These serve as mini “clubs” that meet daily and weekly; the teacher facilitates activity that the students carry forward. These activities are cross-age, which

means that students can mingle with each other, with teachers, and with the greater school community outside of their class relationships, fortifying the community in every direction. Areas of interest driven by teacher inspiration include a radio show, jewelry making, ballet, rock climbing, design, coding, hip hop, yoga, storytelling, and dozens more. Each trimester, students design their own weekly menu of daily activities (in lieu of a traditional recess) that bring them closer to others who are passionate about a subject nurtured by a teacher who is delighted to share with the students.

Every week, students assemble in an experience designed by them and for them. Parents are not allowed to attend but can watch via a livestream. In assembly, students share projects, performances, thoughts, and ideas. They support each other in public speaking (in multiple languages) and celebrate one another’s achievements and risk-taking. It is a culture of student agency and mutual support.

All across the school culture, there is both an overt and a subtle theme of student agency, voice, and choice, which fuels the curriculum and day-to-day interactions among students and between students and teachers. Accompanying this powerful feeling of choice is an expectation for mutually respectful collaboration, encouraging all students from varied international backgrounds to learn to understand and value perspectives that are very different from their own.

