LANCER ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTURE

A4LE Project Awards

Shelbyville Middle School Black Box Theater Submission Date: May 12th, 2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, Shelbyville Central Schools identified an opportunity to reinvest in their facilities and enhance student experiences by repurposing the underutilized Middle School Natatorium. Rather than allowing the aging aquatic center to remain vacant, the district envisioned a transformation supporting curricular and extracurricular activities, fostering creative expression, and strengthening connections among students, staff, and the broader community. Lancer Associates was selected to lead this adaptive reuse effort, tasked with converting the existing natatorium into a vibrant, multi-functional performance space and evaluating options for the remaining square footage. Early planning explored the potential for an extensive group instruction (LGI) room with a stage and fixed seating for up to 600 people, or a new gymnasium to support physical education and athletic programming. Ultimately, the design team collaborated closely with school leadership and stakeholders to develop a flexible, student-centered solution that would accommodate multiple needs while preserving the integrity of the existing structure. The resulting Black Box Theater is a versatile environment that inspires creativity and collaboration. Characterized by its minimalist black interior and configurable layout, the space features mobile bleachers, mirrored walls, professional-grade lighting and rigging, and a newly integrated elevator for full ADA accessibility to the catwalk and upper gym level. This feature provides inclusive access for students and staff and introduces a real-world technical component that allows students to safely engage with stagecraft and production technology. Supporting high school theater programs within a middle school facility, the theater design encourages cross-campus collaboration and resource sharing. The addition of support spaces—including locker rooms, offices, and storage—further enhances the utility and longevity of the facility. This transformation embodies A4LE's core values by delivering a sustainable, cost-effective solution that promotes student engagement, flexible learning modalities, and meaningful community use. It demonstrates how thoughtful design can turn a dormant space into a cornerstone of creativity, expression, and 21st-century learning.

SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET

The scope included renovations and adaptive reuse of the Middle School Natatorium and associated spaces, such as locker rooms and the second-floor mechanical room. The Envelope of the Natatorium, a timber frame structure, was transformed into a divided space housing a Black Box Theater and an auxiliary Gymnasium. The existing pool locker rooms were downsized to accommodate an office and two single-stall restrooms off the corridor. The project included the installation of an elevator for accessible access to the catwalk above the Black Box Theater, which also provides accessible access to the existing Upper Gymnasium. The initial budget for the work was \$4,000,000.



SCHOOL & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

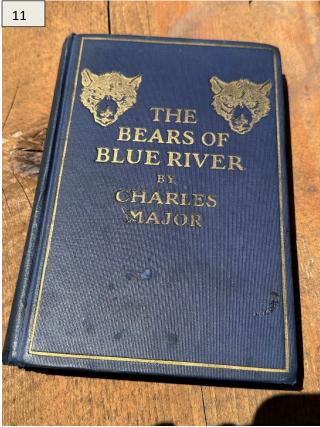
Context

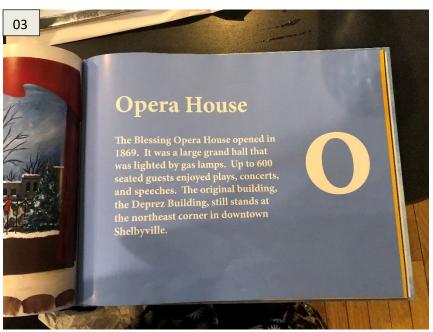
- Describe the Community.
 - a. At the fork of the Little Blue and Big Blue Rivers lies the small city of Shelbyville, Indiana, just 26 miles southeast of Indianapolis. (Photo 01) Shelbyville is the seat of rural Shelby County, with Shelbyville Central Schools at its heart. Shelbyville Middle School and Shelbyville High School's mascot is a bear, inspired by Charles Major's 1901 children's book, The Bears of Blue River, set in the 1820s (Photo 11). The story considers life for an adventurous teenage boy and bear hunter, Balser Brent, whose family would have been early settlers in Central Indiana. (Photo 02). In 1869, the Blessing Opera House opened in the downtown square, and the original building still stands today. (Photos 03 and 04) The community and the school district appreciate and are passionate about band, music, drama, and theater. Shelbyville Central School's Strategic Plan 2021-2026 intends to "Continue to build on and expand performing and fine arts opportunities," outlining goals for maintenance and improvement to the curriculum and extracurricular opportunities.















