



**SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**  
AUSTIN, TX

## Executive Summary

Named after a pioneer of bilingual education, George I. Sánchez Elementary School, built in 1976, was one of the first schools in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) to introduce two-way, dual language learning. After a year-long community engagement process, the core values of Equity, Connectivity, and Flexibility were established for the modernization and renovation of this neighborhood school serving a little over 500 students. Along with the importance of preserving existing cultural artifacts and iconography of the school, these core values gave rise to the theme of duality – English and Spanish; East and West; neighborhood and City; the past and the future – and the symbol of a double-headed serpent to serve as design inspiration.

## Scope of Work and Budget

**Design Start**  
01/2019

**Substantial Completion**  
08/2021

**Construction Cost**  
\$21,834,677

**Project Size**  
80,341 sf

### Services Provided

Full Architectural Services, Interiors, Building Signage and Graphics, Community Engagement



## Physical Environment: Context

One block east of Interstate Highway 35 and a few blocks north of Lady Bird Lake in downtown Austin, a small neighborhood elementary school has undergone a transformational renovation, decisively renewed without leaving the community's historic roots and values behind.

With the school's main entrance facing towards the city, there was the sense that the original edifice turned its back to the families it served in the surrounding neighborhood to the east.



**DOWNTOWN AUSTIN**

LADYBIRD LAKE

INTERSTATE  
35

**SÁNCHEZ  
ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL**

**EAST AUSTIN**

# Existing Conditions

Following the passage of a 2017 bond proposal, Austin Independent School District (AISD) invested approximately \$25 million in the future of this east Austin school, Originally built in 1976.



## School & Community

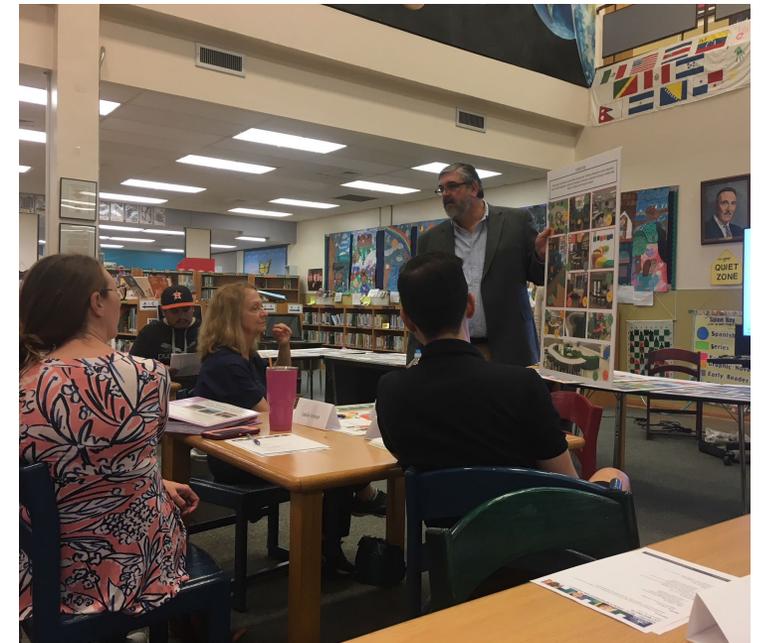
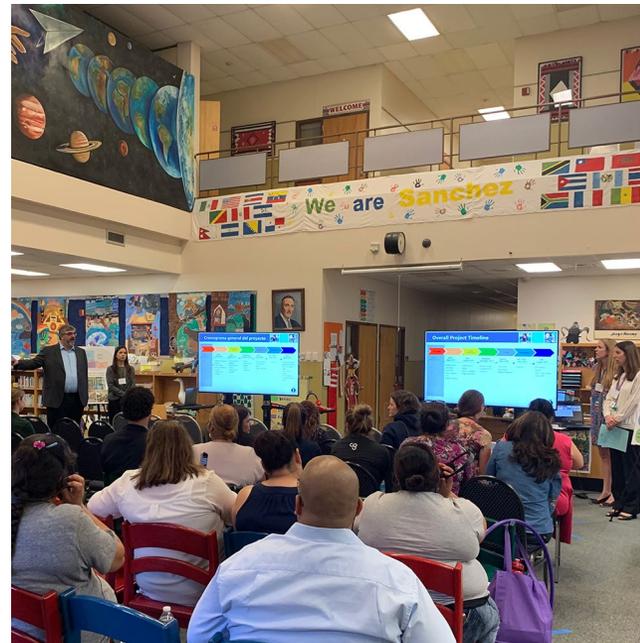
Working with a diverse community within a rapidly growing city, the design team spearheaded intensive dialogue sessions with community stakeholders to enable all parties to contribute to the vision for the future of Sánchez Elementary.

