

MY CHILDREN THRIVE WHERE THE TONE OF THE ROOM IS RELAXED AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRONG.



LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Nichol Lancaster describes how her children's bumpy journeys through the education system helped to inspire an innovative range of shape-shifting classroom furniture.

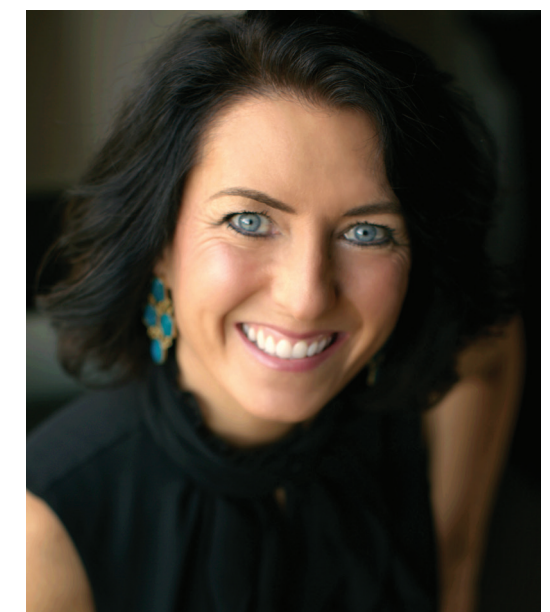
Many commercial products are born around a conference table, in an office building, a long way from the people who will ultimately use them.

Others are born of raw, real life experience, and their designers instinctively understand the users' needs.

In the case of our company's latest furniture range — the Chameleon Classroom System — the latter is true.

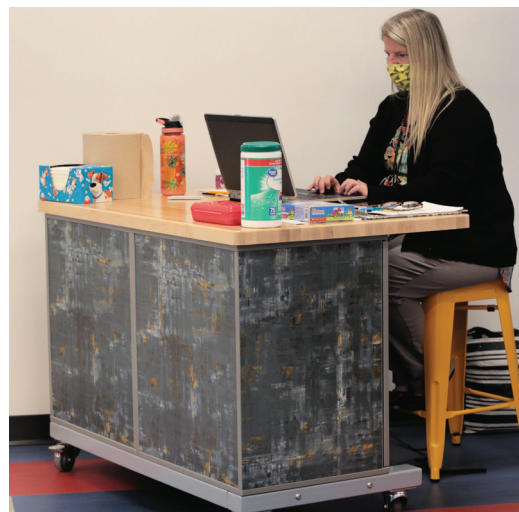
Of course, in our industry, we are all guilty of thinking our furniture is going to revolutionize the classroom and I am personally guilty of standing back and assuming kids will "love" our furniture arrangements.

But the truth is that our furniture is simply a tool for the classroom, and is one piece of a jigsaw that teachers must put together every day.





THE IDEA IS THAT THE SYSTEM ALLOWS FOR COMPLETE FLEXIBILITY FOR THE TEACHER, IT'S MOBILE, FLEXIBLE, COLLABORATIVE AND INSPIRES EDUCATORS TO CREATE ORDER.



As a mother of four children, I have been wheeling in and out of the car rider line to drop my children off at various schools for 22 years.

To say that our experience in education has been a pleasant journey would not be accurate. My children have been average students, and haven't exactly thrived in school.

My career hasn't always been in educational furniture, but when I joined the industry, my eyes were opened to some of the reasons why my children's school years have been difficult.

Over the years, I've discovered that my children learn best in a non-traditional setting, along with a teacher who has the ability to capture their attention on a personal level.

My children thrive where the tone of the room is relaxed and relationships are strong.

When that is coupled with great instruction, I have seen them transform into fabulous students, and they absorb the subject like sponges.

An example of this is how my two oldest children, who are three years apart, both thrived under the same fourth grade teacher, at different times.

Under that teacher, my typically "middle of the road" students both maintained an A average for the entire fourth grade. I was ecstatic and confused all at the same time.



I IMMEDIATELY FELL IN LOVE WITH THE CONCEPT.

Years later, after entering the world of educational furniture, I wrote to their teacher and asked...
"What is your secret sauce?"

She sent back an entire page of her secrets, but the common thread was that she was always going to truly let her students into her life, and she wanted to be in theirs at a real person to person level.

She also gave them freedom. Freedom to make mistakes and then correct them, freedom to sit where they want, freedom to lead their parent-teacher conferences, and the freedom list goes on.

She created a home away from home, and empowered the children to look at their time in the classroom differently, while maintaining order and an expectation for performance and respect.

She got all of that and more as the culture in her classroom began to flow naturally from her students.

I remember visiting her room back in the years of 2002 and 2005, and thinking "This is cool, and I love the way she has her room arranged".

She was using the standard desks that she was given by rearranging them in pods of three or four where the children faced each other. Her room was clean, neat and she was highly organized.

This may have been my first sight of a collaborative classroom. Now, if you will fast forward with me to 2015, I will share an opposite experience.

My youngest child was also in the fourth grade and had done well in previous years. However, this year he began to have behavioral problems, was not focused in class, and his grades were declining, so I was called in for a parent-teacher conference.

When I walked into the classroom, I was instantly overwhelmed with the sense of chaos. His teacher, although very pleasant and kind, had been teaching for 28 years and was retiring soon. The teacher was tired and seemed overwhelmed and the desks, the case work and walls told that same story.



There was "stuff" everywhere... piles of papers, stacks of text books, and trinkets on every bookshelf. Every inch of every wall was lined with motivational messages, paperwork, reminders, and more.

The floor had book bags, coats, and personal belongings scattered about beside each desk. There was not an inch of this classroom left to breathe. It's safe to say that not many people would thrive under those circumstances.

To be fair, this was not the single cause of my son's problems, however, one has to ask if that could have been a contributor.

These types of real life experiences have become the inspiration and driver behind our company's mentality of "How can we fix this, and what if we tried this?"

At CEF, we are absolutely passionate about providing school furniture that is a tool for fostering creativity and a sense of freedom for the children.

When children use our product they can sit or stand, collaborate around writable glass tables with high stools,

work at a butcher block surface or simply roll their desk or storage cart across the room.

The Chameleon Classroom System, which is the brainchild of my colleague and CEF's lead engineer Terry Davis, became a very exciting product from the start.

When he called me out to the factory floor and started stacking pods, and explaining how it would work, I immediately fell in love with the concept and we began the process of designing the full line.

We saw that this could not only provide multiple types of pieces, but solve many of the organizational problems in a classroom. It would also create a highly functional space with the ability to transition the room quickly for any teaching style.

In a nutshell, The Chameleon is a mobile pod system that can sit anywhere from two to six children per unit based on one multi-positional top.

The customizable pod configurations allow users to

create everything from student seating to wall cabinetry. The idea is that the system allows for complete flexibility for the teacher, it's mobile, flexible, collaborative and inspires educators to create order.

It can also be a teacher's desk, classroom storage and reduce the need for case work around the entire classroom.

The Chameleon is only one product line of several where CEF has seen a need and worked towards a solution.

It's not rocket science, it's simply being present and staying connected to our children and the classroom.

CEF is honored to have our furniture placed in classrooms across the country, and we are committed to creating unique pieces that are well built, highly functional and beautifully designed. ■

Nichol Lancaster is the director of business operations at Custom Educational Furnishings (CEF) To see a video of The Chameleon System, go to bit.ly/33ozvL1