- Identify stakeholders.
 - a. School Board
 - i. Gayle Wiley, President
 - ii. Curt Johnson, Vice President
 - iii. John C. DePrez, IV, Secretary
 - iv. David M Finkel, Member
 - v. Troy Merrick, Member
 - vi. Dr. James Reese, Member
 - vii. Mike Warble, Member
 - b. School Administration
 - i. Mary Harper, Superintendent
 - ii. Dr. Matt Vance, Superintendent at Time of Construction
 - iii. Michelle Babcock, Business Manager
 - iv. Earsel Smith, Director of Facilities
 - v. Ryan Mikus, Middle School Principal
 - vi. Wes Hall, Middle School Principal at Time of Construction
 - c. High School Music and Theater
 - i. Michaela Strausbaugh, Drama / Theater
 - ii. Allison Anderson, Band Director
 - iii. Graham Montgomery, Assistant Band Director
 - iv. Myra Crosby, Vocal Music Director
 - d. Middle School Band and Choir
 - i. Kari Kinsey, Band Director
 - ii. Meredith Hall, Choir / Music Technology
- Describe challenges.

Adaptive reuse inherently presents unique design and construction challenges, especially when repurposing a space for an entirely new function. One of the most significant challenges of this project was creating full accessibility within a structure that was never intended to accommodate vertical circulation. To meet ADA standards and support equitable student access to technical theater functions, the design team had to thoughtfully carve out space within the existing footprint to introduce an elevator. This solution provides access to the catwalk and upper-level gym, enabling all students to safely engage with lighting, rigging, and backstage operations, an essential part of immersive, hands-on learning in the performing arts.

Additional challenges involved preserving structural integrity while integrating new mechanical and theatrical systems, coordinating with existing utilities, and adjusting the spatial layout to accommodate mobile seating, support spaces, and storage. Through close collaboration with engineers, contractors, and school leadership, the design team was able to transform these limitations into opportunities, ultimately enhancing the space's functionality, inclusiveness, and long-term adaptability.



Describe available assets.

This project was made possible by combining physical, human, and institutional assets already in place within the Shelbyville Central Schools community. Chief among them was the existing natatorium structure—a high-volume, open-span space offering a solid performance venue foundation. Its durable construction, existing utilities, and adjacency to other educational spaces made it ideal for adaptive reuse.

The building's location on a shared middle and high school campus further amplified its value, allowing the new Black Box Theater to serve both student bodies while enhancing programmatic flexibility and resource sharing. This central positioning created an efficient and accessible hub for the arts, athletics, and collaborative instruction.

Beyond the physical space, the district also benefited from a deep well of internal support. Passionate and experienced bands, music, and theater educators were instrumental in shaping the design to meet real curriculum needs. A supportive School Board with a clear commitment to the fine arts ensured early buy-in and long-term vision alignment. Additionally, well-established performance infrastructure, such as the high school auditorium, high school music wing, and middle school music wing, meant the Black Box Theater could serve as a complementary space rather than a standalone facility, creating a cohesive and comprehensive arts ecosystem across the campus.

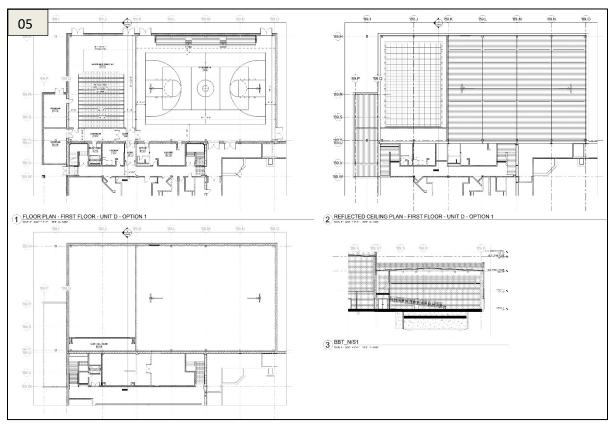
Key Assets:

