

Sensory labs help young students focus

By Laura Frazier
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The reading space at Rosa Parks Elementary looks typical at first glance. Books fill the shelves and colorful beanbag chairs are piled on the floor. Posters illustrating the alphabet hang on the walls.

But the classroom also has buckets of small toys, vibrating pillows and flexible chair cushions, just some of the many tools available to help special-education students learn.

The SuperSensory Literacy Space, a project of the Portland based nonprofit The Shadow Project, began at Rosa Parks in North Portland last month. In partnership with Portland Public Schools' Read Together initiative, The Shadow Project also has opened a sensory lab at Bridger School and has plans for three more pilot schools this year.

The literacy space, set up in Rosa Parks' special-education learning center, includes noise canceling headphones, kinetic sand, weighted lap pads and other supplies that can help calm a student and increase focus during reading time or other activities.

The area also includes a wide variety of "fidgets," such as squishy rubber balls, that students can hold. For students who feel the need to constantly be in motion, some chairs have bands they can kick with their feet or cushions that allow them to wiggle.

During a recent class, student Fortune Gregory, 11, read aloud from a Junie B. Jones book. Meanwhile, she squeezed a pink ball in one hand. Having her hands busy helps her brain focus, she said.

"You're not just sitting there doing nothing," Gregory said. "It helps me."

Gregory also used a vibrating pillow and earphones during state testing to help her concentrate, according to The Shadow Project.

The idea is to "tap into all the senses," said Christy Scattarella, the project's founder and executive director. For example, some students might learn to read through hearing, she said.

National Public Radio recently reported on a study that found performance increased for students with attention disorders when they were allowed to move during a task.

Materials in the sensory space can help students with ADHD, dyslexia, emotional challenges or other learning disabilities, said Kim Giarelli, Rosa Parks special-education teacher. With help from fidgets and other tools, Gregory has learned to manage her learning disability well enough to no longer need special education services, Giarelli said.

The literacy space also

caters to students who might be behind their peers in reading comprehension. The space includes book sets and multicultural titles, and some lower-level books are specifically designed to look like advanced chapter books so students aren't self-conscious, Scattarella said.

Students also have access to a tablet and an audio library called Learning Ally, which can read aloud, highlight spots and track passages. Giarelli said students can also access reading materials outside of school. Isaac Pierce, 10, said the software lets him go back and hear a word again if he doesn't catch it the first time. "It knows where my place is," he said. "It makes me want to read more."

The sensory space project was created after a special-education teacher survey showed an overwhelming need for better literacy materials, Scattarella said. Statewide, only about 31 percent of third-graders with disabilities met benchmarks last year, data show.

"How do we expect these children to thrive when we're not providing them the reading materials that they need?" Scattarella said. "Let's give them what the need to be successful."

The Shadow Project hopes to expand sensory literacy labs to eight more schools next year and 10 the year after, Scattarella said. It cost about \$2,100 to initially equip the Rosa Parks space, said Sydney Clevenger, the project's communications and fundraising manager. Rosa Parks Principal Tamala Newsome said she hopes to expand sensory resources to other classrooms. She said about 65 students rotate through the learning center each day but might not have the same tools available in mainstream classes.

Newsome said the lab has helped empower students to take authority over their own learning needs. And although

the gadgets in the learning lab may seem like toys, students know their value.

"It's amazing how quickly they realize what they need and (what) works for them," she said. "When kids really need something, they don't misuse it. You'll never see that fidget go flying across the room."

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