The design team felt “It was important to spend time querying our community group to learn what aspects of the existing schools were meaningful so that these elements and the values behind them could inspire the design and be incorporated in the modernized facility.”

Throughout the design process, the design team led dual language community meetings, envisioning exercises, listening sessions, and surveys with groups of stakeholders including teachers, parents, and community members.

“Community engagement made the entire project so much better. The end result would not have had the richness or authenticity without the community’s guidance and input,” reflects the team lead.

Drew Johnson, AISD Director of Bond Planning and Project Controls, added that “[the design team’s] ability to slow down, engage the community and listen, learn, contemplate, wonder... much of that groundwork is the cause for the success of the project.”



### Crosswalk Analysis of Responses and Identified Themes

| How would a modernized school benefit our students?                                  | How would a modernized school benefit our students with special needs?   | How would a modernized school benefit our teaching professionals?   | How would a modernized school benefit our community?  | How would a modernized school attract and retain students?   |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| Open doors for <b>collaboration</b> , more <b>collaboration</b> opportunities        | Use technology to allow students <b>to be together</b> & apart           | Tools & space for <b>collaboration</b> and breakout   | Community <b>partnerships</b> & parent <b>support</b> services  | Unique <b>partnerships</b> & quality of programming  |
| Provide <b>equity</b> for whole child  | Welcoming, <b>inclusive</b> , integrated                                 | <b>Equitable</b> access to technology   | Instill sense of <b>pride</b> & <b>equity</b>   | <b>Access</b> to new facilities & technology   |
| <b>Engaged</b> students want to come to school, <b>connects</b> families             | <b>Eliminate/blur boundaries</b> yet with spaces created for their needs | Visual <b>connection</b> allows to see & hear each other  | <b>Connection</b> with community groups (health/ wellness/ financial/cultural)  | Train teachers for high <b>retention</b> , teachers & building are <b>inspired</b> /inspiring      |
| Allows for <b>flexibility</b> & creativity; <b>adaptable</b> to many learning styles | <b>Flexibility</b> , offer <b>options</b> across educational spectrum    | <b>Flexibility</b> of facility to change & adapt, facilitates team teaching; spaces for <b>individual student needs</b> | <b>Versatile</b> for different sports & events, amphitheater; spaces <b>tailored</b> to the community   |  |
| Building integrates the <b>culture</b> , neighborhood <b>hub</b>                     | Serve larger <b>range</b> of students                                    | Open spaces allow for better <b>relationships</b> with other teachers & students, <b>lifelong</b> learning environment  | Community and <b>cultural</b> expression/ personality; playground & outdoor spaces that are welcoming and able to be used by <b>community</b> (with clear guidelines for use/care of the space) | Communicate <b>culture</b> & history; school reflects <b>community</b> and offers a welcoming face |
| Modern <b>safety</b> features  | <b>De-escalation</b> zones/peace corner                                  |   | A community room that is <b>secure</b> from the school & has resources  | <b>Safe</b> , warm, & dry  |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> century <b>technology</b>   | Leverage accessible <b>technology</b>                                    | <b>Technology</b> & modern tools  | School partnership with Austin's <b>tech-oriented</b> community   | New facilities & <b>technology</b>   |

# Visioning

Presentation renderings were created to provide a strong sense of the design direction and to confirm the concepts supported the theme and goals of the modernization.

These images were further supported by an animated “fly through” providing the stakeholders with an experience of the building prior to construction