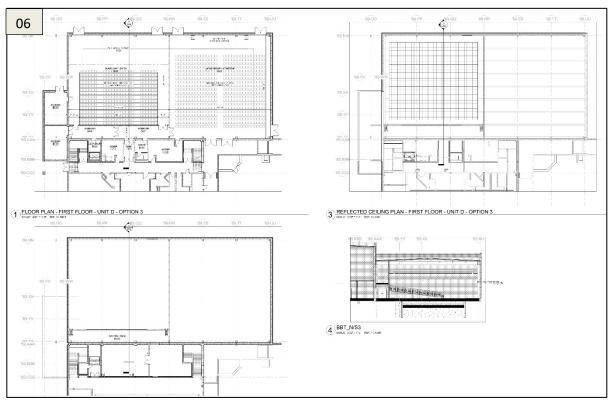
- Existing natatorium shell with infrastructure ready for reuse
- Centralized campus shared by both middle and high school
- Excellent band, music, and theater educators guiding design input
- Passionate School Board invested in arts-based learning
- Existing high school auditorium and music wings for both schools
- Community and administrative support for adaptive reuse

Process

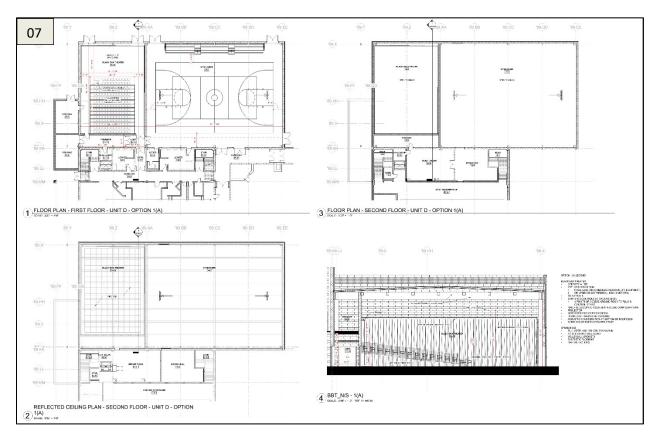
- Describe the visioning process for the project.
 - a. Generated Options for schools to consider between Large Group Instruction Space or Gymnasium (Photos 05 –10)
 - b. Benchmarking tour of Columbus High School's BBT (Photos 12-14)

