

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An urban school with a heart of the Alaskan wild, Iditarod Elementary School is the living room of the Wasilla community. Named after the famous Iditarod Trail, the Title 1 school serves neighborhood students and a significant transient migrant population. This replacement school houses 500 pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students in a 50,000 sf facility. Helping establish a unique sense of place, the school creates a home away from home for the diverse student population and their families, connecting them to the greater community.

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The school sought to establish strong community connections by engaging and welcoming parents, students, social service agencies, and business partners through the planning and design process. Developing a meaningful Learning Signature, *Building promise and potential in the heart of our community*, was a key tool in engaging stakeholders and providing focus to the school design. Created through intense collaboration between the design team, students, teachers, and administrators early in the programming and design process, the signature speaks to the school's core identity and informed all aspects of the planning and design. More than just a design tool, the learning signature embodies the school's promise to the community and the commitment of staff and teachers to their students.

The Design Committee viewed the new school not as just a community asset but also as an active catalyst in the promotion and development of healthy vibrant neighborhoods. Internal communities range from professional and grade level to intermediate/primary groupings. Focused around a light-filled community space, classrooms have direct access and connection to the heart of the school for formal/informal, small-group/large-group and individual learning activities.

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

From the beginning, the District knew they needed a change. The original school was a 1970 era open concept plan that had been walled off, isolating teachers and students. With almost no windows, the school turned its back on the community and its dramatic Alaskan setting. Key concepts for the learning environments include:

- *Student-centered learning*
- *Multi-sensory stimulation*
- *Multimedia program delivery*
- *Collaborative learning environment*
- *Project based learning*
- *Active/exploratory curriculum*
- *Outdoor connection & learning*

The planning process discarded the isolated classroom/hallway model, creating active common connecting space that provide pathways and engaging learning opportunities. This literal and figurative heart of the school carries the message of the school promise through its connective tissue. Design features include:

- **Student-centered:** envisioning a future where every student has an individual learning plan, classrooms connect to common areas to facilitate a fluid, personalized learning process.
- **Stimulation:** bold and varied colors and textures pervade the wide variety of vibrant learning settings.

- **Collaboration:** classrooms spill out into community spaces supporting everything from small study nooks to large gatherings.
- **Project Based Learning:** the library and learning lab can be configured in multiple ways, allowing the spaces to serve varied functions: quiet study, active learning, community gathering, hands-on learning, and much more
- **Engagement:** the heart of the school is a true community space, a place parents and visitors are welcomed to share in the excitement of learning.
- **Connection:** views within the school connect all learning spaces, creating a transparency of purpose while simultaneously displaying its vibrant learning activities to students and visitors.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Iditarod is one of a few schools in the Mat-Su School District that is located in an urban area and is surrounded by mature birch forests. The school is configured to be an active community center with gathering spaces, classrooms, and athletic facilities readily accessible while emphasizing views, materials, and textures that respond to the natural surroundings.

Situated in a subarctic environment winter days are extremely short (5.5 hours at solstice) and sun angles are low (7.5 degrees above the horizon at high noon of the winter solstice). Snow covers the ground 6 of the 9 months that school is in session and periodic 100+ mph winds sweep down the Matanuska Valley and across the site from the east. Located in a reclaimed gravel pit, this sustainable project, transforms site challenges into school assets:

- The limited solar arc prompted a configuration where all classrooms face south, providing needed sun exposure for students during short winter days.
- Low winter sun angles are harnessed to bring sunlight into most learning spaces, even those on the north side of the school.
- Carefully crafted color schemes create playful, varied and sophisticated environments providing welcome visual stimulation largely absent from Alaska's monochromatic winter landscape.
- The vibrant colors and transparency of the school's wedged-shaped clerestory provide a warm and welcoming beacon to the community when used during dark winter evenings.
- Active and engaging interior functions are readily visible from the street. Color-shifting lighting provides a varied and programmable 'light show' in the high bay windows.

RESULTS

Iditarod staff have embraced the new school and the Learning Signature they helped develop with great enthusiasm. It has energized and transformed the way they engage their students. Originally skeptical of the utility of the informal break-out spaces teachers are now actively competing for those spaces and looking for ways to create additional small group learning spaces. Views into and out of classrooms are increasing teacher, parent and student awareness of the vibrant learning happening in all corners of the school. The flexible learning environments have nudged a staff that came from a self-contained classroom setting towards more active, collaborative, 21st Century learning.

