



Reinvention Launches Bright Futures

A4LE 2025 Project Awards: Transformation

Bright Futures Preschool +
Galesburg Administrative Center

An Investment in Early Childhood Education

Department store-turned-church transforms into nature-inspired preschool and administrative center

Galesburg Community Unit School District #205 housed its preschool program in a school built in the 1960s and designed for older students. Enrollment surged, and classrooms had no connected restrooms.

The district's administrative center operated from dated converted spaces in that same facility. Its out-of-the-way location meant that community members had trouble finding it.

The district acquired a facility across the street from its high school and at the heart of the community. Built in the 1970s as a discount store, the facility had undergone several manifestations: regional retail chain, education supplies reuse warehouse, and most recently, community church.

Galesburg CUSD #205 and its architect embarked on a project to transform part of the facility into a preschool and administrative offices. The design team conducted early learner research and led the district on tours of Chicago-area early learning facilities.

The resulting 28,000-square-foot Bright Futures Preschool welcomes the district's youngest learners to a light-filled sanctuary where learning and nature unite. An adjacent center with offices and meeting rooms houses district administrative staff.

Outcomes range from enhanced student performance and elevated staff morale to stronger family participation in school events and more community involvement in board meetings.



Scope of Work and Budget



Starting in the entry lobby, a curving wall separates administrative and preschool functions.

PROJECT TYPE

Community church retrofitted into preschool and administration center

SQUARE FOOTAGE

28,000

SITE SIZE

.75 acres of site redeveloped

CONSTRUCTION COST

\$10.4 million

CONSTRUCTION

April 2022 – May 2023

STUDENT CAPACITY

250

KEY SPACES

- 10 classrooms
- Integrated therapy rooms between each pair of classrooms
- Indoor play area
- Occupational/physical therapy space
- Sensory room
- Staff offices
- Employee lounge/workroom
- Outdoor playground
- District board room
- District office

“This facility is more than just a building—it’s a promise to our community that we value early learning and are investing in the future of our youngest learners.”

— Jennifer Graves, Principal, Bright Futures Preschool

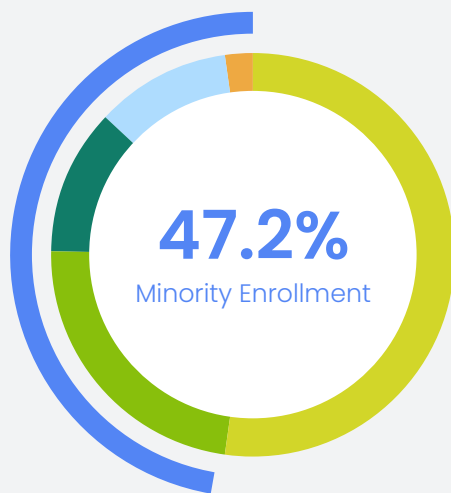
School & Community Research and Engagement

A Need for Early Childhood Education

Galesburg, Illinois was founded in 1837 by Reverend George Washington Gale and a group of anti-slavery advocates.

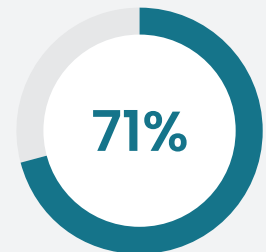
It is a tight-knit, historically industrial and agricultural community that values educational opportunity and equitable access for all children.

The city's population declined slightly over the past decade. Economic shifts have made investment in early childhood education critical.



Student Diversity

52.8%	White
22.8%	Black or African American
11.7%	Two or more races
10.6%	Hispanic/Latino
2.2%	Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander



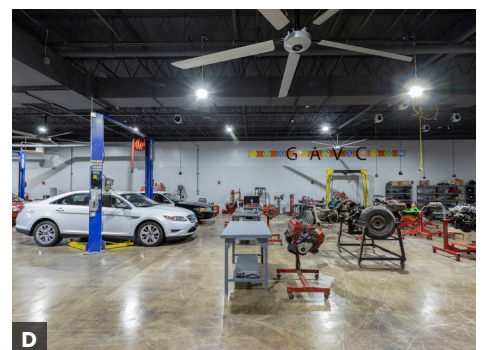
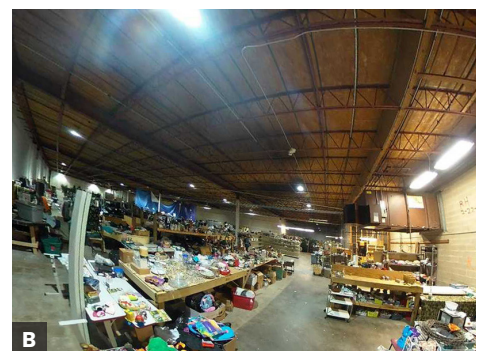
Economically disadvantaged students at Bright Futures Preschool

A History of Reinvention

The 54,000-square-foot facility across from Galesburg High School played many roles since it was built in the early 1970s:

- A** Belscot discount store
- B** Educational supplies reuse warehouse
- C** Northwoods Community Church
- D** Galesburg CUSD #205 leased the church's unused warehouse space to create the Galesburg Area Vocational Center

In 2021, the district purchased the entire facility with plans of transforming the church portions into a preschool/administrative center. Achieving the district's objectives required intensive research into how physical environments impact early childhood development.



School & Community Research and Engagement

Collaborative Vision Unites Play and Nature

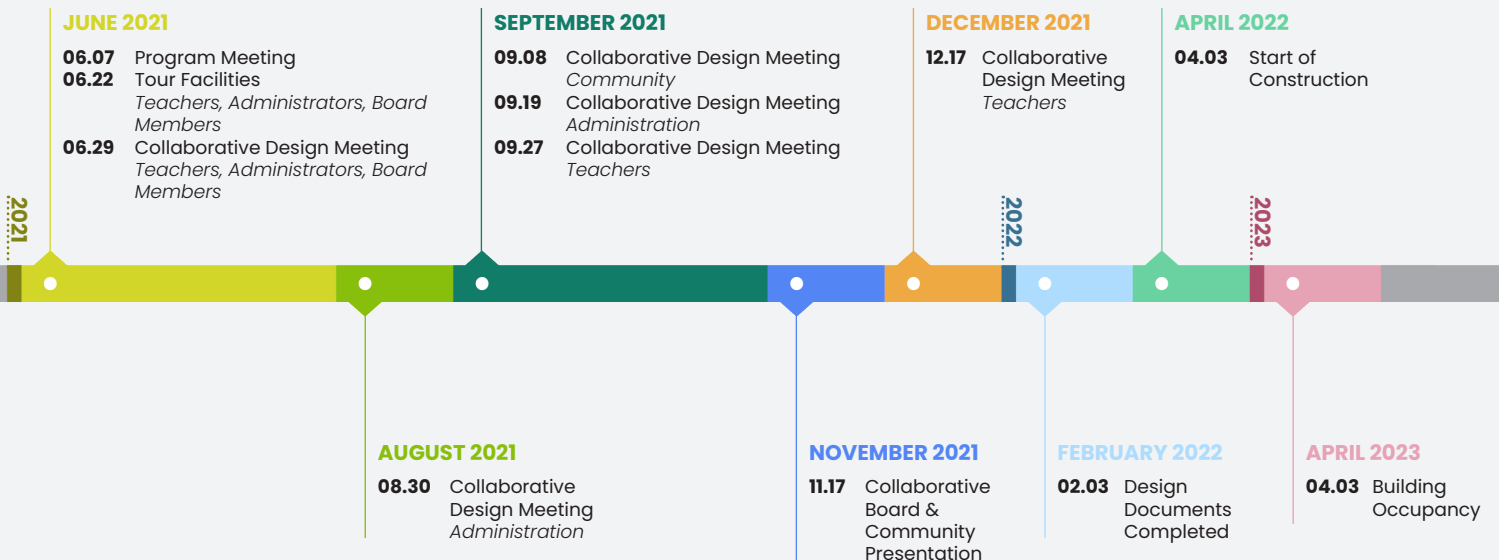
District leadership, educators, community members, and the architectural team defined goals and created solutions for spaces that optimize early childhood development.