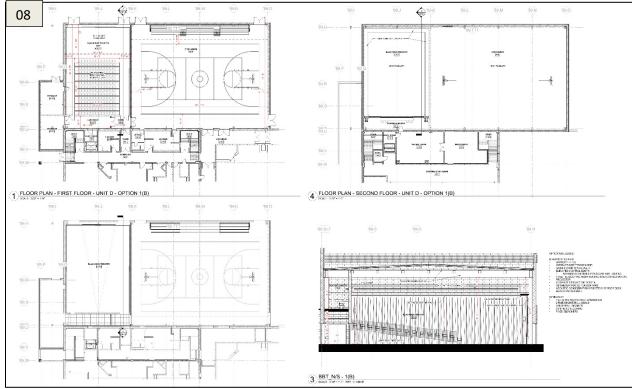




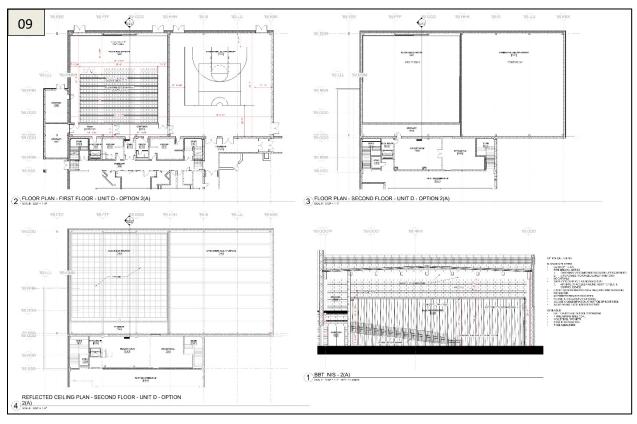


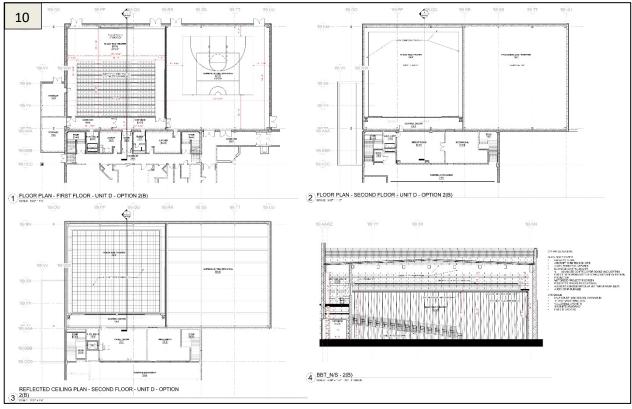


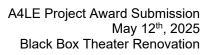








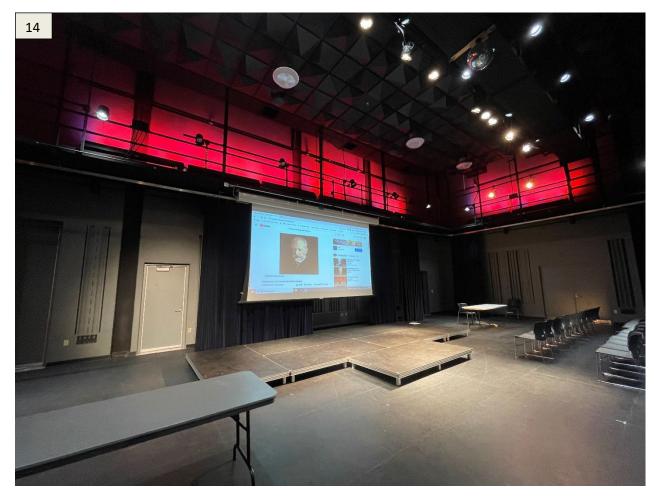














• Describe the visioning process for the project.

CONT.)

Pros and Cons from Michaela Strausbaugh (High School Drama / Theater Director)

- a. Pros/Cons for the Addition of a Blackbox Theater Shelbyville Middle School
 - Pros:
 - 1. District-wide investment
 - 2. "Build it, they will come" mentality
 - 3. Common space
 - 4. Valuable hands-on learning experience
 - Transfer of skills/strong foundation of skills that can carry into high school
 - 6. Pedagogy
 - 7. Science: defined classroom with labs and equipment necessary for work, the theater doesn't currently have that
 - 8. Under-resourced in terms of theater
 - 9. Growth in arts/theater program as a whole
 - 10. Future performance space*
 - 11. Student-directed One Acts, student-written work, competition pieces for state conferences, etc.
 - 12. Additional performance space also opens our school up for hosting opportunities for theater events statewide
 - 13. Space for youth theater camps/workshops
 - 14. More rehearsal space/locations (accomplish more in a short amount of time)

Cons:

- 1. Potential empty space due to absence of theater teacher for Periods 3-7*
- 2. Lack of crossover between other departments
- 3. Only produce one show a year that often includes larger space/technical requirements than a black box
- 4. *It is a future goal that we have the growth necessary to create more performances for the middle school. Given the current workload of the theater teacher, more than two performances in both the high school and middle school would be impossible to do in one school year. A full-time theater teacher in the middle school is a future position that the district should seriously consider in a few years to support the program's growth and utilization of a Black box Theater space.



Describe value of process and project to community at large.

The Shelbyville Black Box Theater is a learner-centered, community-enhancing project that transformed an underused natatorium into a flexible, creative space supporting education and engagement. Aligned with A4LE's core values, the theater fosters student ownership, creativity, and hands-on learning through student-led productions, competition pieces, and technical skill development, putting learners at the center of the experience. This responsive design addresses a long-standing gap in theater resources and prepares the district for future growth. Though current staffing limits program use, the space is built for expansion and cross-campus collaboration, offering more rehearsal opportunities and a foundation of transferable skills for students entering high school.

