

## Shabazz students use Feng Shui to create a better math classroom

by Jane Burns

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For many people, clutter causes frustration. For others, math causes anxiety. Combine the two and it creates a double whammy of stress. Fix them, and a world of possibilities can open.

That's a lesson learned at Shabazz City High School this fall, when a group of students helped make a math room one of the most inviting places in the building.

For the first quarter of this school year, art students learned concepts of feng shui and applied them to a cluttered classroom. The result, finished in November, has been a room that has created enthusiasm throughout the school and has had a noticeable effect on learning.

"It really helped with our school spirit," art teacher Martha Vasquez said. "Some schools have athletic teams. We get feng shui."

Indeed, they approach things a little differently at Shabazz, the city's alternative high school on North Sherman Avenue that has an emphasis on service learning. The math room overhaul was a service learning project tied to the school's art curriculum.

From what the students and teachers are hearing, it's a service that has been appreciated.

"It feels good, especially the positive comments we get," said Tyler Sakrison, an art student who also has a math class in the redecorated room. "I'm glad we're able to help people do math better."

It wasn't just the students who needed the change. Math teacher Steve Young was feeling overwhelmed by the clutter in the classroom he shares with math and science teacher Peter Fee. Posters lined the walls, stickers were stuck onto cabinets, and there were things left over from when it had been used by other teachers. Unnecessary objects took up space. The furniture was so close that students couldn't get up out of their seats without knocking into somebody else.

"It was just a disgusting mess, and I never had the energy to clean it up," Young said.

He takes a yoga class with feng shui practitioner Linda Mundt of Madison, and he mentioned his classroom frustration to her. It wasn't so much that it was messy as it seemed to be full of distractions for the students. He wondered if she could teach feng shui to the art students, who then in turn could help the math students by redecorating his room.

Feng shui is a Chinese phrase literally translated as "wind-water," but it is the art and science of balancing energy in a space. Mundt has worked in homes, offices, spiritual centers and apartments and has helped people choose colors, prepare a home for sale and select or place furniture or art work. She starts with the premise that the things about outdoor spaces that inspire, focus and calm people can be used to create the same environment inside, too.

Young mentioned the possibility of working with Mundt to Vasquez, thinking it would fit in with the

school's commitment to being a learning lab. The project got a green light and work began when school started in September. Once a week for nine weeks, Mundt guest-taught Vasquez's art class.

"I had no idea what I would do, how I would do it and how I could possibly teach students real feng shui, not just what's in the books," she said. "What's in the books are mostly lists of rules. I wanted to teach them something real.

"We spent a lot of time talking about a lot of different kinds of chi (energy) – relationship chi, health chi, and we talked about what good math chi would look like," Mundt said. "And they were really on target; they said you'd need focus."

Mundt had the students look at the pictures of the math room taken before she and Young got rid of some of the clutter during the summer. They talked about what was on the wall and if it related to math – pictures of artist Frida Kahlo, reggae legend Bob Marley, a Mount Rushmore of African-American leaders.

"They're all really important symbols at Shabazz; they loved all these things, but they could see these things were not relevant to math and could provide distractions," Mundt said. "Kids are smart; they're very sharp, and they know what they need."

Vasquez found a story about the soulful essences of math and discussed it with the class. Mundt taught the students about mandalas, circular geometric patterns, and asked each student to design one. They would vote on one pattern to become the focal point of the redesigned math room.

The students learned the role that each color plays in creating an environment. They suggested math formulas to ring the room, an idea the teachers had too, but had not shared with the students. Mundt asked them to talk about places in which they felt comfortable and places in which they felt uncomfortable.

And then she asked them to do the most unimaginable homework assignment ever – to go home and clean their rooms.

"I wanted them to go home into their bedrooms, take everything off the floor and off the wall and to see how they'd feel," she said. "Oh, you would have thought I had asked them to climb Mount Everest.

Jaz Franks did the assignment, even if her room didn't last long in its uncluttered state.

"I felt the difference. When I got everything off the floor, it felt bigger," she said. "So it actually worked for the time it was actually like that."

Taking the clutter out of the math room had the same effect. The space grew, and students were no longer butting chairs. Hanging plants enlivened the space along the windows.

Because of health, safety and time issues, the students did much of the creative work during school while leaving the hands-on work to the teachers during off-hours. Students couldn't climb ladders, but they did paint the mandala.

Right away, Young saw a difference.

"They're a little quieter, a little less distracted," he said. "They're just calmer, that's all I can say. It does make a difference."

Mundt had goals for the students beyond a nicer math space too.

“If they get nothing else out of the course, I want them to know they can learn to read spaces, environment and people. That they can learn to read when things are safe or not safe,” she said.

Vasquez said the project could have future implications too, as students pursue careers that have design elements such as art, fashion, Web design or even architecture. She sees another benefit too.

“Kids need to know that we care about the space that they’re in, that we want to make a special space for them,” she said. “I think that’s going to have a long-lasting effect on the student body. It’ll be the gift that keeps giving.”

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*Before*



*After*

