

Bouncers learn better

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Jaden Crook bounced slightly while working on a workbook page full of subtraction problems in teacher Lisa Seljevold's classroom at Ellen Hopkins Elementary School in Moorhead.

The second-grader bobbed up and down on a large, round stability ball before shouting out the right answer to an equation.

The scene is common in Seljevold's classroom, where lessons have a little extra bounce these days.

Instead of teaching students seated in traditional desks, Seljevold instructs a room full of 7- and 8-year-olds poised on latex exercise balls.

Swapping desks for round stability chairs with pegged feet helps children to learn better and allows them to move throughout the school day, Seljevold said.



Second-graders in Lisa Seljevold's class from left, Samantha Nelson, Ian Olson, Jeffery Berkness and Cole Crompton do lessons while sitting on therapy stability balls to improve their posture and balance, and to enhance their attention at Ellen Hopkins Elementary School in south Moorhead.
Bruce Crummy / The Forum

She said she's the first teacher in the metro area to use stability balls instead of chairs in the classroom.

Several Minnesota districts – including some classrooms in Willmar, St. Paul and Lakeville – have ditched uncomfortable desk chairs for softer seats with more give.

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"I'm a person who is constantly looking for new ways to help kids learn more,"

Seljevold said, noting that she gets just as antsy as her students while sitting in a desk chair all day. "As far as classroom climate, they are so much more attentive (using a stability ball)."

Seljevold brought the stability ball idea to Moorhead school officials after learning about the concept from a former teacher who founded a company – Hudson, Wis.-based WittFitt – that distributes the chairs.

The Dakota Medical Foundation awarded the school a \$500 grant to buy therapy stability balls for classrooms. With additional district funding, the project came to fruition.

Students are in their fifth week of using the balls full time, Seljevold said.

Children went through seven lessons on the history and purpose of using the stability balls before trading in their desk chairs. The school fitted each child with an appropriate ball for his or her height.

Seljevold weaned them from chair to ball by having students increase the number of hours they'd sit on the ball each week.

Safety is the key in Seljevold's classroom, where students are well-trained on the importance of keeping their feet on the floor and not bouncing so aggressively that they disturb classmates or hurt themselves.

Students can sit in a regular chair if they want, but most choose not to, Seljevold said.

Research shows that sitting on the balls instead of on traditional chairs helps children to improve their posture, enhance attention and improve balance. It "activates mental capacities," said Moorhead assistant superintendent Lynne Kovash, when presenting the stability ball proposal to the School Board earlier this year.

Other research backs up the theory that the spheres could make kids more on the ball when it comes to health.

A 2006 study by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester found that "chairless schools" – including classrooms that incorporate stability balls instead of desks – could help curb the growing number of overweight children.

Dr. James Levine monitored the activity of fourth- and fifth-graders at Elton Hills Elementary School in Rochester over three weeks.

He studied the difference in activity between children in a traditional classroom with desks and those where they could move around in a room filled with kneeling pads, throw pillows, stability balls and other "standing desk" options.

Incorporating aspects that encourage children to move around while learning helps to keep kids more active and enhances their chances of burning more calories, Levine found.

"The idea is whatever you can do to make children more active in school, outside of adding more physical education classes ... it's better for them," said Bob Nellis, a spokesman at Mayo who is familiar with Levine's research.

Scientific research on the pros and cons of stability balls is lost on most of Seljevold's students.

"I think it's cool. The chairs are really hard, and these are soft," second-grader Nathan Brown said.

“It makes my spine feel better,” Ian Olson added. “It’s fun to sit on them because it’s comfortable.”

Stability chairs

Second-graders in Lisa Seljevold’s classroom at Ellen Hopkins Elementary School in Moorhead are the first in the district to substitute traditional desks for stability chairs – latex balls equipped with pegged feet.

Educators point to several benefits of students using stability balls instead of traditional chairs, including:

- Enhances attention and concentration.
- Improves learning through movement.
- Allows students to move with little disturbance to others.
- Improves posture and blood flow to the brain.
- Strengthens a child’s core muscle group.
- Improves balance and coordination.

Source: Lisa Seljevold and www.wittfitt.com

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