To view a short video including testimonials from teachers and staff [click here](#)



Clarity & Safety: careful orchestration of vehicular traffic separates parking, drop-off, and bus traffic, while providing safe pedestrian pathways to and from the school.




Capturing the Sun: located in an abandoned gravel pit, the school is situated to maximize solar exposure and southern views to the Chugach Mountains.



Space Key


- Classrooms
- Admin
- Library
- Lab
- Gym
- Music
- Food Service
- Support


 NORTH



Space Key

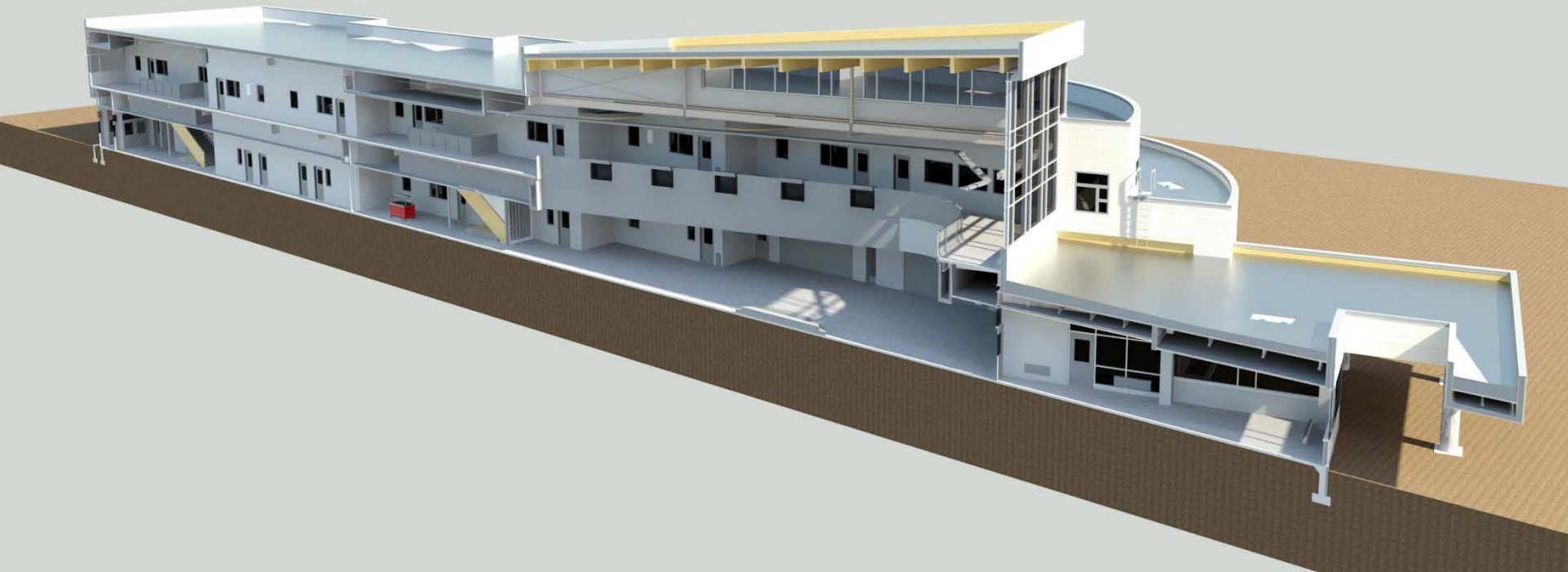
- Classrooms
- Admin
- Lab
- Support



NORTH



- ◀ Cross Section
- ▼ Longitudinal Section



Lively exterior colors provide a welcome counterpoint to the monochromatic winter landscape prevalent for six of the nine months school is in session.