The team conducted early learner research to understand how the space could support developmental, emotional, and cognitive needs. Additionally, the architect led the district on tours of exemplary early learning facilities in the Chicago region to gather ideas.

District input and the research led to a goal of creating a play-based, nature-inspired setting that would reduce anxiety and promote curiosity among young learners.



District engagement sessions resulted in four programmatic options and a consensus plan.



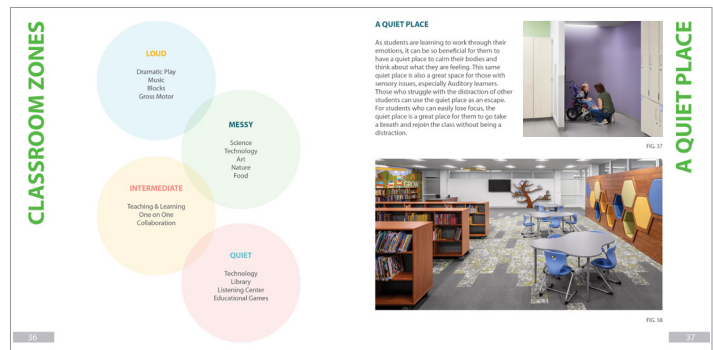
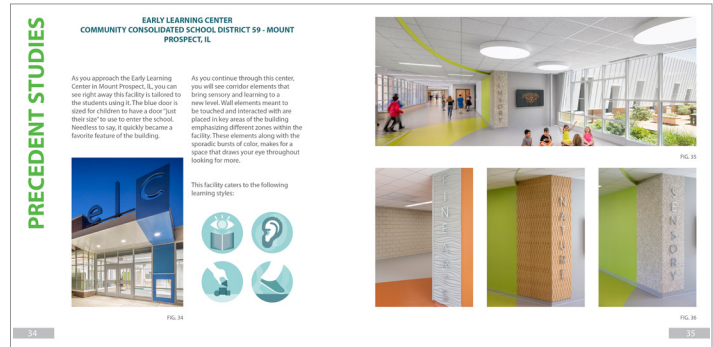
School & Community Research and Engagement



“Overuse of color can be overstimulating for students and cause a distraction. It is important to be mindful with color and use it to bring attention to important pieces of information.”

— Excerpt from research book

A research book set the tone for the design of Bright Futures Preschool. The book explores everything from learning preferences and technology to height-appropriate furniture/fixtures and classroom zones. It also includes precedent studies of other early learning environments.



The facility supports equity by offering inclusive, developmentally appropriate spaces accessible to all students, including those with special needs. Design elements respond to different learning styles to ensure every child feels welcome and supported.

Physical Environment



An Educational Hub

Bright Futures Preschool and the district administration center are located across the street from Galesburg Junior Senior High School. This creates an educational hub that supports intergenerational learning opportunities at the center of the district.

Students and parents sense the building's liveliness as they approach it: randomly placed windows with pops of color identify the early learning portion of the shared facility.