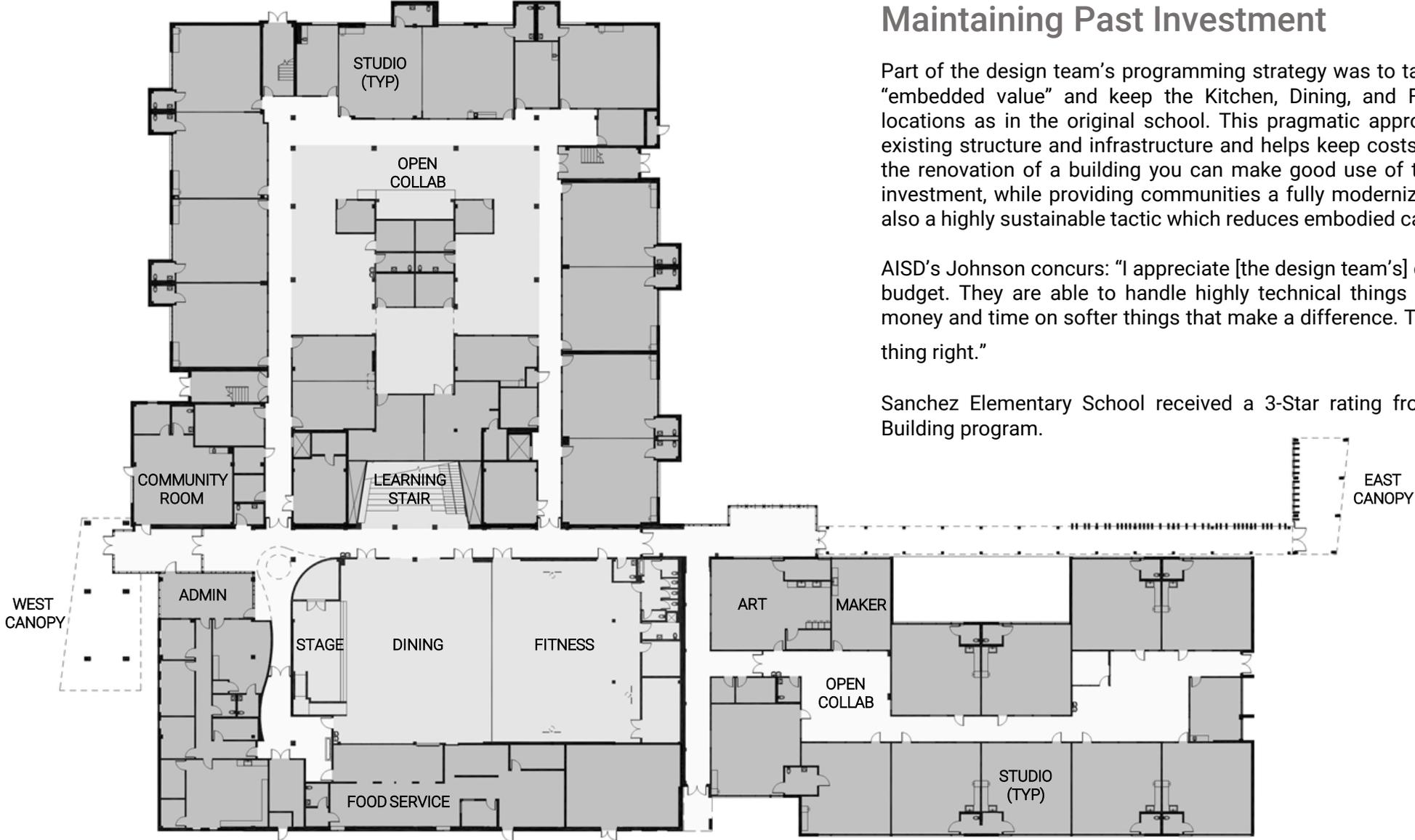


# Maintaining Past Investment

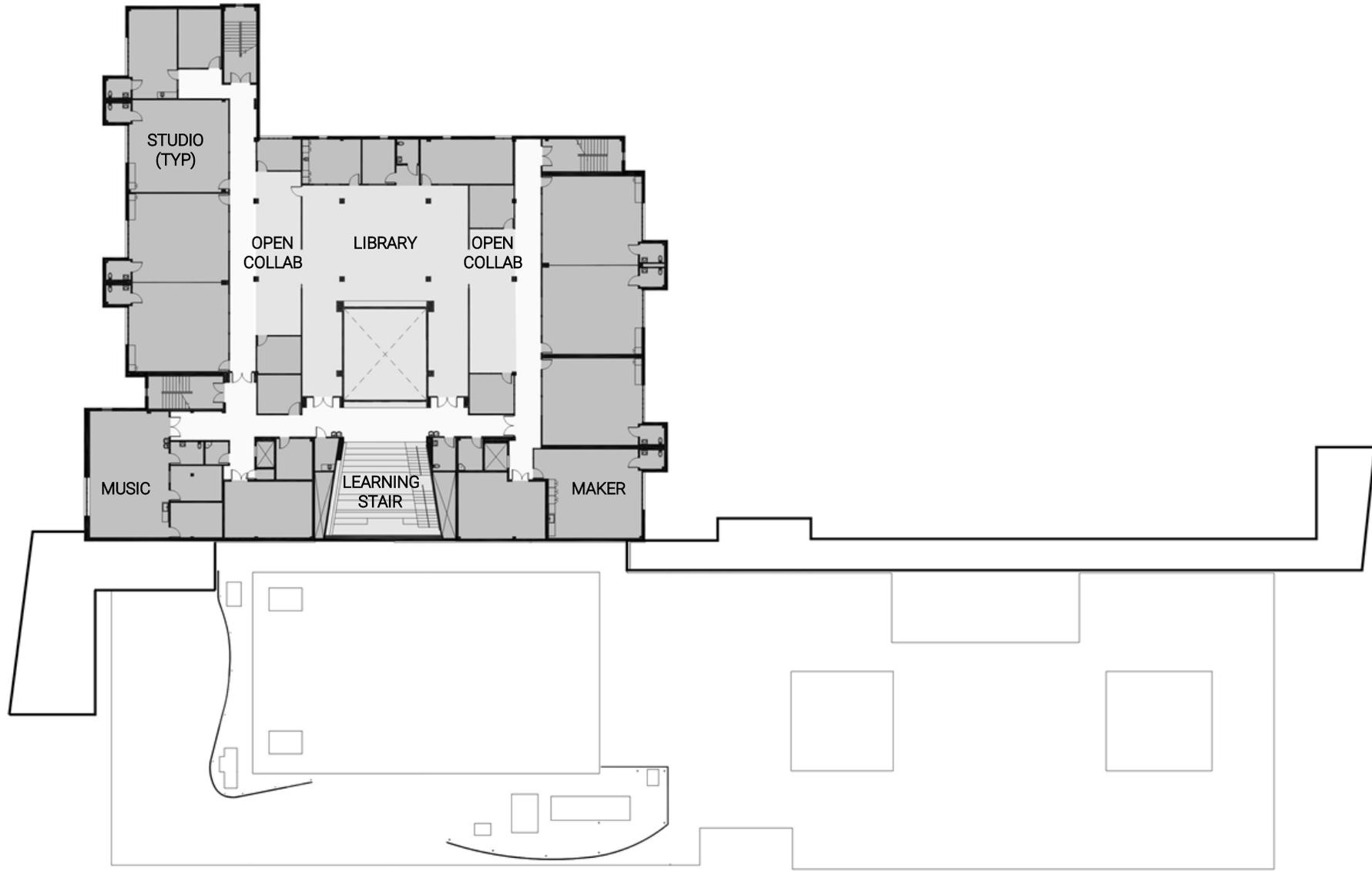
Part of the design team’s programming strategy was to take advantage of the existing “embedded value” and keep the Kitchen, Dining, and Fitness spaces in the same locations as in the original school. This pragmatic approach takes advantage of the existing structure and infrastructure and helps keep costs down. Hunt asserts that, “In the renovation of a building you can make good use of the school district’s previous investment, while providing communities a fully modernized facility.” Building reuse is also a highly sustainable tactic which reduces embodied carbon emissions.

