

T.M. Peirce Elementary School

The School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA



Executive Summary

FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE COULD REMEMBER, NOTHING NEW EVER CAME TO NORTH PHILADELPHIA.

According to the demographic data gathered from the latest U.S. Census Bureau, a third of the residents of the Allegheny West neighborhood in North Philadelphia live below the poverty line. The area has long felt the impact of post-industrial decline and disinvestment, experiencing one of the largest population losses in the city between the 1990 and 2000 Census.

Due to this impact, it came as a surprise when one of its neighborhood schools, T.M. Peirce, was slated for demolition - the result of multiple health hazards and shifting demographics.

Then, something unexpected happened.

Amidst the first global pandemic in over a century, the residents of the Allegheny West neighborhood, The School District of Philadelphia leaders, and a team of architects and designers came together in March 2020 to design the first new school in North Philly in seven decades. Despite the anxiety and uncertainty brought on by the health emergency and the logistical challenges of continuing to educate students, the team committed to planning and envisioning a new school that would usher in a new era of hope for the community.

T.M. Peirce Elementary School



Executive Summary

The 77,000-square-foot facility, which cost \$32 million to build and earned LEED Gold certification, will serve grades Pre-K through 5th. It was designed to be an active community resource as well; the gymnasium, cafeteria and Information Media Center are all available for use by the community when school is not in session.

The third-floor art room is a feature space with floor-to-ceiling windows providing natural light and views of the surrounding neighborhood. The reimagined school yard, in a neighborhood with precious little green space, offers imaginative play equipment, shade trees, and even a learning path with math and spelling games.

“Who wouldn’t want to come in here and learn,” said Jennifer Ballard, Peirce’s digital literacy teacher. “This is going to be a new era for Philadelphia and a new era for education here.”

During the School’s ribbon-cutting ceremony in late December 2023, Oz Hill, the district’s COO agreed, “Today marks the culmination of a vision that goes beyond bricks and mortar. The vision was not simply about constructing a building; it’s about creating a space where knowledge flourishes, curiosity is nurtured, and the future is shaped.”

T.M. Peirce Elementary School



Scope of Work & Budget



Client

The School District of Philadelphia



Location

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Building Area

77,000 square feet



Grades

Pre-Kindergarten through 5th



Student Capacity

~650 Students



Design Timeline

April 2020 - June 2021



Completion Date

January 2024



Construction Cost

\$32,096,000



LEED Certification

LEED Gold





“The community and children were involved in every step of the process. The building that we were in, our original building, was over a hundred years old. It was very outdated and antiquated. To come into a 21st century space is exciting.”

***- Anthony Gordon
Principal, T.M. Peirce Elementary School***

School & Community

RENEWING A COMMUNITY: T.M. PEIRCE'S IMPACT IN ALLEGHENY WEST

The Allegheny West section of Philadelphia, home to the new T.M. Peirce Elementary School, is a vibrant community filled with classic rowhomes and small businesses, characterized by a strong sense of community and accessible public transportation. The project's stakeholders included parents, teachers, and school district staff, many of whom were former students deeply invested in the school's redevelopment.

The project faced significant challenges, such as starting the design phase during the global shutdown in 2020 and addressing a \$5 billion capital improvement need due to underfunding. Despite these hurdles, stakeholders remained dedicated, providing vital input through virtual meetings. The project stayed on budget, incorporating sustainable systems and achieving LEED Gold certification. This effort resulted in a modern, adaptable school that fosters community pride, equity, and a sense of security.