For the broader community, the theater creates opportunities to host local and statewide events, youth camps, and workshops, positioning Shelbyville as a regional hub for arts education. The project exemplifies innovation, sustainability, and collaboration by breathing new life into an existing facility and ensuring long-term value for students, staff, and the community.

Describe how the engagement fostered diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This project was grounded in a commitment to equitable access to the arts and inclusive design for all learners. By transforming an unused natatorium into a Black Box Theater, Shelbyville Schools created a space that serves a broader range of students, especially those whose interests and talents lie outside of athletics or traditional academics. The design process included input from theater educators and school leadership to ensure the space supported student-led performances, collaborative work, and creative expression across grade levels. Adding an elevator to access the catwalk and upper gym was a key move toward physical inclusion, ensuring all students could participate in technical and production-based learning. The Black Box Theater provides an alternative platform for students to build confidence, share diverse perspectives, and engage in storytelling, which is essential to cultivating a culture of belonging. This learner-centered environment reflects the district's and A4LE's shared commitment to fostering spaces where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

Exhibits

- Include relevant portions of Visioning documents throughout the dossier.
 - These items are included throughout our submission.
- Process graphics and relevant diagrams are welcome.
 - These items are included throughout our submission.



Physical Environment

- Context
 - a. Describe & illustrate the physical attributes of the environment, including building(s) and site.

The adaptive reuse of the Shelbyville Middle School Natatorium into a Black Box Theater and auxiliary gym demonstrates thoughtful, efficient design within an existing footprint. The theater features a minimalist black interior with mirrored walls, mobile bleachers, and professional lighting and rigging systems. Its reconfigurable layout supports a variety of performance styles, including traditional theater, student-led one-acts, dance, and multimedia presentations. An elevator was strategically integrated to connect the catwalk and upper-level gym, promoting accessibility and maximizing the educational use of the space. Support spaces—including locker rooms, restrooms, storage, and offices—were incorporated to ensure functionality and flow. The design embraces flexibility, allowing the space to evolve with student needs and programming growth. The physical environment encourages movement, experimentation, and creativity, reflecting a learner-centered approach.

- b. Describe & illustrate how the facility fits within the larger context of the community.
 - Please reference above in our answer to "Describe value of process and project to community at large:" For the broader community, the theater creates opportunities to host local and statewide events, youth camps, and workshops, positioning Shelbyville as a regional hub for arts education. The project exemplifies innovation, sustainability, and collaboration by breathing new life into an existing facility and ensuring long-term value for students, staff, and the community.

Response

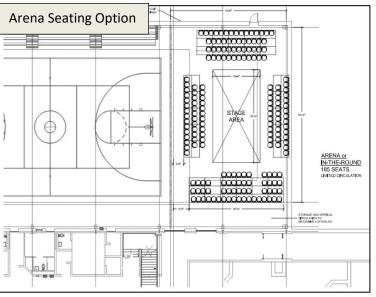
- a. Describe & illustrate how the project inspires and motivates.
 - The Black Box Theater serves as a gateway to artistic exploration, inspiring middle school students to participate in the high school's well-established drama and theater programs. By providing a professional, flexible performance space within the middle school building, students are introduced early to the creative possibilities of the performing arts. Even before a dedicated middle school program is in place, the presence of this space sparks curiosity, encourages participation, and builds a strong foundation for future growth in theater education, motivating students to see themselves as performers, creators, and collaborators

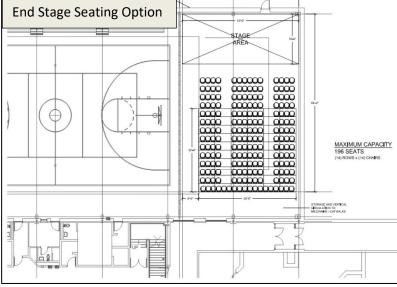


- b. .Describe innovative aspects of the physical environment.
 - Black Box Theaters, by nature, are innovative and adaptable to many uses.
- c. Describe how the physical environment fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Diversity of curricular and extra-curricular options for students.
 - Inclusion of theater and drama space for both High School and Middle School students.
 - Accessibility to the second floor of the school building, where there
 previously was none, and accessibility to the catwalk.
- d. Describe how the physical environment fosters sustainability and wellness.
 - Adaptive reuse of an existing space in lieu of a building addition
 - Design of acoustics, lighting, and the ability to adapt the Black Box Theater.
 - Use marmoleum (plant-based) flooring instead of high-embodied-energy and VOCs.

