Distributed by UW News Service, September 29, 2025

Link to original story: <https://www.uwsp.edu/news/tomorrow-river-school-benches/>

**UW-Stevens Point students create functional furniture for local school**

Written by University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

Students in the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point’s School of Design and Communication recently engaged in a collaborative woodworking project that merged design with practical application. Over the course of a four-week summer session of Art 398: Special Topics in Furniture and Woodworking, the class produced thirteen benches for the Tomorrow River Community Charter School’s second-grade classroom.

Traditionally, the course has emphasized individual creativity, with each student designing and constructing an independent project. This year, however, Justin Playl, instructor and studio and safety coordinator, restructured the curriculum to focus on the complete design process, from client consultation, prototype development and production.

“In the past, we found a summer class with such a tight time frame didn’t give students a lot of time to develop their own artistic voice and designs,” said Playl. “We were looking for a way to bring design back into the woodworking class. The way we want to do that is with a group project where we found a client and designed for that client, giving students a taste of what it would be like working in their field as designers.”

The Tomorrow River Community Charter School provided an ideal opportunity for such a project. The second-grade classroom required new benches that would serve multiple functions as seating for students, adaptable work surfaces and durable play structures. Benches also needed to be light enough for young students to move independently, yet sturdy enough to withstand daily classroom use.

The project began with a client meeting in which students gathered data on the functional requirements, materials preferences and safety considerations. Design teams then generated multiple concepts through sketching and discussion, ultimately producing small-scale models to test their ideas.

Peyton Capary, a studio art major from Randall, Wis., described the process as a useful learning experience.

“I found it really insightful to work with tools that I hadn’t used all that much before,” said Capary. “Also, my partner, who is studying elementary education, brought up issues during the design process that I had not even thought of since she has experience working with kids that age,” said Capary.

Prototyping revealed critical insights. In one instance, a design intended to function in two orientations proved unstable when tipped onto its side, highlighting the importance of physical modeling in evaluating balance and usability.

Once a final design was selected, students transitioned to full-scale production. The class operated as a coordinated workshop, using laser-cut templates, precision cutting tools and joinery techniques to produce uniform pieces. The work required not only craftsmanship but also process engineering skills to ensure that all thirteen benches were identical.

“Students learned industrial woodworking skills with the table saw, router, miter saw and these kinds of big stationary power tools that we think of, with a focus on manufacturing,” said Playl. “Students learned to use jigs and fixtures to ensure consistency.”

“It’s very different, especially when you’re working with other people, because it ended up being like an assembly line of sorts,” said Capary.

Capary reflected on the technical skills gained during production. “I preferred working with the table saw and was especially interested in learning the router. The compressed schedule meant everyone had to focus on efficiency while maintaining quality,” she said.

The completed benches will be in use at the charter school starting this fall. For students, the project provided a tangible example of how design principles, collaboration and technical skill translate into a professional setting.

“There’s something very different about building something that serves a functional purpose versus making a sculpture that needs to speak to you and evoke an emotion,” said Playl. “Those are both excellent kinds of making. However, a lot of our students are coming from the evoking emotion working with sculpture approach, and for them it was a new experience to think about how people want to sit comfortably.”