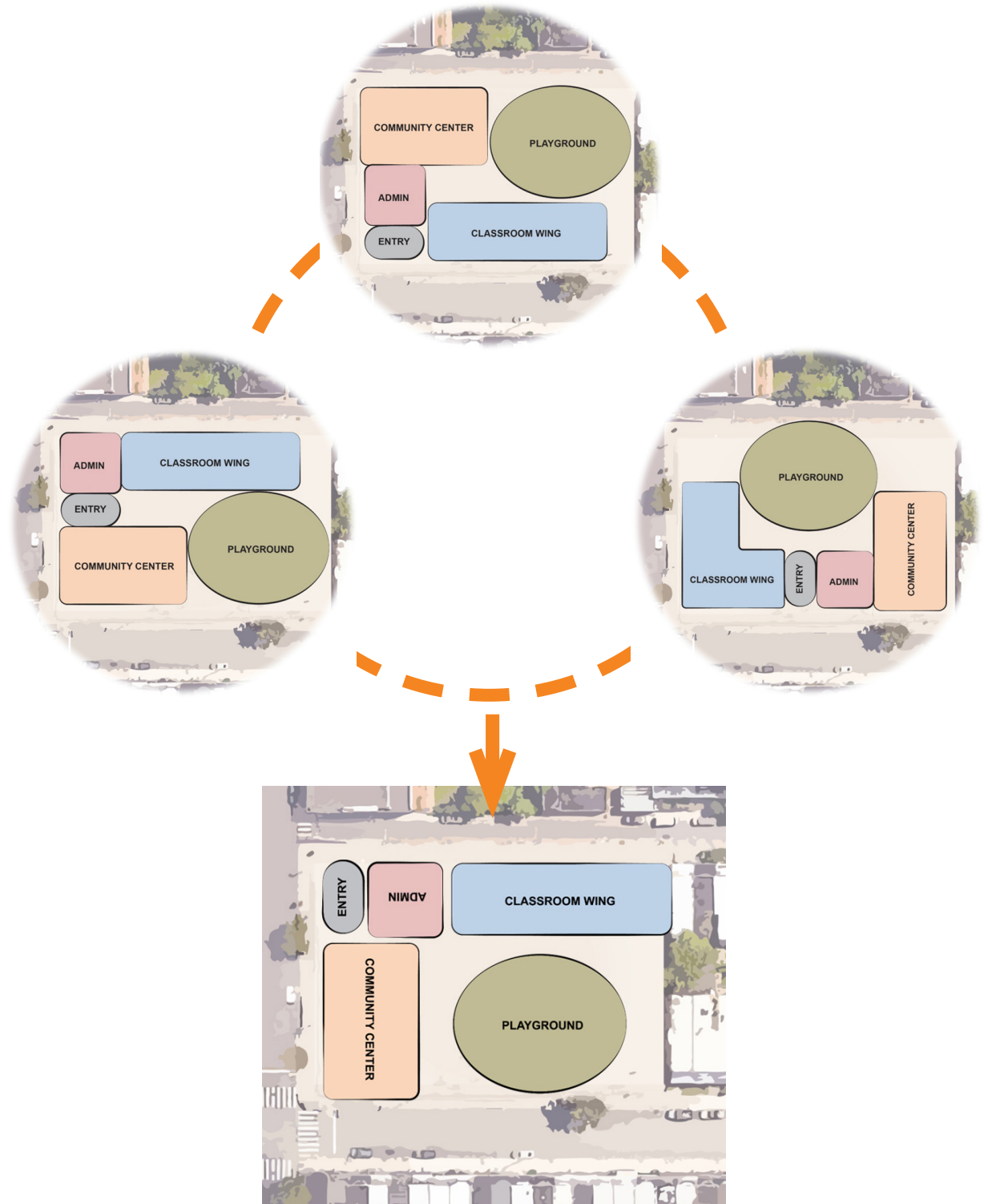
School & Community

FOCUS GROUP & COMMUNITY CHARRETTE

Design and planning phases commenced in April 2020 at the start of the pandemic, requiring all collaboration with the District's focus group - comprised of the principal, teachers, District staff, and select parents - to occur virtually. Despite being remote, the design meetings with stakeholders were invaluable, enabling successful interactions and collaboration. This provided a forum for comments and suggestions that were ultimately incorporated into the new building's configuration, playground features, and final design. The same 21st-century learning tools that students and teachers were using for remote learning were also utilized for the new T.M. Peirce School.

"It's impressive the amount of community input and that it's been heard and incorporated."

- Commissioner Carmen Febo San Miguel





“When young people walk into this school, the school building says something about what we think about our students, it says something about what we value.”

