2025 A4LE PROJECT AWARD - NEW CONSTRUCTION

Blending Coastal Beauty with Educational Excellence

Del Mar Heights School

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Del Mar Heights School replaces an aging K-6 elementary school within a well-established community. The team collaborated closely to ensure the voices of students, educators, and neighborhood residents were heard. Over 150 community members took part in a seven-part symposium that fostered a transparent dialogue around the school's vision, goals, and key concerns. Early engagement activities allowed the design team to understand what mattered most to young learners.

The design capitalizes on expansive scenic coastal views and the surrounding Torrey Pines Environmental Reserve, while maximizing a forward-thinking pedagogy and curriculum. Learning villages grouped by grade level, collaborative spaces, and indoor/outdoor experiences engage students in purposeful learning matched to their individual learning styles. Each learning village provides a visual connection to the coastline and nature preserve.

Del Mar Heights School exemplifies the power of community-driven, environmentally responsible design. Utilizing passive design strategies, adaptable spaces, and deep community engagement, the school seamlessly integrated into its neighborhood and natural contexts, setting a new standard for modern, sustainable schools. More than just a school, Del Mar Heights is a living learning landscape where students, educators, and the broader community can come together to explore, collaborate, and grow.

Budget / Project

Project Name
Del Mar Heights School

District Name
Del Mar Union School District

City/State
San Diego, CA

Occupancy Date
7/2024

Grades Housed
K-6

Project Size
69,000 SF

Student Capacity
489

Site Size in Acres
10.5

Gross Area in SF
69,000

Per Pupil SF
141

Total Cost
$61,500,000

Planning Process

This project replaces an existing school within an established neighborhood of families and students spanning several generations. The project team collaborated closely to ensure the voices of students, educators, and neighborhood residents were heard. Team members implemented an integrated structure and collaborative process to fully engage this community in the planning and design. Over 150 participants, including District school site administrators, instructional leaders, parents, community members, and business & civic leaders, all shared their dreams for the new school, guiding the design and construction of this new community asset.

Symposium Series

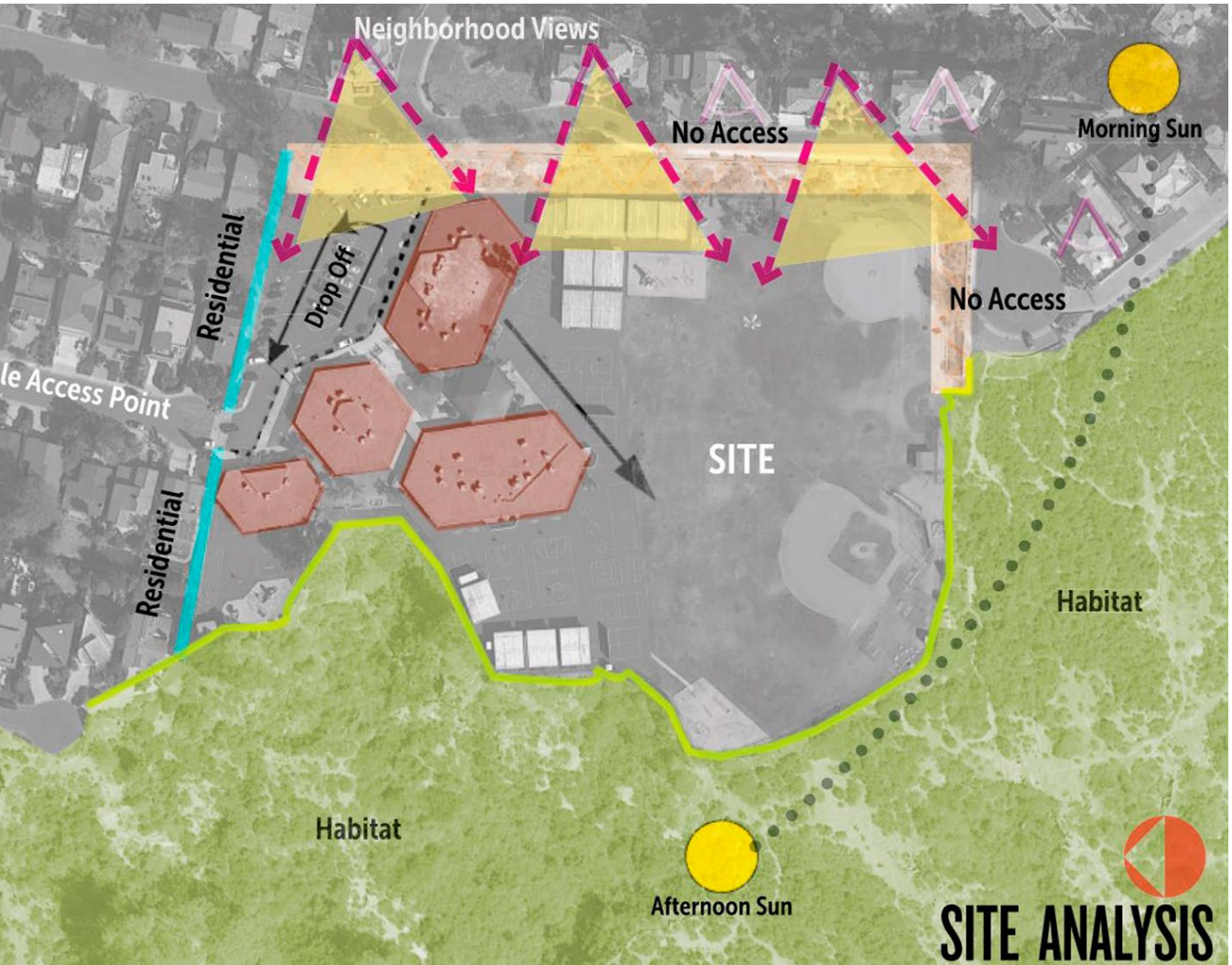
A robust seven-part symposium series enabled a comprehensive review of the District's vision and strategic goals, covering site constraints, regulatory and budgetary limits, neighborhood context, and evolving educational trends. This fully transparent process addressed strategic issues surrounding the future of education, the student learning experience, and community expectations. It also fostered a transparent dialogue around the district's vision, goals, and key concerns. Students created art projects illustrating their vision for the future elementary school, serving as the inspiration that guided the design process. These early engagement activities allowed designers to understand what mattered most to young learners.

A live project website documented the process in real-time to ensure continuous community involvement and transparency.

Preserving Neighborhood Views & Improving Campus Access

The primary concerns of the surrounding community were focused on preservation of ocean views and resolution of severe traffic congestion impacting neighborhood streets and residents. Currently traffic queuing extends well into the neighboring streets blocking intersections, street circulation and restricting access for emergency responders when needed. Planning options were explored to reduce traffic impacts by providing more onsite parking and traffic queuing.

Preservation of neighborhood views has been addressed by limiting buildings to single-story structures with low slope roofs and a VRF mechanical system that eliminates the need for roof-mounted HVAC equipment. Additionally, the campus plan locates buildings along edges where they will remain outside the primary view corridors.



Natural Inspiration

Imagine walking along the beach boardwalk every day as you enter school, listening to the sounds of tall grasses, and birds above, smelling salt in the air. At Del Mar Heights, nature and learning combine to foster a healthy connection to the surrounding landscapes. This is a neighborhood school surrounded 50% by residences and 50% by the Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve overlooking the sandstone cliffs of Torrey Pines State Beach. Respect and preservation of these extraordinary assets led to the design approach of enhancing the coastal experience for students through site planning, building design and material selection.

> *Inspiring to learn how design thinking is taught and used for district improvement."*
>
> - Educator

California Coastal Architecture

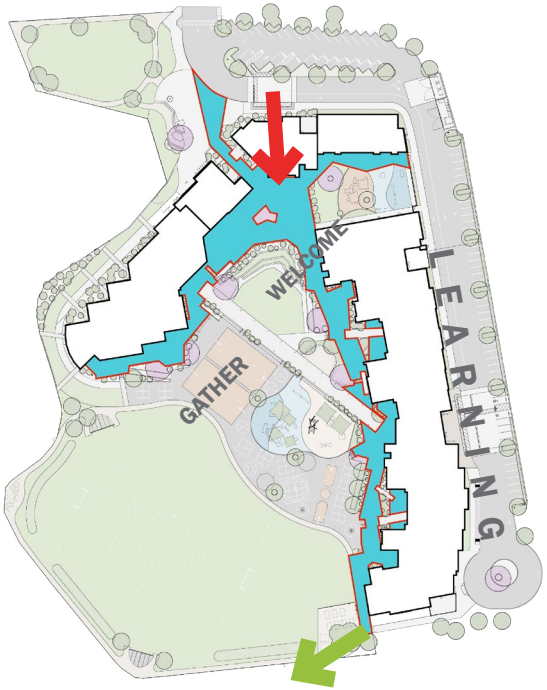
Key design drivers include student safety, campus security, flexible learning studios, collaborative spaces, adaptive, and innovative environments. Inspired by California Coastal Architecture, the design employs open-structure buildings with shed roofs, evoking the natural coastal environment. A campus Boardwalk, lined with beach sand and coastal grasses, mimics the water's edge, fostering a direct connection to nature. The site's natural topography is utilized to create a terraced campus that harmonizes with its surroundings, offering expansive views of Torrey Pines Beach while ensuring optimal site supervision.

Community Connections

Del Mar Heights serves as both a school and a community hub, with weekend access to the play areas and fields, offering scenic views and connection to the nature trails beyond. A student/community garden at the boardwalk's end connects to the adjacent reserve, fostering hands-on environmental engagement. Even during school hours, a pet-friendly green space near the entrance offers a safe, welcoming gathering spot.

A Connected Campus

At the heart of campus, the learning boardwalk connects the school, community, and Torrey Pines Reserve, weaving nature into the indoor-outdoor experience. Lined with native coastal grasses and soft white sand, the elevated path offers uninterrupted Pacific Ocean views, reinforcing a deep connection to the landscape.



Indoor/Outdoor Learning Spaces

Bringing the Outdoors In

Open structure buildings with shed roofs invite the outdoors in. Native grasses and soft white sands extend around the entire school, blending the building into its surroundings seamlessly. Glass accordion doors that open bring cool ocean breeze into classrooms and present breathtaking views from atop bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean at the horizon.

Orienting fields and outdoor learning areas toward the prevailing views and capturing the natural ocean breezes are combined with a transparent connection between indoor and outdoor spaces to invite nature into the learning process.

> *Beautiful environment... design connected to values."*
>
> - Educator

Site Plan

Building Spaces

A. Administration
B. Multi-Use Room
C. STEAM+ Classrooms
D. Innovation Center
E. Kinder Learning Village
F. Extended Day Program
G. Grade 1-3 Modern Learning Studios
H. Grade 4-6 Modern Learning Studios

Site Features

1. Community Open Space
2. Entry Plaza
3. Parking
4. Student Drop-Off Plaza
5. Kinder Playground
6. Amphitheater
7. Boardwalk
8. Outdoor Learning Area
9. Trellis Connector
10. Fitness & Playground
11. Fields
12. Canyon Rim Path
13. Student Garden

Floor Plans

1. Entry Plaza
2. Administration
3. Kinder Learning Studios
4. Kitchen
5. Multi-Use Room
6. Lunch Shelter
7. Indoor/Outdoor Connection
8. Music Studio
9. Art Studio
10. Science Lab
11. Collaboration Area
12. Innovation Center
13. Outdoor Learning Area
14. Boardwalk
15. Trellis Connector
16. Extended Day Program
17. Student Services
18. SDC
19. Grade 1-3 Modern Learning Studios
20. Grade 4-6 Modern Learning Studio
21. Student Drop-Off Plaza
22. Amphitheater/Commons

Guiding Principles

Strong Academic Core

High-quality Instruction

Mastery of Skills that Matter Most

The District's educational vision focuses on creating adaptable learners with the skills they need to succeed today and tomorrow. Three guiding principles shape this vision.

The campus design supports this vision through open, collaborative spaces and flexible learning environments that blend indoor and outdoor experiences tailored to different learning styles.

> *"Culture is simple, clear and it lives in all students and teachers."*
>
> - Educator

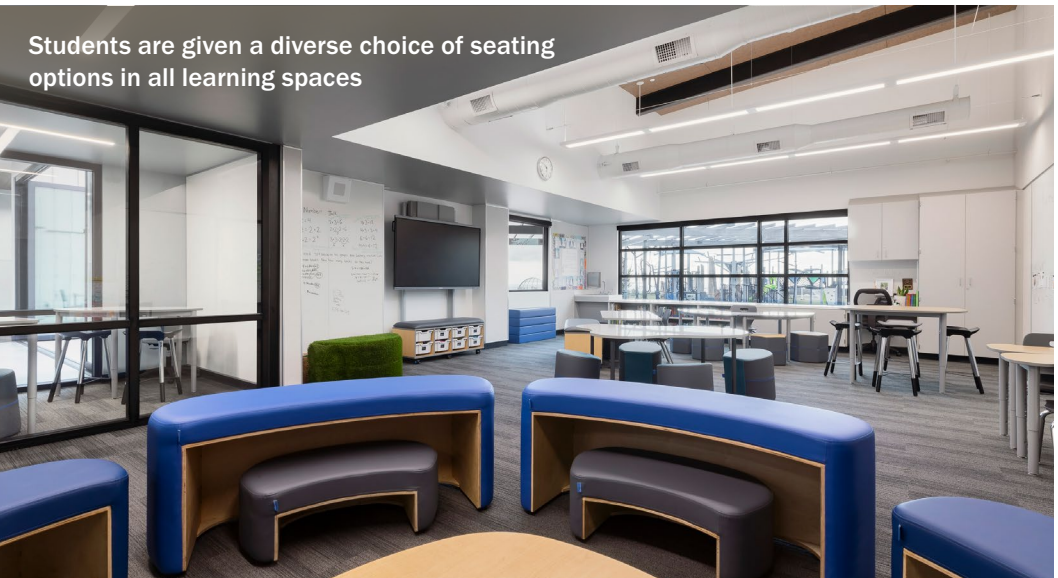
Layered Spaces

Del Mar Heights School embraces a layered approach to design, ensuring that every space serves multiple functions. Modular furniture, movable monitors, and rolling desks empower students to adapt to their daily needs.

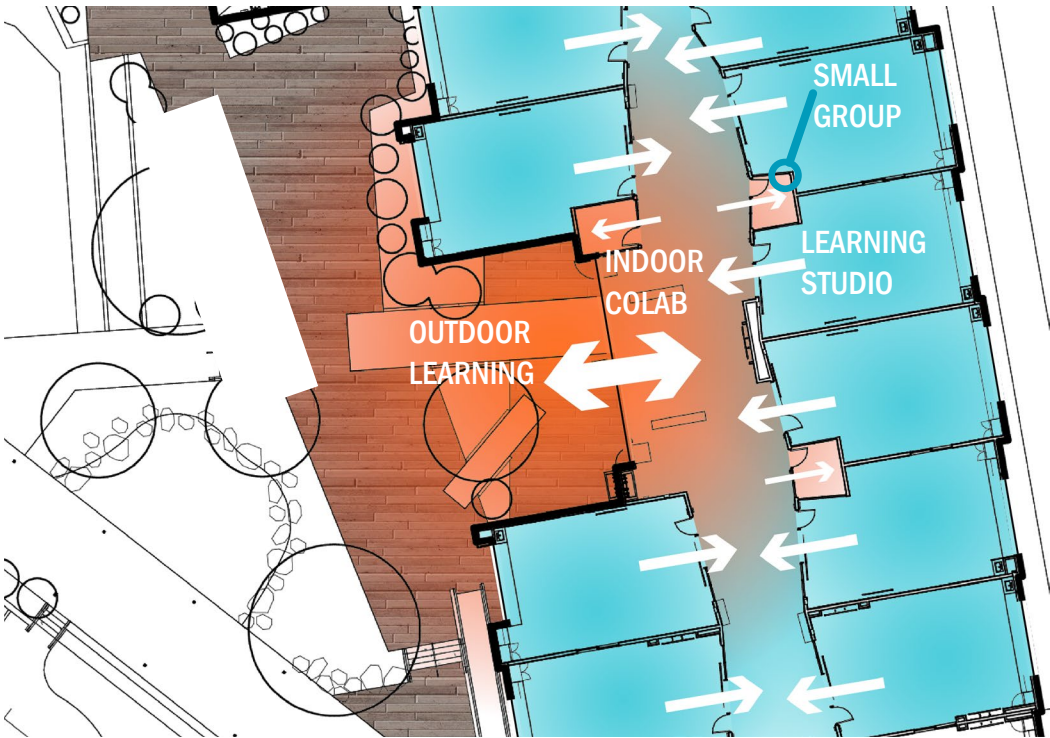
Large operable doors connect learning spaces, fostering collaboration and fluid transitions between indoors and out. Thoughtful design and vibrant seating enhance the space, creating a dynamic, student-centered experience.

Classrooms spill out into open collaboration areas with direct outdoor access

Kindergarten colab area



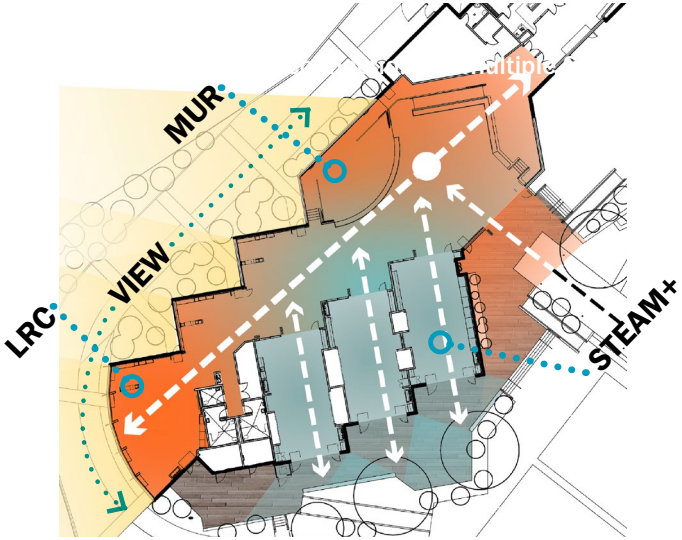
Students are given a diverse choice of seating options in all learning spaces



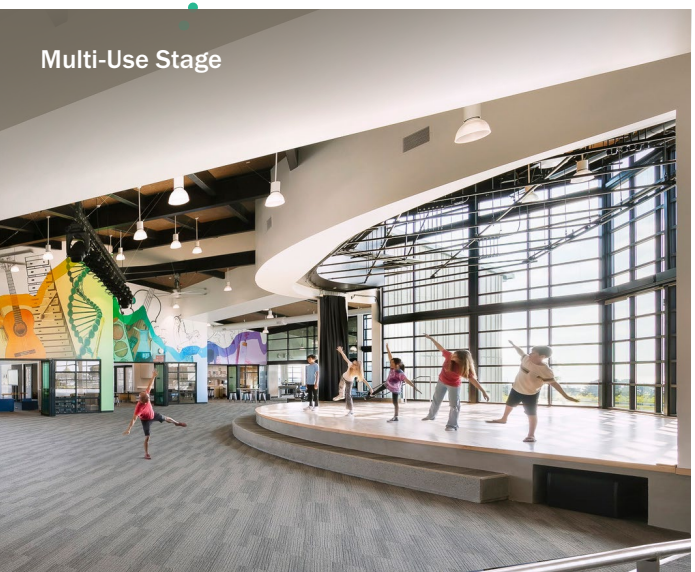
Multi-Use Room

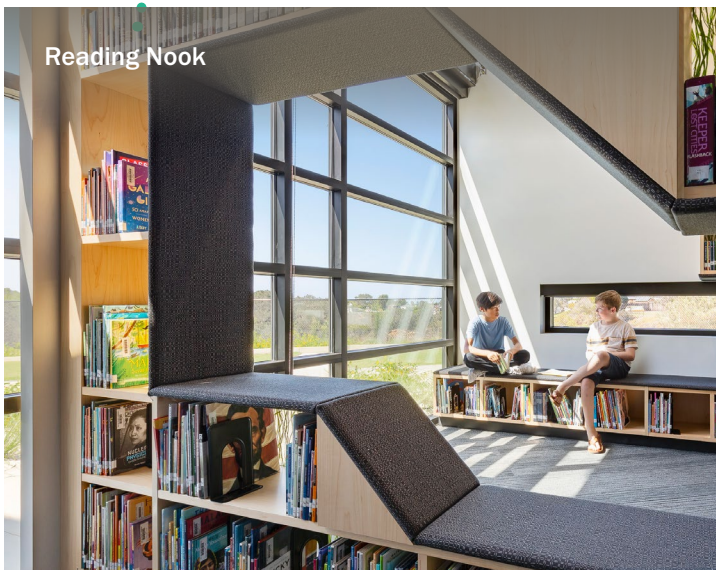
A prime example of a layered space is the multi-use room. This is a bright, sunlit space designed for daily use, adaptable for assemblies, performances, and community gatherings. Operable curtains allow the space to transform instantly, creating a stage-ready environment or a focused presentation area.

The boardwalk, STEAM + lab, and the innovations center are all connected to the multi-use room. Connecting spaces to this central hub ensures accessibility and collaboration.



Learning Adjacencies





High Performance

Sustainability goals are realized through climate-responsive strategies, including material selection and building orientation that take advantage of the coastal environment. The school meets the Green Building Code's and CHPS's high-performance standards.

The design maximizes energy efficiency and occupant comfort by incorporating high, north-facing windows for natural, glare-free light. Natural ventilation is captured with large glass folding doors that when operated, trigger low speed fans to turn on and clerestory windows to open, drawing the outside breezes through the building. Passive heating and cooling are optimized by leveraging thermal massing in the concrete floors, which store energy during coastal diurnal swings. Reflective insulation, insulated/coated glazing, and solar-reflective surfaces enhance the building envelope's insulation values. Large overhangs and trellises provide abundant shade, contributing to energy efficiency and occupant comfort.

> *"It was like seeing the future of education."*
>
> - Educator

Passive Sustainability

RESULTS

Restorative Ecology

The stormwater outfalls within the reserve have been reconstructed to effectively manage and disperse runoff from the school grounds. These upgrades are designed to minimize the impact of heavy rainfall, reducing the risk of erosion and helping to preserve the natural integrity of the surrounding environment.

Community Asset

Beyond its role as a school, Del Mar Heights is an active community hub. The campus is open to the public on the weekends and a canyon rim path along the perimeter of the school invites residents to take advantage of the sights and sounds of nature. The free-flowing paths adorned with native landscaping guides visitors through a scenic journey that celebrates the natural beauty of the site with breathtaking views of the ocean and surrounding reserve.

At the end of the boardwalk, a student garden meets the trailhead of the adjacent reserve, providing a hands-on opportunity for students and visitors alike to engage with nature. Even during school hours, the community remains connected through the public green space near the main entrance that offers a pet-friendly gathering spot with controlled access, ensuring safety and accessibility.