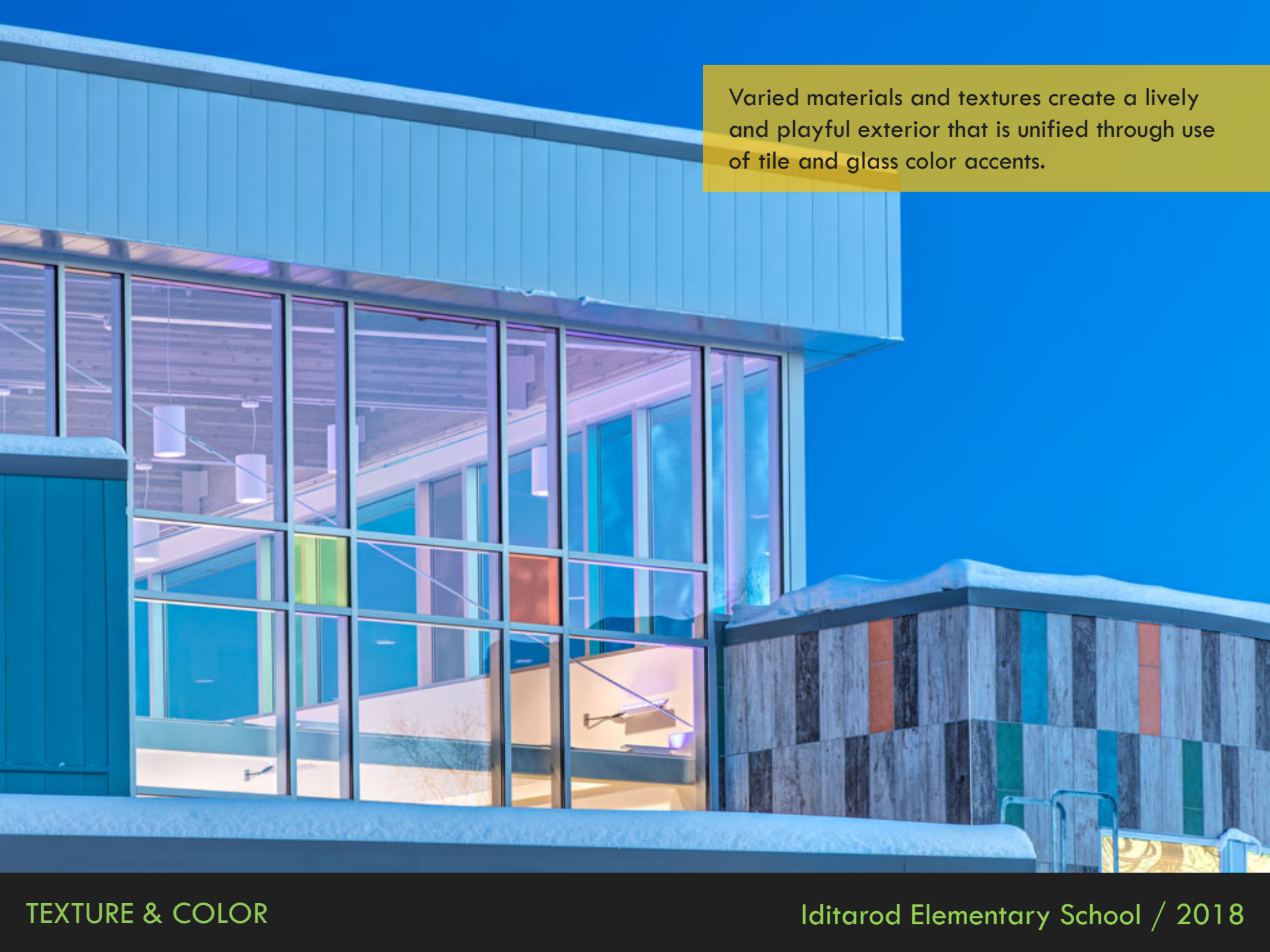


LED uplights are programmed to shift color through the evening hours enlivening the school's presence through long northern nights while welcoming after-hours users.



Vertical patterning of exterior tile reinforces the interior/exterior color schemes and provides a sympathetic interaction with surrounding birch forests.