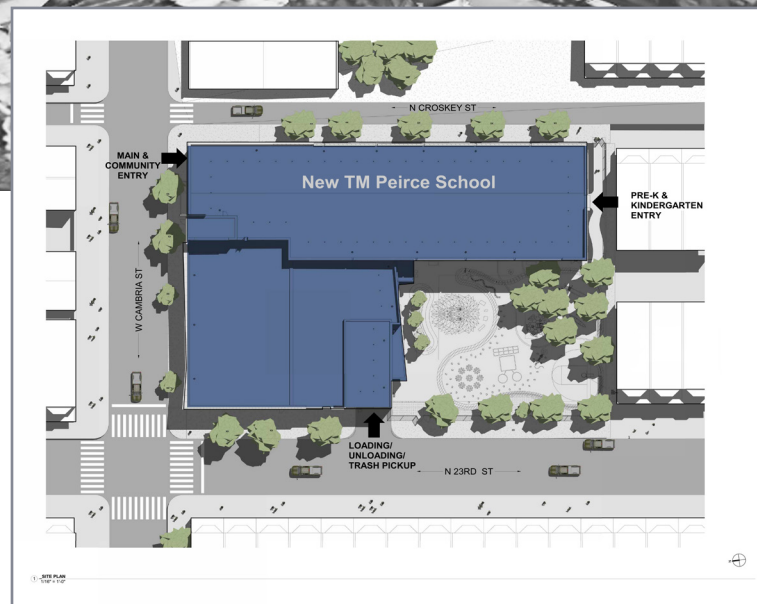
***- Tony B. Watlington,
Sr. Superintendent, The School District of
Philadelphia***

Physical Environment

ROOTS AND REVITALIZATION

The new T.M. Peirce Elementary School is nestled in the Allegheny West section of Philadelphia, one of the many vibrant neighborhoods that make up the rich urban fabric of the city. The neighborhood is predominantly comprised of quintessential Philadelphia single-family, rowhomes with various small businesses that support the needs of the residents. Like many of the neighborhoods in Philadelphia, there is a strong sense of community, further enhanced by the convenient access to public transportation.

The original T.M. Peirce School served as a cornerstone for students and families in the immediate area and surrounding residential blocks. During the early design phases, several parents and school staff - some of whom had attended T.M. Peirce as children - became integral members of the primary stakeholder and focus groups. It was evident that the original school held a significant place in the heart of the community. A notable former student, who became a well-known R&B singer, generously donated money in 2001 to help fund the library, providing new books and computers.



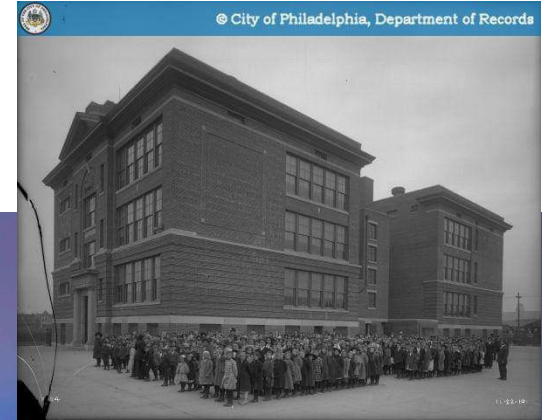
T.M. Peirce Elementary School

Physical Environment

A NEW CHAPTER

The new T.M. Peirce is the first new school built in this area of the city in 70 years. It stands as a shining symbol of the bright future envisioned for this community, representing a significant investment in the students of this neighborhood. The exciting potential for this school to ignite a reinvestment in the neighborhood through stewardship, new businesses, and legacy families is both a real and intended possibility.

The original school sat in the middle of the site, which is not quite a full city block. It was surrounded by fencing and its windows wore security screens that seemed to be more about keeping students in than intruders out. The new design hugs the street, welcoming the community into its vibrant environment. Large expanses of glazing convey a sense of respect and trust to the community, while decorative fences now serve to keep balls in the play yard instead of penning students away from their community.

