

2023 A4LE LE SOLUTIONS AWARD

North Kansas City Schools Early Education Center & Prospect Plaza



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welcome to the Neighborhood

As Dr. Katie Lawson walks the halls of the North Kansas City Schools Early Education Center, she's greeted by a student with a warm embrace. The student is eager to show Dr. Lawson, the executive director of special programs for North Kansas City Schools, what she's been working on during small-group with her teacher.

These encounters are not rare for Dr. Lawson, or any of her colleagues. Nor is it irregular to meet a student who wants to share with you their joy for learning; in fact, you can find that just about everywhere you go throughout the North Kansas City Schools Early Education Center.

A space that was once a vacant retail complex is now the catalyst to unlocking the joy of learning for nearly 1,000 North Kansas City preschool students. This was made possible through a collaborative process that prioritized the student and educator experience and the community investment made in early childhood education.

To break down the scale of the building and strengthen a sense of community, the design creates smaller, more intimate neighborhoods, or "pods," each with a biophilic theme ranging from honeycomb to butterflies. Due to the young age of the learners (3-5), most of whom cannot yet read, each pod also has a corresponding color to assist with wayfinding. Each neighborhood provides easy access to distributed resources for educators and students to reduce transition time and recapture that time for learning.



Scope of Work
& Budget

Owner	North Kansas City Schools
Location	Gladstone, Missouri
Project Type	Early Childhood Education
Grade Levels	Pre-K (Ages 3-5)
Project Size	Phase I: 112,000 SF Phase II: 22,900 SF Phase III: 12,000 SF
Student Capacity	900
Construction Cost	Phase I: \$23,500,000, Phase II: \$12,000,000, Phase III: \$3,500,000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Each learning community is meant to give learners a smaller cohort to interact and engage with, while also having access to the facility's many amenities including multipurpose spaces with sensory experiences, expanded outdoor play, pull out spaces for de-escalation and testing, as well as expansive discovery zones for additional indoor play. Equally important is the inclusion of teacher equanimity spaces, affording educators a space that is intended for adult interaction and collaboration.

Outdoor play environments flank the entire front façade of the building, softening the edge of a harsh retail development while also providing the necessary amount of outdoor play environment

needed for early childhood. Interior finishes and planning have been carefully considered to make sure all learners, both special needs and others, are afforded equitable learning experiences.

The district is continuing to utilize adaptive reuse to expand its facilities footprint. Due to the success and reception of the early education center, the district has elected to develop the remaining vacant spaces of the strip mall, formally called Prospect Plaza, as additional resources. The remaining spaces are being transformed in phases and allow the district to consolidate its special programming into one location.

“*You can't walk through this space and not feel moments of joy. When kids are knocking on the door and waving hi to you as you walk by, how can that not make you smile? You just pause and think how awesome it is I get to come here and work every day.*”

- Katie Lawson, EdD
NKC Schools Executive
Director of Special Programs



Collaborative Method

With the nature of adaptive reuse, the early education center is twofold in serving NKC Schools, as well as the community of Gladstone. In the most literal sense, a project like this takes a village. In our case, we saw complete and total buy-in from the school district, the community, and the state.

An open line of communication ultimately made this project successful in working with an aggressive timeline. The professionals at North Kansas City Schools, the Gladstone community leaders, and the design team, were in unison in our understanding of what was needed at every juncture in the project.

Every conversation we had turned over new opportunities and new challenges. In adaptively reusing an already existing building, we knew our limitations in the scope of this project. It was our job to turn a space that was never intended to be used as an educational facility into an environment that was inclusive and cultivated opportunities for all learners.

Prior to a bond vote, leaders from the North Kansas City Schools district will make over 100 presentations across the community to bring awareness. Their efforts have led to numerous successful bond referendums, including the one in June 2020.



