



Sartell High School
Sartell, Minnesota



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inspired by Sartell's historical and contextual landscape, Sartell High School creates a teaching and learning landscape that inspires creativity and problem solving through new, collaborative learning opportunities. Much like the Mississippi River which runs through town, Sartell High School's commons is a catalyst for activity, bringing people together to build a sense of community and promote collaboration. Program areas traditionally pushed to the back of a school — such as career technical education spaces — are instead placed adjacent to the commons, making them visible and accessible to all students — sparking curiosity and interdisciplinary project work. A series of interior bridges that span across the school's commons further add to the school's transparency and vitality by connecting general and specialized learning environments.

SCOPE OF WORK & BUDGET

Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Interior Design

Budget: \$87,678,088





SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The co-creative design process for Sartell High School commenced before the referendum for the new school had even passed. The entire team, which included district leaders, community members, teachers, students, and designers, was eager to collaborate and contribute to the design of a new school that would impact the lives of thousands of teachers and learners—both current and future.

This robust collaborative process established a long-term connection between the design team and the space’s users. Together, the entire team worked through priorities, goals, visions, and design solutions. Workshops included program development, initial spatial organization with colored blocks, imagining what a day in the life at the new school could be like and how it could be different, and details like design elements, wayfinding, branding, and furniture. Each workshop and design session built on the previous with constant check-ins to ensure progress aligned with the project goals.

Not every step was easy; there were many roadblocks along the way and ample discomfort associated with so much change. The team worked through these challenges with empathy, recognizing that change is hard. One major roadblock was that teachers would no longer own their individual classrooms, instead having a workspace in a shared staff collaboration room. There was a great deal of conversation with district leadership, curriculum coordinators, education designers, and fellow teachers to understand how this could work before moving forward together. Tours of other schools with similar staff collaboration spaces was immensely helpful in building an openness to change.

Because of their integration into the design process, many students and teachers noted that they felt a strong sense of ownership immediately after moving into the new building. The school is truly a reflection of the integrated process and passion of the district leaders, community members, teachers, and students.

Student Influence

Ideas generated during student workshops are always exciting. Students bring a fresh perspective, and their input adds so much life to both the process and the final design.

At Sartell High School, student ideas generated during the graphics and furniture workshops can be seen throughout the school. The large custom wall graphics reflect students’ design concepts and the names of the learning neighborhoods (Watab, Pines, and Meadow) and the overlook group rooms (River Dock, Treehouse, and Hayloft) are also a result of student ideas. Furniture in the common spaces was also selected in collaboration with students.

When students walked into Sartell High School the first day of school, they felt that their voices were heard. They felt an instant connection to the spaces that they helped design.





EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT DESIGN

Sartell's district leaders wanted their new school to be a space where both educators and learners could grow together with the changing needs of the world. As such, designers worked with a planning committee comprised of more than 100 members representing all major stakeholder groups in a series of workshops where they shared their vision, standards, criteria, and priorities for the Sartell-St. Stephen School District's facilities over the next 10 to 15 years.

These initial workshops led to the following facility vision statement:

"We see flexible, sustainable, and safe facilities that support and encourage multi-faceted, leading-edge opportunities for our students and community. They will build upon the success and excellence for which our school district is known. These facilities integrate technology seamlessly and foster creativity. They will include state-of-the-art venues for academics, athletics and the arts for our school and community. The goal is to create an environment where staff and students are inspired to learn in their own diverse way."

Program spaces throughout the school are designed to support a targeted curriculum but also advance new programs and uses in the future. For instance, the black box theater is designed to replace the previous theater classroom, but teachers also envisioned its potential future uses for astronomy, after-school yoga and dance, and robotics. Therefore, the space is designed with enough flexibility, acoustics, and power to support a wide range of future uses.

The wide variety of activities and resources that learners can access — and see their peers participating in — improves engagement and allows students to participate more meaningfully. As a result, learning at Sartell High School is more applied and personalized, with students empowered to solve real-world problems, explore a range of pathways, and find their passions.

