

[1] The design and manufacture of the furniture used in New Zealand schools has traditionally been targeted at meeting the needs of the school rather than the needs of the students who use the furniture for most of the day. As schools have got bigger and rolls increased the major factors which have driven design changes have been keeping costs down and making sure that the furniture was strong enough to stand up to the daily wear, had surfaces that could be easily cleaned and were able to be repaired by the caretakers when damaged and could be stacked easily by students when they needed to be.

Over the last 100 years the physical size of students has changed but these changes have not been taken into account in the design of desks and chairs which up until recently looked much the same as they did for much of the last 100 years.

But recently things have been changing. Students are not only physically bigger than they used to be but there is a greater mixture of cultures in the classroom. This is now encouraging principals to try to make sure that the size of the desks and chairs has a better match to the size of the students in the school.



[2] One company working in the field of classroom furniture design that has tried to adapt to the range of body sizes in the schools is Furnware which has its factory in Hastings. This company has made a lot of different wood and metal products since it originally started but has been making desks for New Zealand primary and secondary schools for a number of years now. Up until recently the company focus has been more on how the chairs have been made rather than how well they suited the people working in the desks.

Their new Bodyfurn classroom furniture range of desks and chairs is very much different from the furniture it has been designed to replace. It is still hard wearing and easy to maintain, but has also been designed to be able to more closely fit the needs of the students working in the classrooms.

One problem that students have is that they get restless and then they rock backwards and forwards on their chairs. This still makes for a noisy classroom with 30 students all rocking backwards and forwards and there's always the odd one that rocks too far back and falls over. So the company decided to make the chairs out of a plastic that could bend more and pivot a bit which is much safer and quieter.



The desks were changed so that they came in more than one size and this meant that students wouldn't knock things like books and pens off the top as easily. The surface of the desk was also made of a special plastic that can be cleaned more easily and they supply a special liquid that can be kept in the classroom and used to wash off marks when they are made.

One problem that the company had with their old desks and chairs was students unscrewing the screws used to fix the wood and plastic to the metal frames. They solved this problem by using a specially designed screw that can only be unscrewed using a special tool which only the caretakers usually have access to.

The chairs are designed so that the metal legs have protective plastic on them to stop the floors from scratching if the chairs slide across. And a new side storage unit has been developed so that the students' books don't have to be stored underneath the desks or in tote trays with those of the other students.

Although the new designs have meant that the furniture is more expensive than the old desks and chairs schools are still buying the new furniture. This is mainly because of the improved design suiting the students better and looks good in the classroom. The way the factory has been set up means that furniture is manufactured efficiently and to a high standard and everything they supply to schools will last an acceptable number of years before it needs to be replaced again.