Guiding Principles



Accessibility & Inclusion

Access to learning, resources and opportunities for all while celebrating cultural diversity and learner individuality



Flexible & Adaptable

Opportunities for flexibility and adaptability in space, furniture, curriculum and learning opportunities



Sensory Learning & Active Play

Building visual, auditory and kinesthetic connections through active and engaging play



Student Health & Wellness

Social and emotional learning rooted in supportive environments to provide equanimity for all learners



Support for Educators

Space for educator collaboration, mindfulness and resources

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It was important to the district, and to us, that every group utilizing the education center had a voice in its design. We held 10 stakeholder workshops actively listening to their needs. We spoke with the NKC Schools learners, educators, district leadership, and community members to understand how we could deliver a facility that enhanced their experience at work and at school.

Perhaps our most unique workshop setting was participating in “pre-k for a day” on several occasions. We were able to immerse ourselves in the day-to-day excitement and challenges that the students and educators face. This was especially important to us since this facility would be suited to all students, including the nearly 400 special education learners and the teachers that support them.

The early education center was built with every interest group in mind. However, it was extremely important to us that we served the needs of our most impressionable stakeholder group, the students.

From there, we combined our design prowess with the insights and feedback we garnered during our workshops, never straying from our five guiding principles. All the while, we kept an open line of communication with everyone involved in the project.



Community Engagement

Successful bond referendums are made largely in part, if not entirely, by the community's understanding of the need the bond will serve. Leaders within NKC Schools have taken the bond process and turned it into a formality. They ensure that all stakeholders in their community, not just the parents of students, are involved throughout the process.

Their efforts have led to numerous bond referendums being passed, including the \$155 million ticket in June 2020 which supported the early education center among other district initiatives. That bond passed with nearly 80% approval in a community where most residents do not have school-aged kids. This is a testament to the commitment of the district and the community, working together.

“*The best districts are the ones that work very closely with their communities. They work closely with business leaders, civic leaders, community leaders, parents, every group, they make sure they are represented. They ensure the school district is reflecting their community and representing their community.*”

- Tammy Henderson

NKC Schools Executive Director of Community Relations and Governmental Affairs

It's been 30 years since North Kansas City Schools had a bond that didn't garner support at the ballot box. Since 2001, they've passed seven bonds, delivering \$590 million in support of bettering the educational experience in their communities.