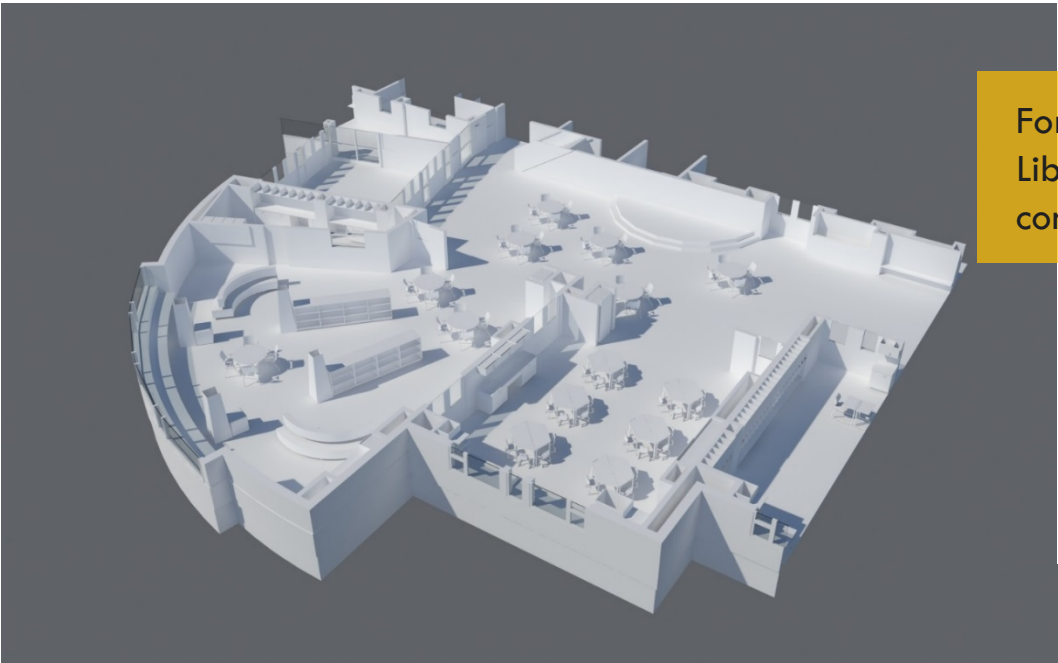


The image shows the exterior of a modern school building. A large, multi-paned glass window is the central focus, reflecting the sky and showing an interior view of a staircase with a handrail. To the right of the window is a wall made of vertical wooden planks, some of which are painted in vibrant colors like red, green, and blue. The building's upper section has a light-colored, vertically-slatted facade. The sky is a clear, bright blue. A yellow text box is overlaid in the upper right corner.

Varied materials and textures create a lively and playful exterior that is unified through use of tile and glass color accents.

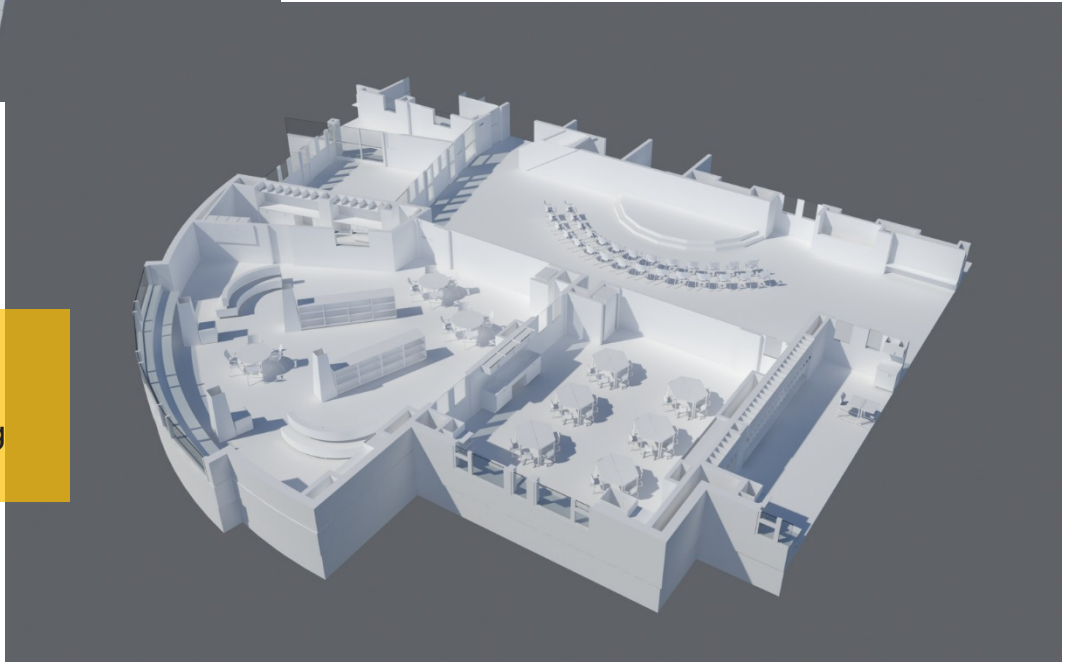



Primary color accents of the exterior glass create a shifting kaleidoscope of color throughout the day and set the tone for a textured interior design scheme.