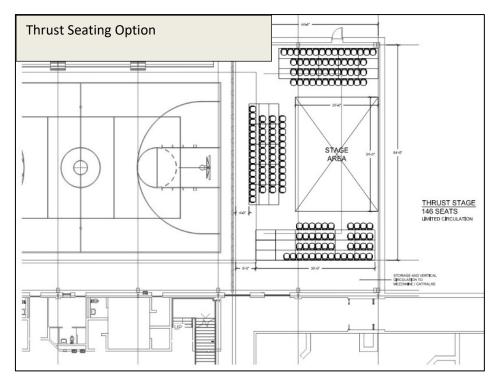
Exhibits

- a. Include site plan, floor plans and images.
 - Please reference our images in the previous pages and those below.









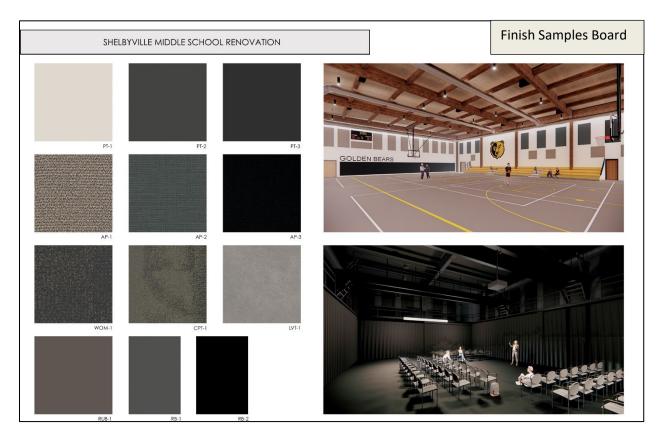




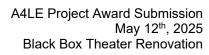


















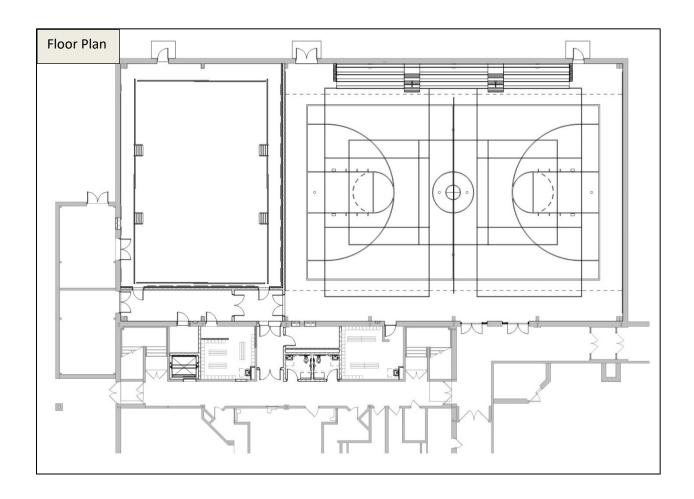














Educational Environment

b. Context

- Explain the educational vision and goals of the school.
 - 1. Here is an image of Shelbyville Central School's Student Development Expectation from their 2021-2026 Strategic Plan.



STUDENT DEVELOPMENT EXPECTATION

C. Continue to build on and expand performing and fine arts opportunities

- Utilize local artists and musicians to enhance the curriculum and to provide mentorship to students
- 2. Investigate local, state, and national grant opportunities
- 3. Maintain instructional material and equipment to ensure high-quality programs
- Evaluate current performing/fine art spaces in all buildings and collaborate to improve
- 5. Provide collaboration on scheduling options for courses
- 6. Allow for virtual and onsite field trip opportunities
- 7. Add after school programs or clubs with stipends for sponsors
- Create opportunities where student artwork can be displayed in the schools and Community
- Investigate the need to hire additional teachers in areas like band, drama, and theater as enrollment indicates and as needed
- Develop a job description for a technical director and negotiate a stipend during collective bargaining within the Drama/Theater department





STUDENT DEVELOPMENT EXPECTATION

H. Promote and create culturally sensitive and inclusive educational environments

- 1. Include different cultural holidays in the district calendar
- Utilize our diverse staff to provide professional development and lead Real-Talks with minority senior students at the administrative retreat
- Survey diverse seniors to evaluate what the district did well and what needs to improve
- Investigate a "brother/sister" mentorship program for high school ELL students and elementary/middle school ELL students
- 5. Encourage schools to host a cultural fair or similar event
- 6. Work towards the IDOE's EL student-teacher ratio (30:1)
- Ensure that our social media presence (webpages, Facebook, Twitter) reflects the diversity of our students

c. Response

- Describe & illustrate how the environment supports the curriculum.
 - 1. The Black Box Theater directly supports Shelbyville Central Schools' commitment to providing a "total education: mind, body, and character." By transforming an underutilized natatorium into a versatile performance space, the district enhances its arts curriculum, offering students hands-on experiences in theater production, lighting, and sound design. This aligns with the strategic plan's emphasis on cultivating diverse learning styles and ensuring equity and access for all students.



- Describe & illustrate how the environment supports a variety of learning & teaching styles.
 - 1. Designed for flexibility, the Black Box Theater accommodates various teaching methodologies, from traditional lectures to experiential learning. Its reconfigurable seating and stage areas allow educators to adapt the space for different instructional approaches, fostering creativity and collaboration. This adaptability reflects the district's strategic priority to "cultivate learning styles unique to each student", ensuring that the environment meets diverse educational needs and promotes student engagement.
- Describe & illustrate how the environment is adaptable and flexible.
 - 1. The Black Box Theater is innovative and adaptable for various uses. This adaptability is accessible to the students, who can gain hands-on production experience in rigging, lighting, and audiovisual aspects.
- Describe innovative aspects of the educational environment.
 - 1. The Black Box Theater redefines the traditional learning space through its adaptability, student-driven programming, and technical integration. Unlike fixed-use classrooms or auditoriums, this reconfigurable environment encourages students to own the space, arranging seating, staging, and lighting according to their creative goals. Including professional-grade rigging, a full catwalk, and lighting systems empowers students to learn real-world production skills within their school, promoting career readiness and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The newly integrated elevator not only enhances accessibility but also reinforces equity and inclusion, allowing all students to safely engage in the technical and performance aspects of the theater. This space responds to current and future instructional needs, positioning it as a flexible, learner-centered solution that adapts as curriculum, staffing, and programming evolve.

d. Exhibits

- Include relevant portions of Educational Specifications throughout the dossier.
 - Please see above.



Results

- e. Explain how the project achieves educational goals and objectives.
 - Shelbyville Middle School's Black Box Theater provides curricular and extracurricular space for music and theatrical productions, as well as multi-use meetings, presentations, practice, and performances.
- f. Explain how the project achieves school district goals.
 - Shelbyville Central School's Strategic Plan 2021-2026 outlines its intentions to "Continue to build on and expand performing and fine arts opportunities," outlining goals for maintaining and improving the curriculum and extracurricular opportunities.
- g. Explain how the project achieves community goals.
 - This project reflects the School Board's and community's strong commitment to the arts and supports their long-standing investment in music and drama programs. By creating a dedicated, flexible performance space, the Black Box Theater fulfills a shared vision to elevate fine arts education, expand student opportunities, and strengthen Shelbyville's identity as a district that values creative expression and cultural growth.
- h. Explain any unintended results and achievements of the process & project.
 - The project introduced middle school students to the broader world of theater production—not just performance. Students are now engaging in lighting, sound, set design, and stage management, sparking interest in behind-the-scenes careers.
- Explain how the project provides value and good stewardship of financial resources.
 - The project remained within budget and maximized an existing space that would have required costly maintenance. The district achieved long-term value by transforming an underutilized and nearly abandoned facility with minimal new construction.
- j. Summarize the project's sustainability and wellness outcomes.
 - This adaptive reuse project preserved existing infrastructure and incorporated thoughtful material selections, especially for acoustics and sound absorption. The Black Box Theater promotes wellness through hands-on learning and creative expression in a purpose-built environment.