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By the Numbers



100%

Bonds Passed in the last 30 years



7

Bonds Passed since 2001



73%

Voted in Support



\$590 M

Delivered by Bonds

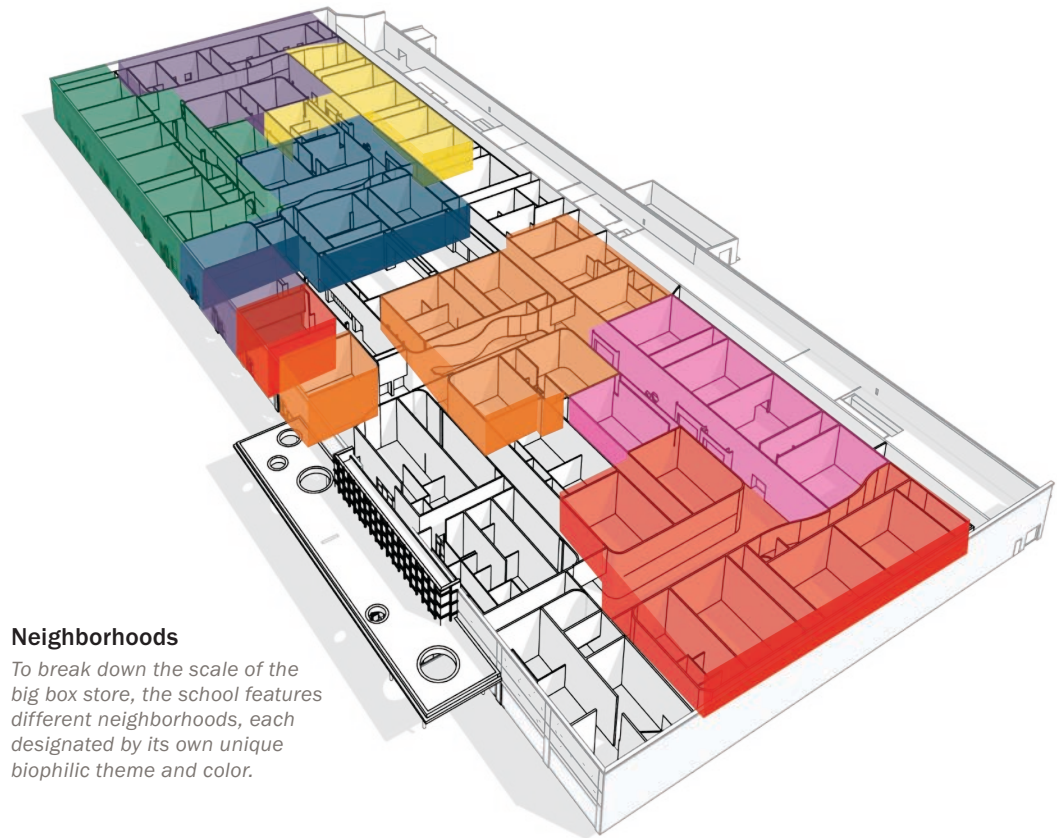
Thinking Outside the Box

To break down the scale of the big box store footprint, the school includes seven neighborhoods – each rooted in a different biophilic theme as well as associated color. Not only does this help with wayfinding but allows learners (and educators) to feel they have a smaller community within the greater whole of the campus.

Each neighborhood is comprised of four to six classrooms depending on the needs of the students in the neighborhood. They feature their own library and shared areas, including restrooms, storage, and swing spaces. Each neighborhood also features discovery zones, providing space for breakout sessions and additional sensory learning that occurs beyond the classroom.



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT DESIGN



Neighborhoods

To break down the scale of the big box store, the school features different neighborhoods, each designated by its own unique biophilic theme and color.





North Kansas City Schools
Early Education Center

hi!

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT DESIGN

Knowing our primary occupants were some of our youngest learners, playgrounds and soft scape help soften what would otherwise be a harsh transition from parking lot to educational environment.

A new canopy and entry brings the scale of the facility down as users approach. Coupled with a large scale “hi!” - the entry helps to spark excitement, joy, and wonderment as the user first begins to experience the space.

Upon entering the facility, whimsical branding, ceiling features and playful colors help turn what was otherwise an understated grocery store entrance into an exciting first glimpse of the facility beyond.



Answering the Call

One of the main themes of Prospect Plaza, which includes the early education center, a centralized district IT center, professional development center, district sponsored coffee shop, adult education spaces, and additional future space, is centralization.

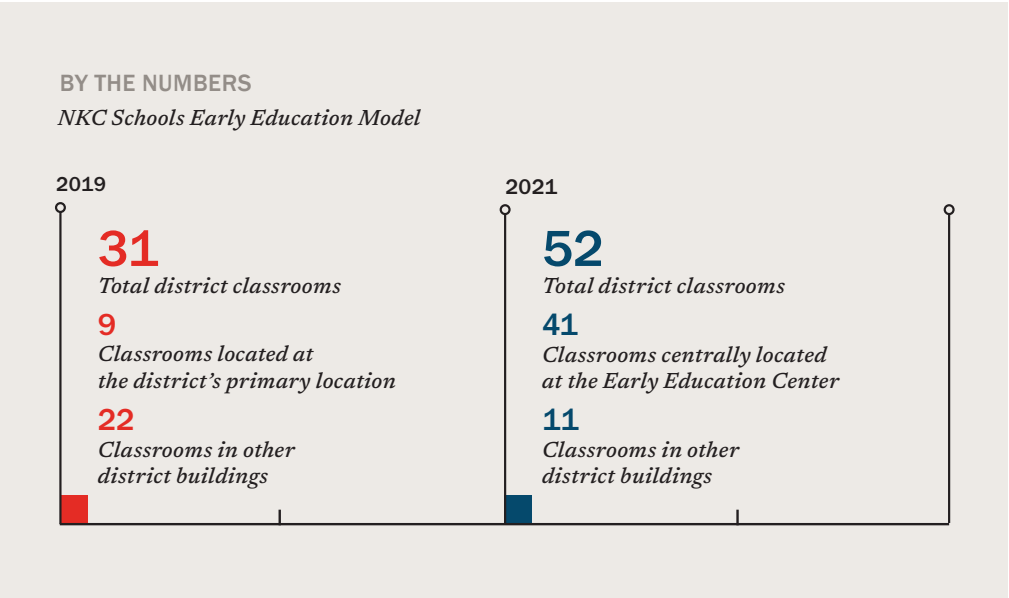
In 2019, NKC Schools' early education program was dispersed throughout the district, scattered across 22 classrooms in various buildings where space would allow, and a converted elementary school consisting of nine classrooms that served as the primary hub. In addition to a wide-spread footprint, 50% of the students the early education program serves are special needs.