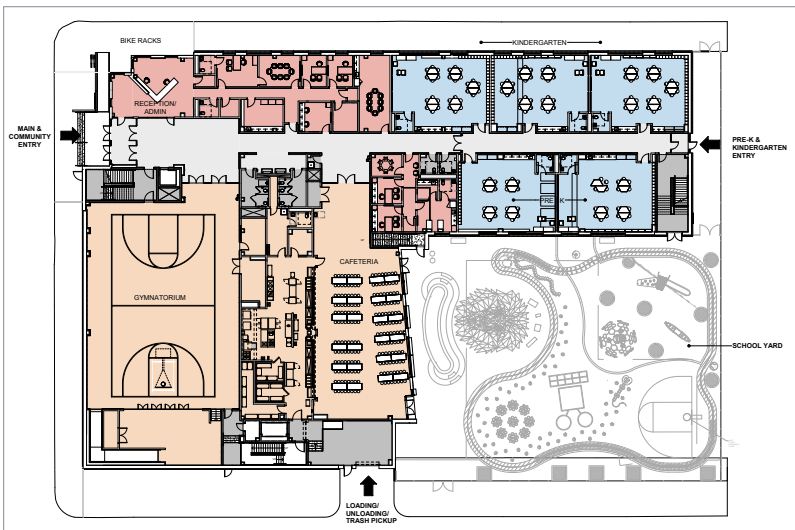


T.M. Peirce Elementary School

Physical Environment

A BEACON OF OPPORTUNITY

The school's site offers a welcoming front door to the surrounding neighborhood. The larger gymnasium and cafeteria spaces, located at the street line, serve as an anchor for community use. The school now steps forward and becomes an active participant in the fabric of the neighborhood. A theme celebrated at the school ribbon-cutting celebration was the sentiment that these students are important and special and now have the opportunity to learn and grow in a first-class learning environment, comparable to those found in the surrounding suburban school districts. Students and parents now have a sense of equality, with endless opportunities for the students.



T.M. Peirce Elementary School

Physical Environment

TRANSFORMING URBAN SPACE

Despite an extremely compact site, stakeholders emphasized the importance of creating a play area that did not resemble a tired, urban concrete pad. Incorporating natural light, estate fencing, and strategically placed trees for biophilia, the design provides shaded seating areas and planters for students who prefer smaller groups. Inclusive play equipment caters to all ages and students with special needs, with features that offer learning opportunities, such as a learning trail that winds around the play area.

This landscaped schoolyard, an urban oasis for play and learning, includes imaginative equipment like musical percussion instruments and ample space for various activities. During early virtual charrettes, the stakeholders contributed valuable insight into the surrounding neighborhood to ensure the classroom wing was placed on the quieter side, and the main entrance was positioned at a safe corner for traffic. With most students walking from the surrounding neighborhood, parking was kept off-site to prioritize the play area. Additionally, bike racks were provided to encourage cycling.



T.M. Peirce Elementary School



“Walking into the old Peirce, it’s really dim and kind of dark so just to come in and see all the colors and the lights and everything - it’s really uplifting, motivating, exciting to get into the building. It’s been a long journey.”

***- Dr. Crystal Lanham,
Educational Compliance Monitor***

Educational Environment

A VISION FOR EXCELLENCE

The educational visions and goals of T.M. Peirce Elementary School, as originally outlined by The School District of Philadelphia, are multifaceted and ambitious. They aim to provide students with advanced educational opportunities and enriched learning environments, ensuring both the interior and exterior spaces of the school are efficient and safe.

A key focus is optimizing sustainable design and promoting occupants' wellness, creating an innovative design solution that fosters pride among students, parents, teachers, and the community. Furthermore, the building design is developed to align with and integrate seamlessly into the surrounding community, enhancing the connection between the school and its neighborhood.



Educational Environment

THOUGHTFUL DESIGN TO ENHANCE LEARNING

The environment at T.M. Peirce Elementary School is thoughtfully designed to support the curriculum in several ways. Grades are clearly delineated per floor, allowing students to feel a sense of ownership over their grade-specific environments. The art and music/ creative suites are prominently showcased at the main elevation of the school, creating a stage-like atmosphere filled with natural light where students can immerse themselves in creativity while overlooking their community and the wider city, symbolizing broader opportunities. Flexible learning environments are created using adaptable furniture and technology, and the Information Media Center (IMC) is strategically located on the second floor as a central hub for all students. Each space is functionally designed to cater to the needs of different age groups, with age-appropriate furniture and large, naturally lit, colorful areas enhancing the learning experience.