Physical Environment

BEFORE



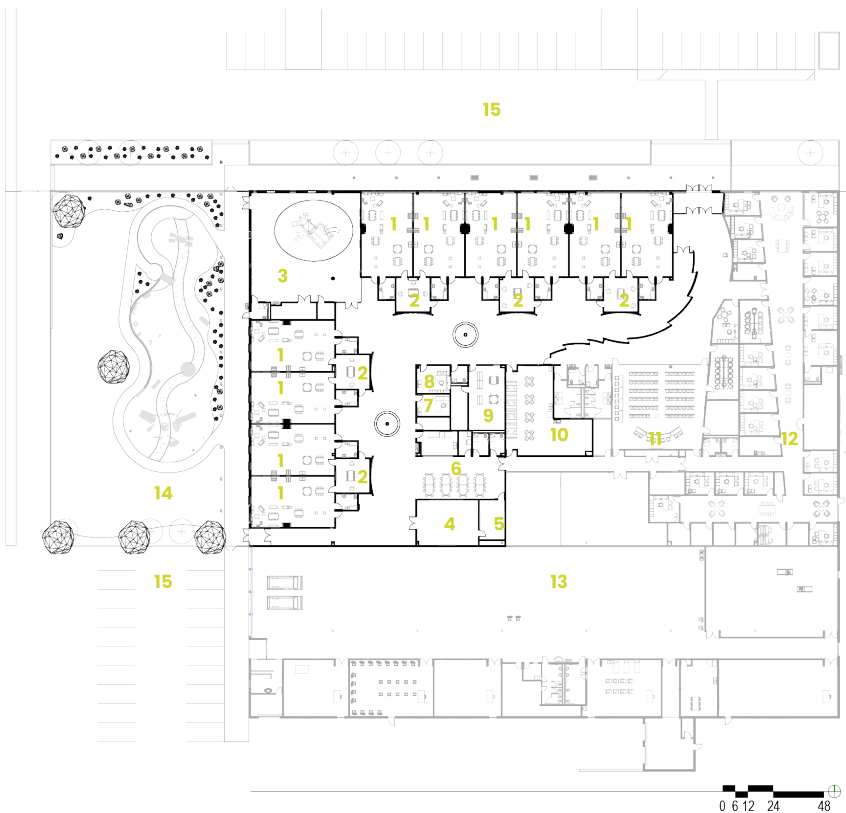
The project revitalizes a well-known but underused local building to preserve community memory while giving it new life and purpose.

By consolidating all early learning programs under one roof, the facility improves access and efficiency for families throughout the district.

LEGEND

- 1 Church Lobby
- 2 Church Auditorium
- 3 Church Classroom
- 4 Church Office
- 5 Store
- 6 Youth Center
- 7 Storage
- 8 District Vocational Center
- 9 Parking

AFTER



LEGEND

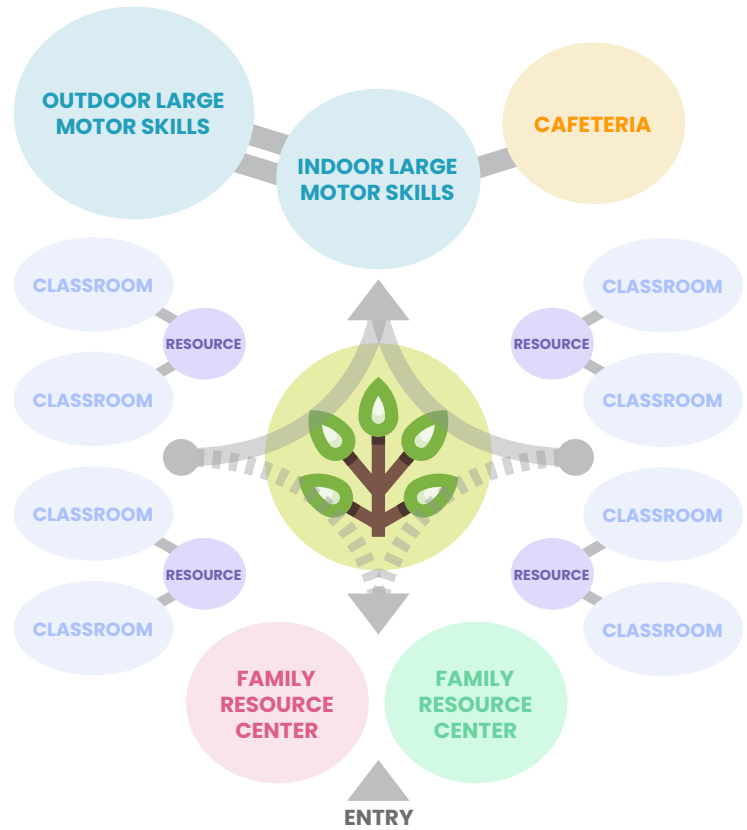
- 1 Classroom
- 2 Integrated Therapy
- 3 Indoor Play
- 4 OT/PT
- 5 Sensory
- 6 Serving
- 7 Health Office
- 8 Principal Office
- 9 Play-based Assessment
- 10 Employee Lounge/Workroom
- 11 District Board Room
- 12 District Office
- 13 District Vocational Center
- 14 Outdoor Play
- 15 Parking

Physical Environment

Bright Futures Preschool emphasizes intuitive flow and connection to nature. High-use areas surround a nature-inspired circulation hub, ensuring clear wayfinding, balanced activity zones, and easy access to support services.



Students display their artwork throughout the facility.



Physical Environment



“As students transition from one space to another within the school, they’re encouraged to gently run a hand along the textured plant wall. This simple, tactile action keeps them engaged, focused, and connected to the rhythm of the group.”

— Jennifer Graves, Principal, Bright Futures Preschool

Physical Environment

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The physical environment is designed to be universally accessible to students of all abilities and learning styles. Features range from a sensory room and calming nooks to a trike track and inclusive play equipment.

Sustainability and Wellness

- **Biophilic design:** Nature-inspired features such as faux vegetated walls, tree-like columns, and natural textures connect students with the outdoors. Additionally, every classroom offers outdoor views.
- **Daylighting:** Skylights and energy-efficient windows reduce reliance on artificial lighting. The design “splays” the main corridor in a triangular form to filter north light down the length of the office portion.
- **Thermal efficiency:** Foam-in-place insulation and upgraded windows improve the building envelope’s performance.
- **Indoor air quality and acoustics:** Materials like wood acoustic baffles and advanced ventilation systems support a quieter, healthier learning environment.
- **Active play areas:** An indoor playground and outdoor play spaces repurposed from parking lots offer safe, accessible areas for physical activity.



Physical Environment



A parking lot behind the school transforms into a safe play zone for students of all abilities and a community gathering place.

The outdoor space balances physical activity and sensory play, helping children develop coordination and creativity while having fun.



“The data we’ve collected suggests that Bright Futures students perform better than their peers who go straight to kindergarten.”

— Dr. John Asplund, Superintendent, Galesburg CUSD #205



Physical Environment

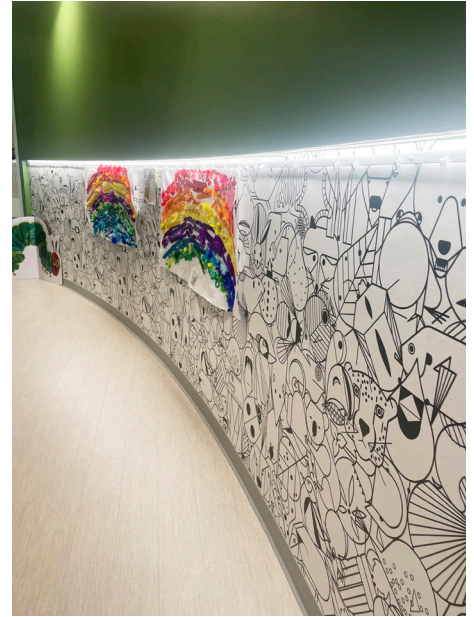
Bridging Educational and Administrative Areas

One design hurdle involved functionally separating while aesthetically linking educational and administrative functions.

The design counteracts the building's rectilinear shape with a curvilinear wall separating the preschool and administrative areas. The wall, based loosely on the shape of a leaf, encourages fluid circulation, offers window serrations that mimic peekaboo, and displays preschool activity for adults.

LEFT View from administrative corridor into Bright Futures Preschool.

RIGHT On the Bright Futures side, the wall steps to reveal a playful graphic. A continuous light fixture highlights the art rail displaying student creations.



Educational Environment



Vision

- Create a play-based, developmentally appropriate learning environment
- Support for the whole child (emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development)
- Reduce student anxiety
- Integrate nature into the design (biophilia)
- Design inclusive and equitable learning spaces
- Distinguish preschool and administrative functions while also creating visual connectivity



Response

- Flexible classroom layouts: Classrooms feature distinct zones for active play, quiet learning, and messy exploration.
- Visual wayfinding for young learners: Color-coded entries, tactile markers, and large numerals help children learn while navigating the space.
- Nature-integrated learning spaces: Biophilic design elements like vegetated walls and tree-like columns connect indoor spaces to nature.
- Multiuse play areas: Indoor and outdoor play zones promote motor development, social interaction, and imaginative play.
- Sensory and calming features: Elements like cozy nooks and sensory-friendly materials support self-regulation and emotional development.

Educational Environment



CLASSROOM ENTRY

Acoustic wood canopies bring the entries down to a smaller scale with a home-like feel. Flooring creates opportunities for lining up, counting, and hopscotch.

NUMBERS

Large-scale classroom numbers created out of tactile wall coverings.



INDOOR TREE

Structural columns wrapped in wood with floating leaves became trees.

RIVER

Flooring created a river that guides children through the space.

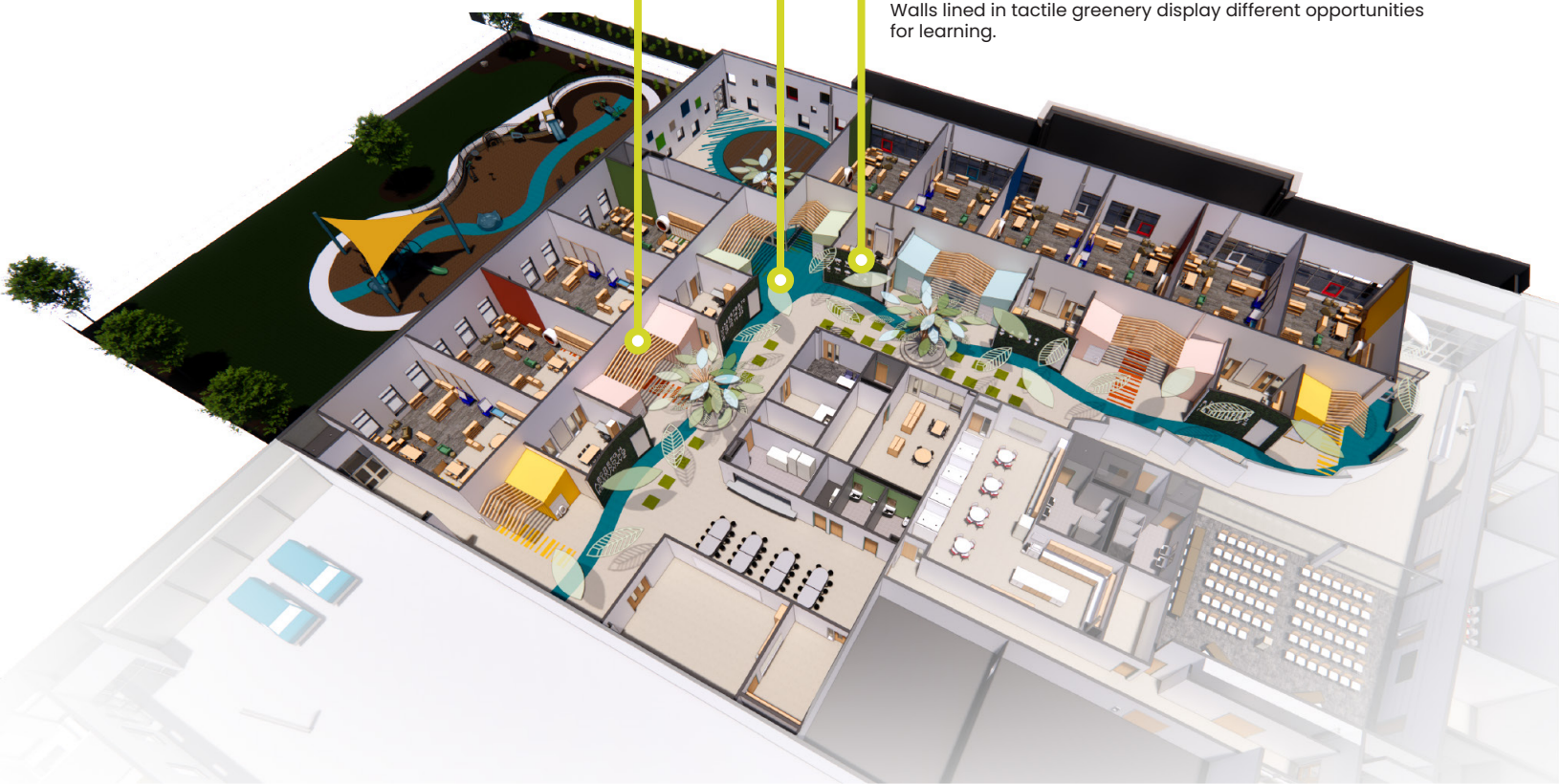
GRASS SQUARES

Green carpet squares were incorporated into the flooring to create "grass" areas for breakout learning under the trees.



NATURE WALLS

Walls lined in tactile greenery display different opportunities for learning.



Educational Environment

Turning a Liability Into an Asset

The existing facility's three unsightly steel columns posed a major challenge. The design transforms the columns into trees that become focal points in the corridor, lobby, and multiuse areas.



AFTER



BEFORE



Flexible corridors accommodate classroom breakout sessions.

Educational Environment



AFTER



BEFORE

The indoor playground supports year-round physical activity, a vital part of building motor and social skills. Randomly placed acoustical treatments manage noise levels, and windows framed in vibrant colors bring daylight into the space.

Educational Environment



AFTER

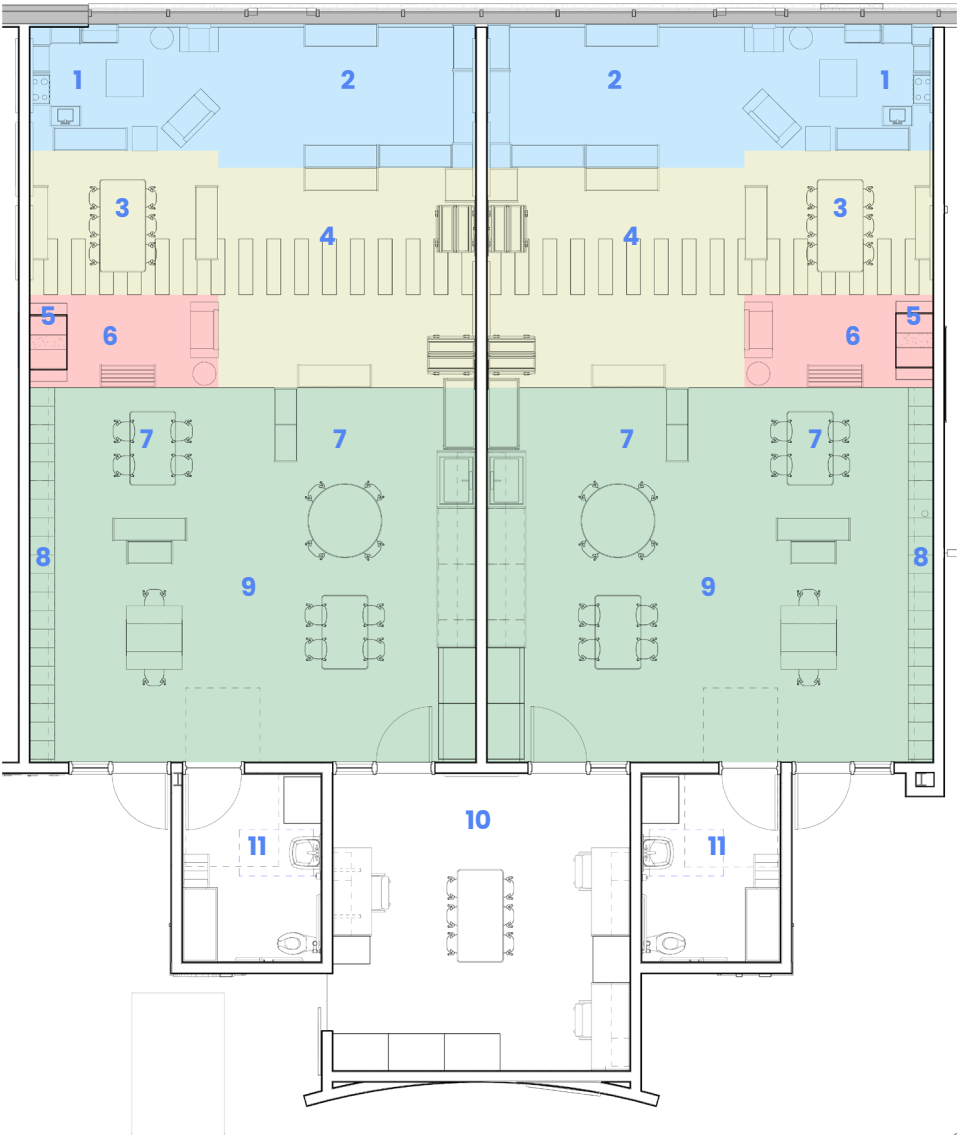


BEFORE

All Learning Styles Welcome

Bright Futures classrooms, one-third larger than the previous classrooms, not only give students more places to explore but also cater to different cognitive styles. Research into learning preferences drove classroom layouts and color selections.

Educational Environment



Moveable furniture and zones within classrooms allow teachers to easily reconfigure spaces for different activities or group sizes.



LEGEND

	LOUD ZONE		INTERMEDIATE ZONE		QUIET ZONE		MESSY ZONE
							
1 Housekeeping Center		4 Learning Center		7 Art/Science Center		10 Integrated Therapy	
2 Discovery Center		5 Wall Seat		8 Cubbies		11 Toilet	
3 Math Center		6 Library Center		9 Classroom			
Soft Surface Flooring				Hard Surface Flooring			

Results



Community members tour Bright Futures Preschool at the grand opening.



Project Goals Met

Educational Goals

- ✓ Supports early learning development: flexible classrooms, open areas, outdoor play spaces
- ✓ Promotes wellness and focus: natural light, calming color palettes, biophilic elements
- ✓ Strengthens inclusive learning: sensory rooms, accessible play areas, quiet nooks
- ✓ Encourages independence and exploration: color-coded entries, large numerals, and tactile cues

School District Goals

- ✓ Replaces an outdated, age-inappropriate setting with a purpose-built space that supports developmentally appropriate practices
- ✓ Expands early childhood capacity and provides more classrooms designed specifically for young learners
- ✓ Consolidates preschool programs and district administrative offices in one location

Community Goals

- ✓ Increases access to early education by centralizing and expanding preschool services
- ✓ Enhances community involvement with spaces that support strong school-family partnerships