For a more collaborative learning setting the Library, Learning Lab and Commons can be combined and mobile furniture reconfigured

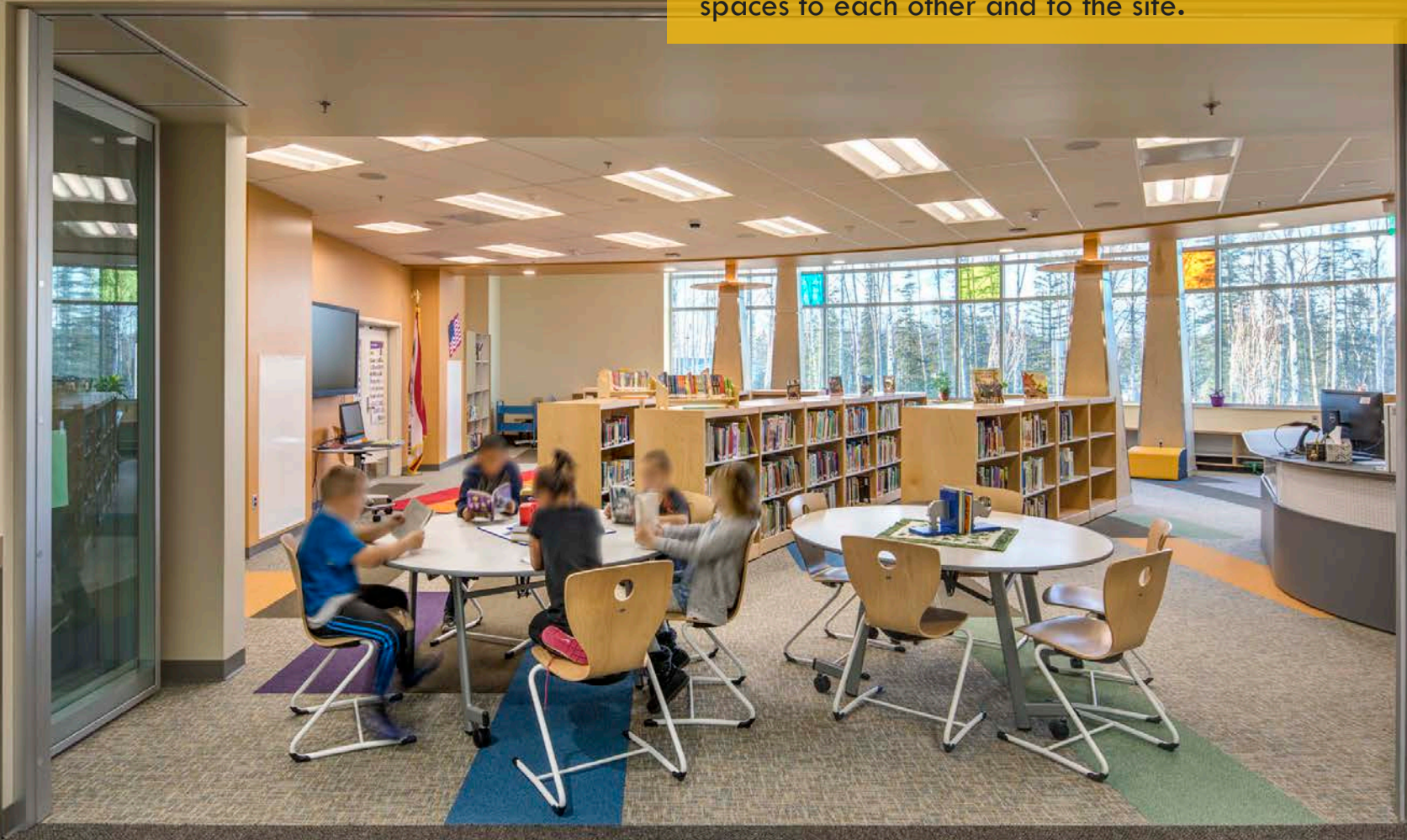
Configured for a more traditional school setting the Library, Learning Lab can be separated from the Commons by sliding glass partitions providing acoustical separation for varied activities





Classrooms and other major spaces are organized around a common community space unifying the school and connecting students, faculty, and staff.