Educational Environment

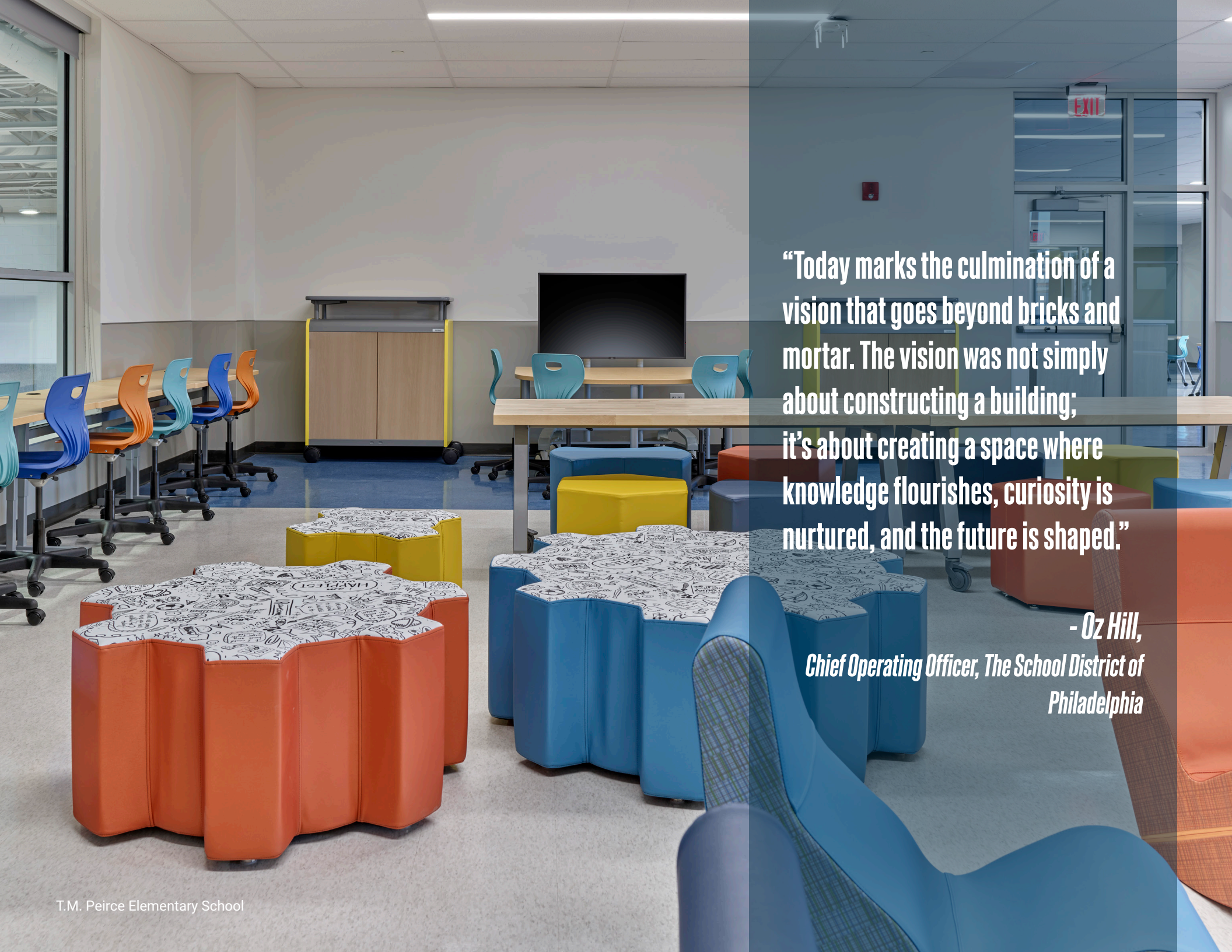
ADAPTIVE DESIGN FOR VERSATILE LEARNING SPACES

The design of T.M. Peirce Elementary School supports a variety of teaching styles, offering large spaces equipped with ample lighting and receptacles that can be transformed into STEM labs or collaboration areas. Additionally, collaboration areas are strategically located at the end of corridors outside the music and art rooms, providing versatile spaces that can also showcase student artwork. These features create an environment conducive to diverse instructional methods and foster a collaborative, creative atmosphere for students and teachers alike.