In addition, a local tax proposal would have limited access to early education for a number of students in the district. While this tax never came to fruition, NKC Schools was already working on a solution to this hurdle. The resolution was a larger, more centralized early education center.

NKC Schools needed to increase its classroom space by 50% to accommodate the needs of the early learners in their community. This transformative period also provided a window of opportunity for NKC Schools to better serve its nearly 400 special education learners, as well as the educators who inspire their learning.

Our work at the early education center provided these solutions to NKC Schools and to the community it serves. The facility allows the district to offer all-day Pre-K opportunities to families – a program it couldn't under its prior model. The early education center met all the capacity needs the district laid out while also allowing for room to grow.

In addition to the physical requirements being met, the design for the early education center created an adaptable and flexible space for its educators to utilize to meet the needs of their students. Every stakeholder in the process saw their needs and thoughts answered to in the design of the early education center.



RESULTS OF THE PROCESS AND PROJECT

Championing for Early Childhood Education

One of the unintended results of the early education center was attention and visits being paid by state officials who are seeking support and advice in advocating for early childhood education.

Missouri State Senator, Lauren Arthur, a North Kansas City Schools alumna, was one of the biggest supporters of this project from start to finish. Now, she's encouraging her colleagues to visit the early education center and demonstrating how they can bring this level of education to their district.

NKC Schools has hosted state representatives, senators, and even the lieutenant governor at the center. These visits are shaping how the Missouri legislature is talking about early childhood education at the state level. In a recent legislative session, Governor Mike Parson declared early childhood education advocacy a legacy issue for his office.



“

I'm so excited for those kiddos now because their lives are tangibly different and better because of the center. I can't even imagine the impact that it will have once the kids are 18, 20, 30 years old. Our hope is that they stay local, and that they continue to be part of our community.”

- Lauren Arthur, Missouri State Senator

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

A Wonderland for Learning

With limited space on the site, outdoor play environments are positioned along the main facade of the building. Not only does this soften the otherwise hard edge of parking and big box store, but it also creates an experience as users enter the building and hear the noise of learners playing outside.

To afford the maximum opportunities for all, each playground provides slightly different amenities. The smallest of the three is geared toward more special needs learners with more sensory focused play equipment, while the other two focus on gross motor and kinesthetic development.

Environmental graphics throughout the facility link the various biophilic themes in the pods into one cohesive facility. This experience, designed to be like the user is walking through a storybook, was quite literally translated into a storybook for young learners.

“ *Our kids talk about their ‘butterfly school’. They talk about their neighborhoods and how their neighborhood is the best. Our kids very much have a sense of belonging. I believe the design of this facility has absolutely attributed to that sense of belonging.*

- Katie Lawson, Ed.D.