AISD’s Johnson concurs: “I appreciate [the design team’s] commitment to schedule and budget. They are able to handle highly technical things but also appropriately spent money and time on softer things that make a difference. They got the dollars and cents thing right.”

Sanchez Elementary School received a 3-Star rating from the Austin Energy Green Building program.

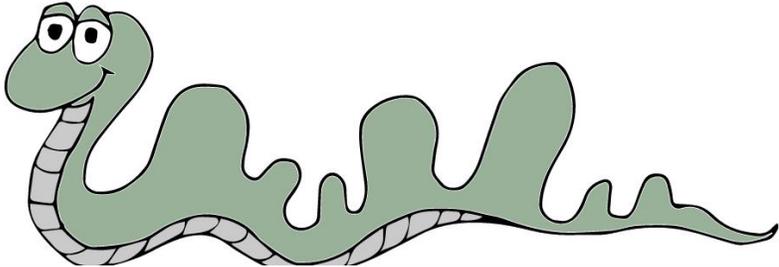


**L1 PLAN**



# Results

The architects realigned the main entry location and reconfigured the main circulation spine to connect the primary communal gathering spaces – Dining, Fitness, Learning Stair, Library – and extended it outward to culminate in welcoming canopies at the East and West entries. The internal reorganization of the building also allowed the design team to combine previously disjointed exterior play and activity areas, improving access to the outdoor spaces.