Movable glass walls and interior windows put learning on display connecting classrooms, commons, and other learning spaces to each other and to the site.



The two story commons is actively used throughout the day for everything from whole school assemblies to individual study.

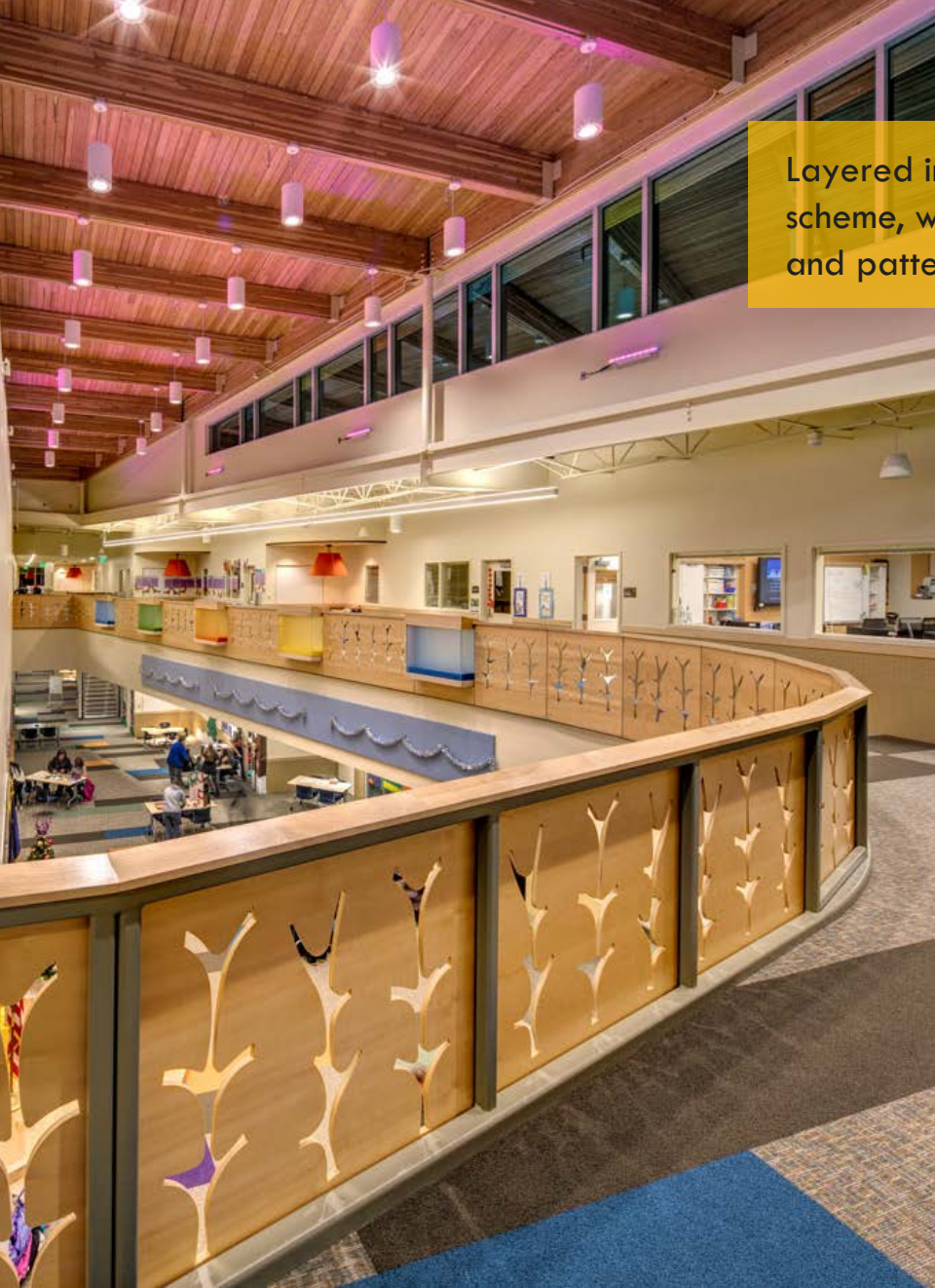




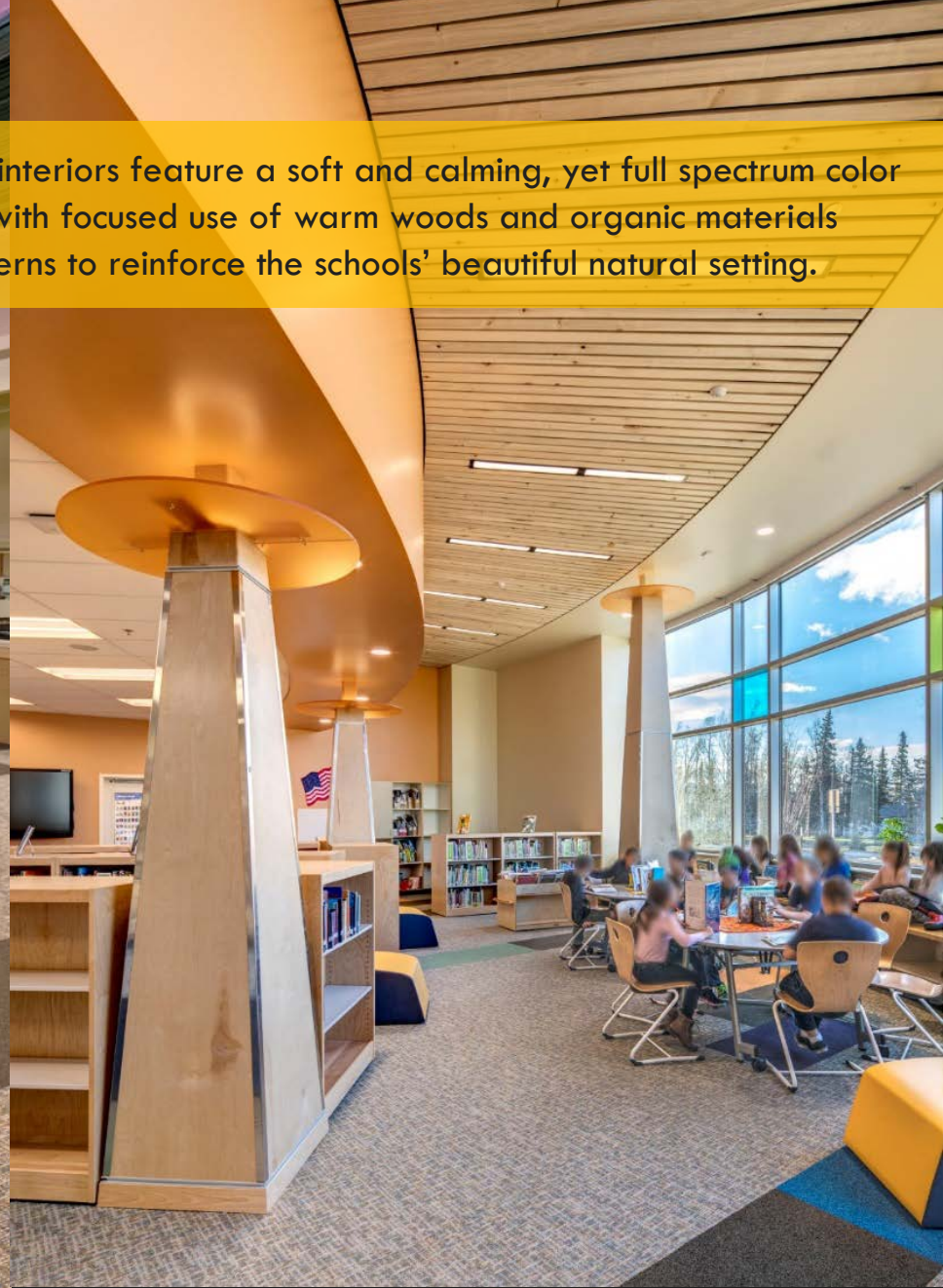
Jewel-toned translucent nooks project into the atrium creating magical spaces for one or two students to curl up and read or study.

Strategically located corners used for informal, individual, and small groups infuse the school with the spirit of learning.





Layered interiors feature a soft and calming, yet full spectrum color scheme, with focused use of warm woods and organic materials and patterns to reinforce the schools' beautiful natural setting.



Classrooms feature cozy window seats and are open and flexible to allow for each teacher to create an ideal learning setting for their students.