Spaces were not programmed as one-size-fits-all. Instead, they are outfitted with resources and technology to provide diverse learning opportunities while remaining flexible for future needs. A range of flexible and specialized spaces support Next Century learning—encouraging collaboration, curiosity, student agency, and project-based learning activities.







RESULTS OF THE PROCESS & PROJECT

“I think the potential for what we are going to do, it won’t be fully realized the first year that we are there, but that’s sort of the point. We don’t know what the needs of kids are going to be 10 years from now, and we want a space where we can grow with the changing needs of the world. **We want to be able to meet the needs of our kids 25+ years from now too, and I think it’s designed to do that.** It’s really a credit to the work that our teachers did along with our architects.”

PRINCIPAL BRENDA STEVE

Significant planning focused on incorporating flexible spaces that could maximize usability and adaptability over the coming decades. Throughout Sartell’s learning neighborhoods, studio walls are demountable and a continuous floor and ceiling finish are installed to ease change in the future. When classrooms need to expand, contract, or change completely, demountable walls allow for total reconfiguration.

The Sartell-St. Stephens School District is committed to promoting student success through project-based learning and specialized programs. In addition to flexible and adaptable spaces for future programs, a range of specialized labs throughout the school—including design and prototyping labs, a culinary lab, specialized science labs, a video editing and production space, and a mechanics lab—supports the district’s goals by offering thoughtful and well-equipped learning spaces.

The new school is designed with community use in mind. Specific attention is paid to creating a welcoming environment with good wayfinding and flexibility. The commons, performing arts center, athletic areas, and specialized labs are all designed with multi-use programming in mind, understanding that they will support activities before and after school, on weekends, and throughout the summer.

Early on in the visioning process, the question was posed to designers: “Does Sartell High School really need a media center?” Citing the current media center’s lack of student use, Sartell’s principal and staff members pushed designers to relocate the square footage into something more functional.

The result was a media center which is distributed throughout the entire school, instead of being closed-off and located in a single area. Books and resources like video editing labs are integrated into the common areas, making media opportunities more accessible and engaging to students.

By freeing up dead square footage in this way, specific media opportunities become more accessible to all students. These spaces are not seen as one-size-fits-all, and they are each outfitted with unique technology to provide the greatest opportunities for students while remaining flexible for future programmatic needs.





PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT DESIGN

The school's main entrance opens up to a two-story commons flooded with natural light from clerestory windows. The space is wrapped by the administrative and counseling suites, dining hall, café, culinary lab, presentation stair, and design lab.

Adjacent to the commons is access to the performing arts center and music suite, and access to the athletic areas, including gyms, fitness center and pool. Two bridges span across the commons and contain Flex Labs which connect the learning neighborhoods with specialized programs like career technical education (CTE) labs and bioscience.