The environment is designed to be adaptable, epitomized by the Information Media Center (IMC), which serves as the technological “brain” of the school. The IMC, like many spaces throughout the school, is enhanced by modern furniture and the latest technology, including Smart boards in every classroom and adjustable whiteboard tables. The IMC also offers several engaging spaces to cater to large and small group instruction, as well as independent learning. This flexibility ensures the school can accommodate various teaching styles and learning needs, fostering an inclusive and dynamic educational experience.

T.M. Peirce Elementary School





“Today marks the culmination of a vision that goes beyond bricks and mortar. The vision was not simply about constructing a building; it’s about creating a space where knowledge flourishes, curiosity is nurtured, and the future is shaped.”

***- Oz Hill,
Chief Operating Officer, The School District of
Philadelphia***

Results

CREATING A VIBRANT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The project achieves its educational goals and objectives by creating a vibrant, colorful new space filled with natural light. This welcoming environment not only enhances the aesthetic appeal but also fosters an atmosphere conducive to learning and creativity, aligning with the school's vision of providing advanced educational opportunities and promoting occupant wellness.

The project achieves the School District of Philadelphia's goals by creating a vibrant, colorful new space filled with natural light, which aligns with its vision of becoming the fastest-improving large urban school district. This significant investment in the community fosters a sense of equity among students, who now feel empowered to reach as high in their aspirations as their peers in suburban Philadelphia schools. This welcoming environment enhances both the aesthetic appeal and the educational experience, promoting advanced learning opportunities and occupant wellness.

This journey has been one of collaboration, respect, aspiration, understanding, and listening. The stakeholders, parents, teachers, community, students, and designers united together for a common goal of providing a quality learning environment, a place of equity, and hope for the future.

T.M. Peirce Elementary School



Results

IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT

The project achieves school community goals by demonstrating that the community's needs and voices were heard and addressed, reaffirming that they were not forgotten. The new school has become a beacon of pride and an anchor in the neighborhood, offering a safe place for children to learn and grow while also serving as a resource for community programs. This renewed sense of investment and responsiveness has strengthened the bond between the school and its surrounding community, fostering a shared sense of achievement and support.

The project design commenced just weeks after the world shut down in the Spring of 2020. Stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and school district staff, met virtually with the design team in early April. Despite the palpable fear of the unknown and widespread anxiety, it was evident that nothing would deter the dedicated stakeholders from designing and building this school for their community and children. The stakeholders became champions of the process, fully engaging and interacting throughout. After the first meeting, community voices began to emerge, actively informing the design team about the optimal locations for various spaces on the site.

T.M. Peirce Elementary School



Results

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DESIGN

The community identified the quietest street for classrooms and suggested the safest pedestrian area for the main entrance. The design team often remarks that this building was truly designed by the community, a statement they wholeheartedly believe. The passion and dedication of the community involvement in the project is rarely seen in school design. It stands as a testament to a community that cares deeply about its future and the investment made in their children.

The project exemplifies value and good stewardship of financial resources in several key ways. The bids came in on budget, making the new school a valuable commodity for the community and a sound investment in the students. This development is particularly significant given the \$5 billion capital improvement need identified by the state supreme court, which ruled that city schools have been underfunded. The new school replaces antiquated steam and oil systems with modern, sustainable building systems that are both efficient and long-lasting. This careful financial management ensures that the investment benefits the community for years to come, providing a safe and modern learning environment for current and future generations.

