

How Brooklyn Special Ed Students Built a Library | The Maker Issue

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Adaptive Design teacher Charles Brown with a reading easel in progress.

All students consider themselves makers at P.S. 721K, a public school in Brooklyn, NY—it's part of the educational mission. The school's 400 on-site 14- to 21-year-old special education students make their own soap, cook meals (often with vegetables grown in the school garden), and run coffee and bake shops. In a third-floor shop, they wield tools and assemble furniture from industrial-strength corrugated cardboard, glue, and wooden nails.

The young people at this facility, a vocational school/occupational training center, live with a range of disabilities. Some have mild autism, while others are wheelchair bound, or do not speak. Yet "there's not a job done here that the kids were not a part of," says principal Barbara Tremblay.

Recently, shop students at the school built furniture for their new school library—colorfully painted stools and book return boxes (color-coded for students who don't read). Students work at the library, too, under the guidance of teacher Rizwan Malik.

"Not all of our kids are readers," says Tremblay. Still, having a school library was a top priority when she became principal three years ago. Then, the library space was mostly used for teacher meetings. That was before she overhauled it, knocking out a wall to make the space wheelchair accessible and enlisting

Malik to oversee it. “Library is part of what we do here,” Tremblay says. “Whether it’s picture symbols or you hear it on audio, you need to access literature.”

While Tremblay’s students won’t be packing the library to cram for AP exams, many of them will likely become lifelong library users, says Melissa Jacobs, coordinator at the Office of Library Services in New York City’s DOE. “This is the population that needs [a school library] the most,” she says.

The return of shop

For many students, that means spending time building things in the shop with teacher Charles Brown, who guides them in making the sturdy chairs, book stands, and other items—all out of cardboard. “Everything you see here was made from three-layer cardboard—the kind stores like Costco use to ship their big materials,” he says. Brown received training in this construction from the Adaptive Design Association (ADA), a New York City nonprofit dedicated to creating custom-designed furniture out of industrial cardboard for disabled children. In ADA’s midtown Manhattan storefront location, staff teach volunteers, from high school and college students to educators and professional designers, these skills.

ADA and the NYC DOE are in the process of setting up more shops in city high schools serving general education students.

“Kids helping kids is powerful and working for a purpose is powerful, especially with a purpose that is very clear, and you quickly see that your work has an impact,” says ADA executive director Alex Truesdell. The right adaptation can enable developmental milestones, she adds.

Giving a child the right furniture—for instance, an elevated chair that literally helps her sit at the table with peers—allows kids’ abilities, rather than their limitations, to shine, she says.

Truesdell sees multiple benefits of the hands-on shop experience, for both able-bodied children and others. “We must put shop in every school. We only learn by doing,” she says. “We don’t learn by watching.”

Accessible and low cost

ADA shares its building with DIYAbility, a group dedicated to assistive technology and promoting equal access to maker tech tools. Among the organization’s initiatives is a summer maker program for teenagers with physical disabilities. DIYAbility is also developing an affordable Morse Code communication system for people who don’t speak, Truesdell says.

“People with disabilities are the largest minority worldwide,” she adds, “and the most underperforming in schools.”



Student-built stools and book bins.