## Results

A significant challenge in the renovation was to create a modern learning environment that embraced the community's historic roots and values in a meaningful way. The design team responded with an inclusive design that incorporated the bilingual Spanish-English culture and honored the past while looking forward to the future.

As the team lead emphasizes, "We utilized design elements such as color and pattern to instill the modernized school with the history and heritage of the community while at the same time being sustainable and staying within budget."

Slithering down the main corridor of the school between the east and west entries is an undulating, striped, slatted wall inspired by a double-headed serpent. Coiling around the community gathering spaces and topping out at the roof, the decorative element serves as a billboard for the modernized Sánchez Elementary. Like a snake that has shed its skin, Sánchez Elementary has been physically renewed with a heart that remains connected to the history and heritage of the community.



## Results

The communal gathering spaces – Dining, Fitness, Learning Stair and Library – are located at the center of the school, connected by a circulation spine which extends out to form covered canopies at the East and West entries. An internal courtyard was enclosed to create the Learning Stair, a versatile hub for small groups or classes with hexagonal niches and display areas to showcase artifacts or curl up with a book. The serpent manifests as an undulating, banded “snakeskin” sliding along the spine embracing the communal gathering spaces and extending through the roof to act as “billboard” to increase visibility to the broader community. Like a snake shedding its skin, it represents the growth and transformation of the students during their primary school years.

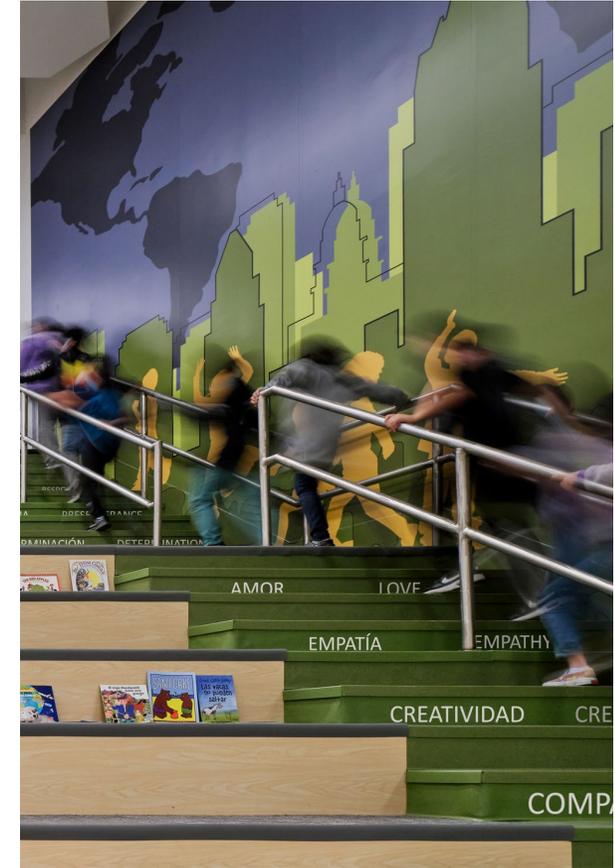


## Results

Strategic use of colors, patterns, and geometry helps create a sense of place throughout the school. The design team incorporated natural colors layered against a neutral backdrop, and employed color blocking to define different program areas, accentuate points of entry, and articulate circulation paths. Rich iconography was used in room signage and wayfinding, as seen in the scrolled serpent floor pattern in the Dining area, which recalls a feature from the original building. The risers of the Learning Stair display virtue words in both English and Spanish, while room signage for communal gathering spaces employs three languages – Spanish, English, and Braille – in addition to colorful pictographs and the serpent motif.

Hexagons, another symbol from the original school that was carried forward, form the ceiling of the Dining area and flow through the Learning Stair, culminating in the Library ceiling. There, hexagons in the millwork form cozy reading nooks, while other hexagonal niches are used to display cultural artifacts and artwork from throughout the school's history. The consistent application of these design elements help form a cohesive, whole-school identity. The design also incorporated original mosaic artworks and monumental-scale painted murals that were of importance to the community.

Johnson acknowledges: "The design team honored some of the cultural aspects, some of the historical components, but still pushed the project forward into modernization." As illustrated by the new graphic design on the wall of the Learning Stair, the students at Sánchez Elementary are leading the way into the future with a strong and influential community supporting them at every step.





GEORGE SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY