

# Sensory rooms enable students to de-stress, refocus



Students in the Clarence Central School District tour a new sensory room in Harris Hill Elementary School, trying out bean bag chairs and tactical interactive areas. The room was financed by a grant from PERMA. ❖ Photos courtesy of PERMA

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The sound of water in a bubble tube. The feel of a sequin wall panel. The pressure of a roller slide.

Those sensory experiences can now be experienced in some elementary schools. Schools are creating special spaces called sensory rooms to help students improve focus and attention, as well as reduce anxiety.

More than a calming corner with soft furnishings, sensory rooms are carefully designed settings to support any student who feels overwhelmed or overly emotional, including special education students. It can also be used as a preventative measure to help students feel in control of their environment and maintain a positive frame of mind.

In the Clarence Central School District in Erie County, all aspects of a new sensory room – from the lights and textures to the visual elements and temperature – were designed to help students let go of feelings of stress and refocus.

“For students with sensory needs, the environment can often help them succeed or shut down,” said Robert Boccaccio, principal of Harris Hill Elementary School. “It was important to our team that the items we chose to put in the room were diverse and allowed for student choice ... to help them get back to baseline.”

Scientific literature suggests that sensory rooms – also called multisensory environments – can help children regulate distress and manage their own mental health. For example, children with autism who were given the ability to control their environment in sensory rooms improved their ability to pay attention, according to a study published in the international journal *Autism*. They had fewer repetitive behaviors, better activity levels and less

stereotyped speech or vocalizations, according to the journal.

At Schuylerville Elementary School in Saratoga County, a sensory room includes a “vibra-acoustic lounger ... that plays music synced with the vibration of the chair,” according to a district news release. Teachers can control the chair and other parts of the room using a Bluetooth connection.

Visits to the room are listed as an accommodation in individualized education programs. “Progress is documented and monitored regularly, and feedback from support staff, teachers and families is collected to help determine whether the intervention is having a positive impact,” said Lindsay Ochal, director of pupil personnel services for the Schuylerville Central School District.

What’s an example of how the room is used in Schuylerville Elementary? Ochal said some students found it stressful to unpack their belongings alongside everyone else first thing in the morning. Now, these students can avoid the noise and tumult of that experience. After arriving at school, they typically visit the sensory room, then enter the classroom once their classmates are already settled.

“Now that they have that sensory break in the morning, it’s a much smoother process,” she said. “They’re able to get their day started in the right mindset.”



A sensory room in Schuylerville Elementary School cost roughly \$35,000, paid for with federal American Rescue Plan money. ❖ Photo courtesy of Schuylerville Central School District

Schuylerville has publicized its sensory room on its website and social media, and more detailed information is shared directly with families whose children may benefit.

Officials in Schuylerville and Clarence said their schools have had decreases in therapeutic crisis intervention incidents since their sensory rooms have been available. Boccaccio credited teacher aide Christine Rich-Reese, also a therapeutic crisis intervention trainer, who helps students understand how to use the space proactively.

Although equipping a sensory room can be expensive, schools have been able to find external sources of funding.

Schuylerville Elementary School’s room cost roughly \$35,000 and was made possible through a federal American Rescue Plan grant.

In Clarence, the Public Employer Risk Management Association (PERMA) gave Harris Hill Elementary School a \$22,500 grant for its sensory room. This was part of an effort to reduce workplace injuries, as well as to support the district in its goals, according to PERMA officials.

More than 60% of staff and student injuries in schools involve students with special needs, noted Angela M. Nagle, schools risk management specialist with PERMA and former school administrator.

“Although the injuries are most always unintentional, bites, scratches,

hair pulls and bruising are common,” Dr. Nagle said.

Districts that are members of PERMA and desire a grant for this purpose “should examine and identify trends in their workers’ compensation claims,” said Nagle. “If the trends indicate a multitude of claims originating from interactions with students, a sensory room should strongly be considered.”

*Editor’s Note: PERMA is a NYSSBA business partner.*

Generally, installation of a sensory room isn’t something that would require formal approval by school boards. Nevertheless, school board members “can play a vital role by collaborating with the director of special education, reviewing evidence-based practices and contributing to informed, student-centered decisions,” said Schuylerville Elementary School Principal Stacy Marzullo.

Boccaccio, the Clarence principal, recommended choosing items that will be most durable. His district bought materials from a supplier called Fun and Function, which replaces broken items at no cost.

He added that a search on Google or Amazon will turn up numerous products for districts to build a sensory room. He cautioned that there are “thousands of options available,” which could leave administrators feeling a bit overwhelmed themselves.

## Tips on sensory rooms

- Planning a sensory room? Schuylerville Elementary School Principal Stacy Marzullo offers these tips:
- **Get help with design.** “Our most successful step was integrating the occupational therapists and special education teachers early in the process, allowing them to design the space intentionally based on student needs.”
  - **Training staff is essential.** “This includes understanding the purpose of each sensory tool, how it supports regulation or sensory integration, and how to safely implement the student’s sensory diet.”
  - **Plan appropriately.** “One challenge we faced was scheduling – making sure the room could serve students consistently without becoming overbooked.”