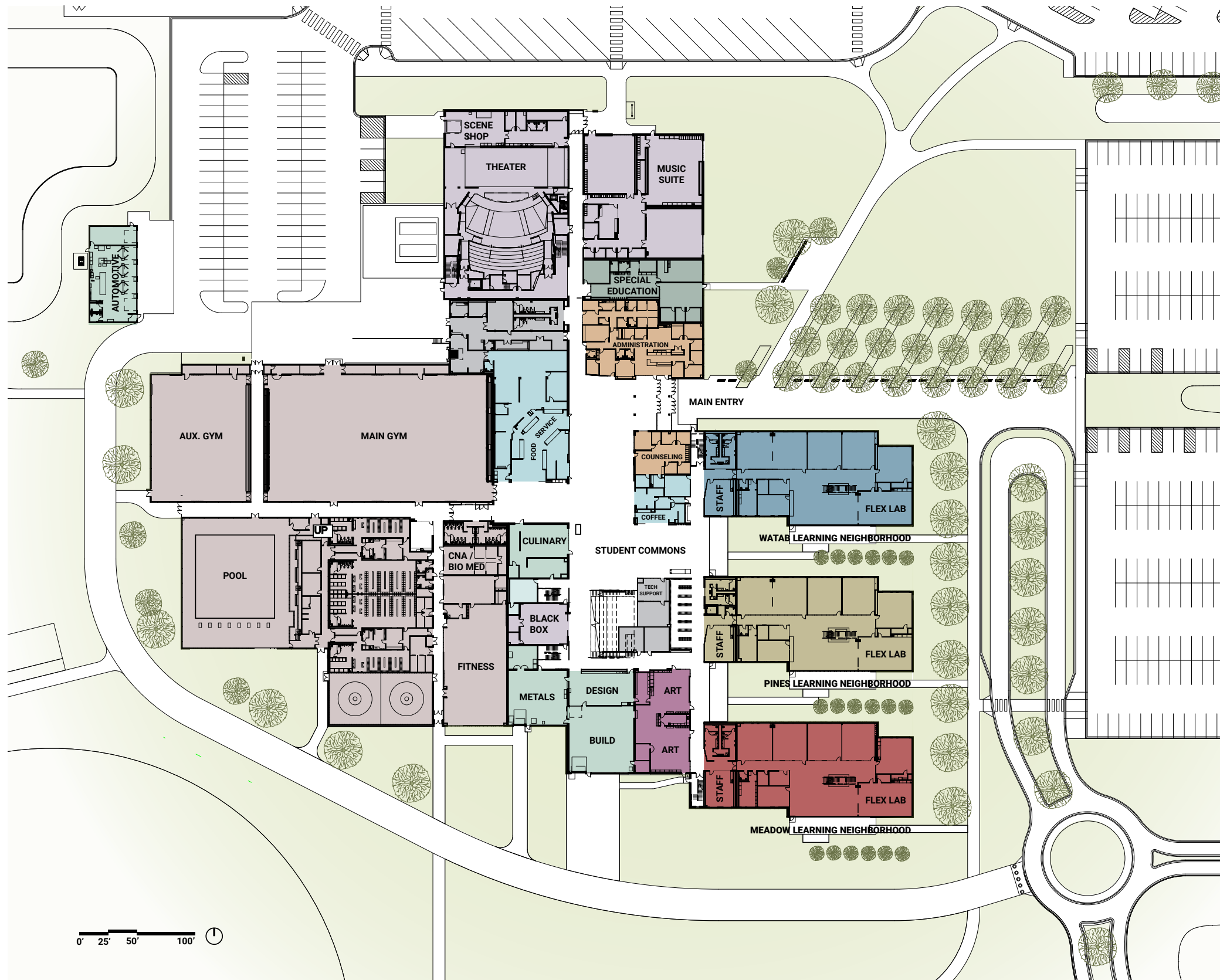
Three learning neighborhoods extend from the building housing flexible learning classrooms, staff collaboration rooms, a range of breakout group rooms, and a two-story collaborative commons space. Media labs at the learning neighborhood entrances offer a range of computer science, video production, and graphic design resources. Courtyards between the neighborhoods create outdoor learning classrooms.

Through strong storytelling and unique visual branding, the new school connects users to Sartell's natural ecosystem. Working with staff, students, and community members, three key place-based themes were identified – the history of forestry, agriculture, and the prominence of local waterways. Together, these themes shape the design concept for the building. Students helped coin the coffee shop "The Mill" and the learning neighborhoods "Watab" (the local river), "Pines" (inspired by their history of logging), and "Meadow" (inspired by their strong agricultural history). Large scale wall graphics and accompanying narratives both passively and actively tell the story of Sartell's ecological history.