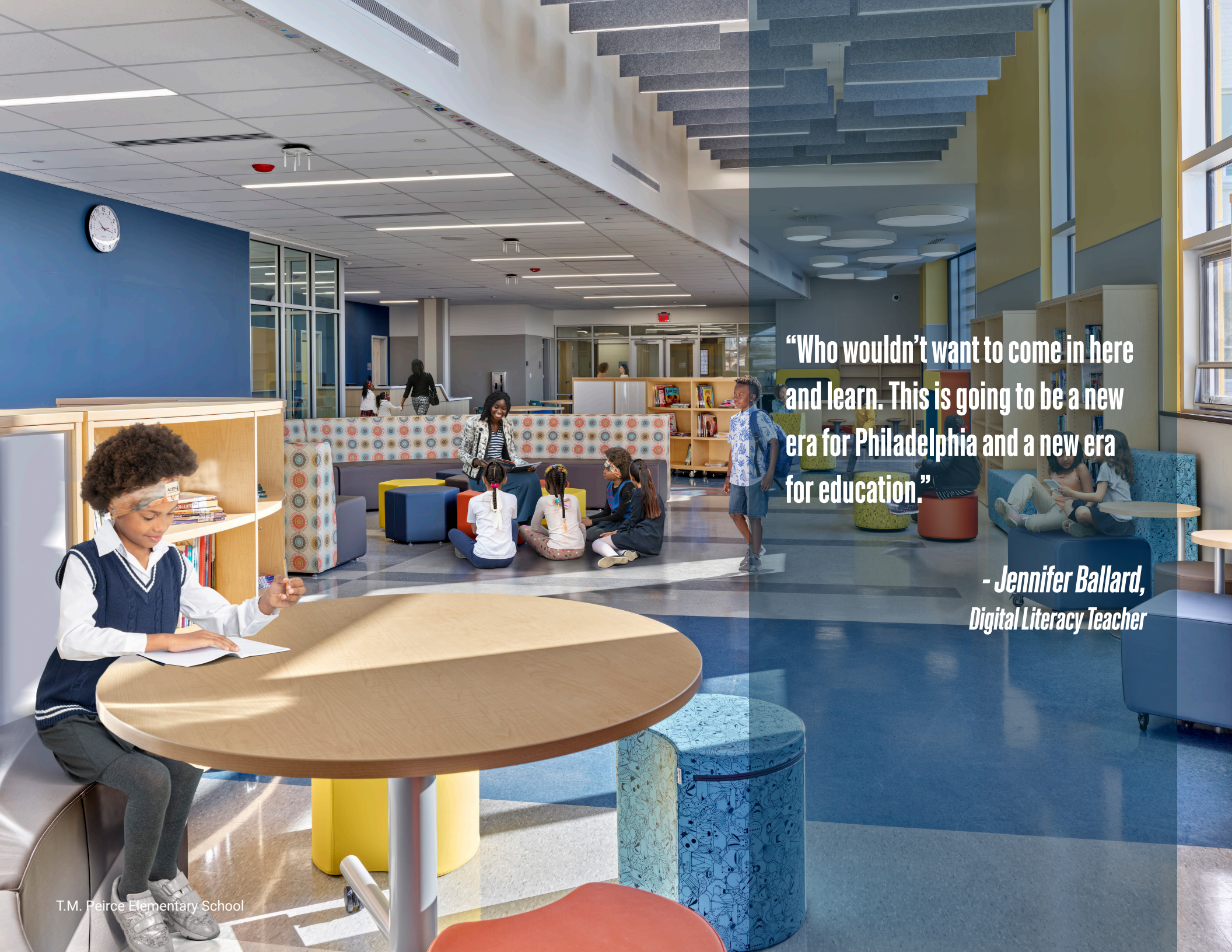


Results

PROGRESSIVE DESIGN: ENHANCING COMMUNITY AND EDUCATION

The project achieved LEED Gold certification. It incorporates efficient HVAC systems, abundant natural light, adequate LED interior lighting, and acoustically controlled learning spaces. Beyond these technical achievements, the new school provides a sense of security and pride for the community, establishing an inviting presence that offers a new generation of students equity and a conduit for endless possibilities. This thoughtful design ensures a healthy environment, reinforcing the school's role as a cornerstone of the community.





“Who wouldn’t want to come in here and learn. This is going to be a new era for Philadelphia and a new era for education.”

***- Jennifer Ballard,
Digital Literacy Teacher***