- ✓ Turns a dormant site into a community asset

Financial Stewardship

- ✓ Reuses existing structure to reduce project costs
- ✓ Increases operational efficiency by housing preschool classrooms and district administrative offices in one facility
- ✓ Supports fiscal sustainability with energy-efficient upgrades

Sustainability and Wellness

- ✓ Supports student focus and comfort: skylights, energy-efficient windows, natural materials
- ✓ Promotes physical activity and motor skills: outdoor and indoor play areas enable year-round activities
- ✓ Draws from nature: abstracted trees, river floor pattern, vegetated wall
- ✓ Maximizes thermal efficiency: new insulation and upgraded windows

Results



The new administrative center is much more accessible to community members and allows district leadership to be close to not only the preschool but also to Galesburg Junior Senior High School across the street.

Thanks to a much larger board room and the facility's location, attendance has risen sharply at board meetings. Additionally, improved technology allows the district to more effectively broadcast meetings to its community.

"The river pathway that winds through our hallway is more than just a visual element; it acts as a natural guide to help students navigate the building with confidence."

— Jennifer Graves, Principal,
Bright Futures Preschool



Results



“Since completion of Bright Futures Preschool, we’ve noticed an **increase in student performance** and a **decrease in behavioral problems**. Wait lists have grown, and **parent involvement has intensified**. Beyond that, **teachers have shown enthusiasm** for working in the bright, open spaces. Consequently, the attractiveness of the facility has **bolstered the district’s recruitment efforts.**”

— Dr. John Asplund, Superintendent, Galesburg CUSD #205