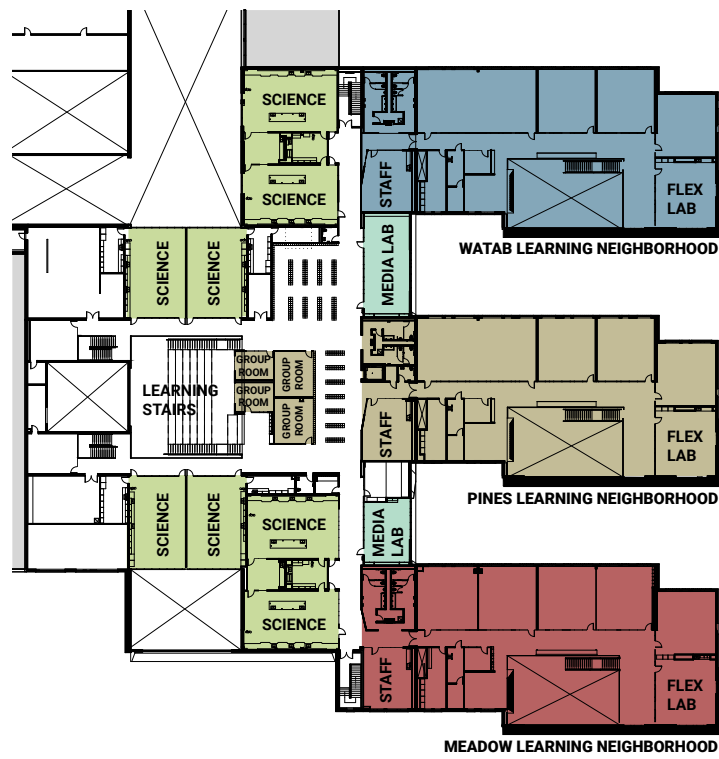
The school's material palette is kept largely neutral. A minimal number of materials provides a blank canvas for students to infuse their unique character through activities, art, performance, and projects. As a result, the school's appearance is a unique reflection of its students – editable by all present and future learners. The simple and durable materials use can withstand decades of use.

Each learning neighborhood is designed around a heart space that is flooded with natural light and connected to an outdoor courtyard. Open stairs promote movement throughout these two-story learning neighborhoods creating activity and connection. A wide range of flexible and comfortable furniture options create cozy and dynamic settings for students to relax and feel at home while exploring new subjects and working on hands-on activities.





SITE + LEVEL 1



LEVEL 2



SUSTAINABILITY & WELLNESS

Daylighting studies early in the design process allowed designers to maximize natural daylighting within learning spaces. The main commons and learning neighborhood commons spaces are so well lit that artificial lighting is only supplemental to natural light during the day. Not only is this energy-efficient, but natural lighting and connection to the outdoors also promotes occupant well-being.

Materials were carefully selected for alignment with the design concept, durability, cleanability, and life-cycle-cost. While the palette is minimal to create a blank canvas for student work and support change over time, it was also minimized to limit the carbon footprint of products from additional manufacturers. Red List Free materials were prioritized with a focus on PVC-free materials throughout the project.

Extending the exterior brick and decorative precast panels into the building establishes a strong indoor-outdoor connection while leveraging the durability of these materials for high-traffic interior spaces. Thin format wall tile panels are installed at other high traffic corridors to protect walls long term and minimize the amount of material needed.

Because the school is designed to last for many decades, the design team was strategic in selecting materials that can last and be easily maintained. School facilities staff were collaborators in identifying material solutions that could meet these criteria.

Learning neighborhoods branch off the commons and celebrate the history of Sartell's waterways, forests, and agriculture. These spaces are designed to support the mental health of students and staff by bringing in abundant natural light, providing private areas for staff to unwind and collaborate, and promoting social interaction. Outside of the learning studios, students have choice between a range of learning landscapes, including private and semi-private small and medium group rooms, open lounge space, genius bars, collaborative meeting tables, and outdoor learning areas.







Inspired by the Mississippi River, the Commons is a catalyst for activity, bringing people together at the heart of the school to build a sense of community and promote collaboration.