NKC Schools Executive Director
of Special Programs





SUSTAINABILITY & WELLNESS

Before



After



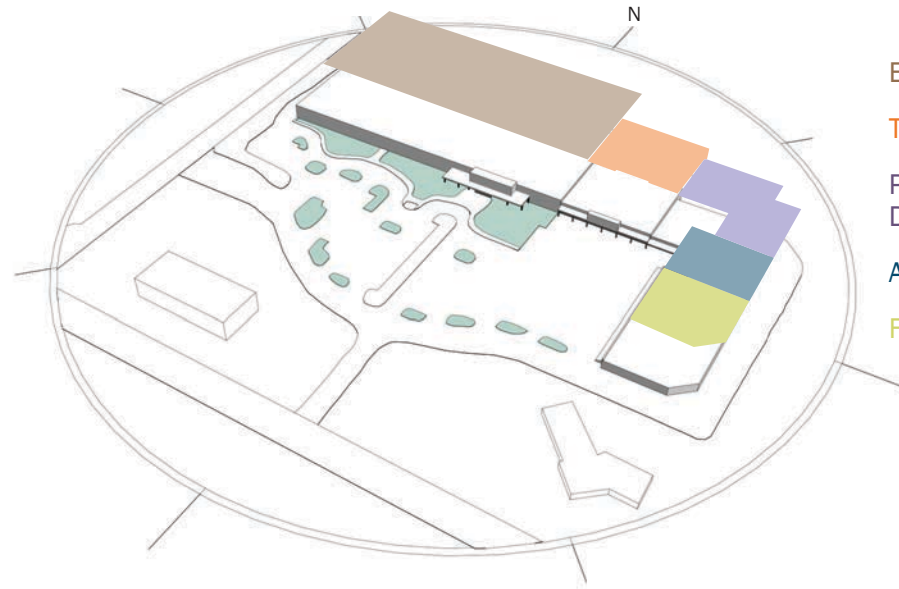
Adaptive Reuse

Prospect Plaza, which includes the early education center, will successfully reinvigorate more than 150,000 SF of dormant retail space in north Kansas City once fully completed. This approach is mutually beneficial for the community and NKC Schools, while also being good stewards to the environment.

By electing to salvage the vacant shopping center, NKC Schools saved 33% on the total cost of the early education center, and more importantly, provided a larger, more inclusive space for its students and educators. The aggressive timeline for this project, 14 months from our first student shadow to the grand opening of phase one of the facility, was only attainable because of adaptive reuse.

To better connect with the outdoor environment, nine-foot skylights are featured in our design to provide a source of natural light into the neighborhoods. Each classroom is equipped with special light features that allow the teachers to change the tone of the lighting in their classroom, simulating calming or energizing light environments.

The early education center is designed intentionally with the well-being of every educator and student in mind. The space is adaptive and inclusive to all, particularly the 50% of learners who have special needs. Focusing on offering equitable opportunities for all - the design offers solutions catered toward our most vulnerable learners. What works for them will ultimately support all learners.



Early Education Center

Technology Center

Professional Development Center

Adult Education Center

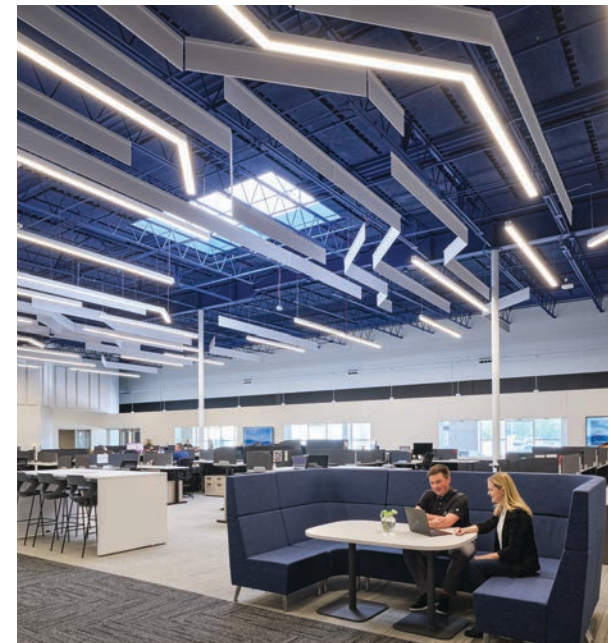
Future Programming



We feel like we've been able to show the community what you can do with an old box store with a little imagination.

- Tammy Henderson

NKC Schools Executive Director of Community Relations and Governmental Affairs



SUSTAINABILITY & WELLNESS

Supporting Educators

The advent of the reimagined space at Prospect Plaza also affords the district the opportunity to enhance the spaces the educators use on a day-to-day basis. Within the school, specific areas are dedicated to staff to take personal phone calls, decompress, and complete job requirements that lay outside their teaching responsibilities.

In addition, the new professional development center at Prospect Plaza provides an appropriate space for all NKC Schools employees, including those at the early education center, to meet and grow in their personal professional development.

