

Prisoners restore school desks

A new program in which prison inmates from the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility refurbish damaged school furniture got a rousing thumbs up from students, staff and administrators at Bernstein Intermediate School in Huguenot earlier this month as the school unveiled the first batch of desk chairs redone through the program.

A total of 100 wooden chairs used by Bernstein students had been shipped to Arthur Kill at the end of the school year.

The 35-year-old chairs had been used since the school opened and most were cracked and splintered. But the chairs came back "looking brand new and better than ever," reported Bernstein Principal Nancy Lisiewski.

"They're beautiful," she said of the chairs. "Something like this boosts morale. It makes the students and teachers feel good just to

see the new chairs and know how this was accomplished."

And, more importantly, Mrs. Lisiewski said, the school saved about \$6,000 by having the inmates do the work, instead of purchasing brand-new chairs, which cost at least \$60 each. "The money that we saved can be put into programs elsewhere in the school," she noted.

Bernstein has another 100 chairs and desks that Arthur Kill inmates are in the process of refinishing.

Arthur Kill inmates have also finished furniture for students and staff at Barnes Intermediate School in Great Kills and Dreyfus Intermediate School in Stapleton.

The Arthur Kill program, known as Operation Restoration, is a five-year pilot program among Borough President Guy V. Molinari, the city Board of Education, and Staten Island

School District 31.

The program involves five inmates who each work two eight-hour days a week, according to Steve Graziano, director of carpentry and maintenance at the facility. The program is modeled after one at East Jersey State Prison in Rahway, N.J., that was first observed by Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island representative to the Board of Education. Cammarata obtained seed money for supplies and equipment to get the Arthur Kill program up and running.

The program can overhaul as many as 1,000 dilapidated chairs and desks a year. At last count, just over two years ago, District 31 officials estimated there were more than 11,000 damaged student chairs and desks abandoned in the Island's public elementary and intermediate schools.

— DIANE C. LORE