TRANSFORMATION

# Dorothy I. Height Elementary School

*Washington, DC*




CGS ARCHITECTS

## Reaching New Heights

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School, a public school in Washington, DC underwent a comprehensive 93,000 square foot modernization to transform the school into a state-of-the-art educational facility. Originally composed of two separate historic buildings, the 1939 Vocational School and the 1924 Health School were carefully expanded and renovated while preserving key historical components.

A new two-story infill addition connects the two existing buildings and provides space for a skylit atrium and discovery commons. Key upgrades include a gymnasium, cafeteria, library, maker space, commercial kitchen, and upgraded health suites. The brick facades of the original buildings was cleaned and preserved or thoughtfully replicated and replaced if necessary.

The modernization also improved outdoor space. A green roof, outdoor classroom, and age-specific playgrounds extend the classroom and provide students with secure access to nature.



A District of Columbia Public School, Dorothy I. Height Elementary School was scheduled for modernization in 2022. In addition to the existing buildings being designated "contributing historic academic," the facilities were inadequate among other site concerns.

Significant shortcomings included insufficient square footage for the gymnasium/ multipurpose room, cafeteria, Pre-K classrooms, library and discovery commons program, outdated HVAC, inability to meet sustainability requirements, limited outdoor space, and a restrictive and ADA non-compliant main entrance.

The budget set forth for this modernization was $65,000,000.

## At a Glance:

*Owner*
DC Public Schools

*Budget*
$65M

*Project Size*
93,000 SF

*Enrollment Capacity*
558

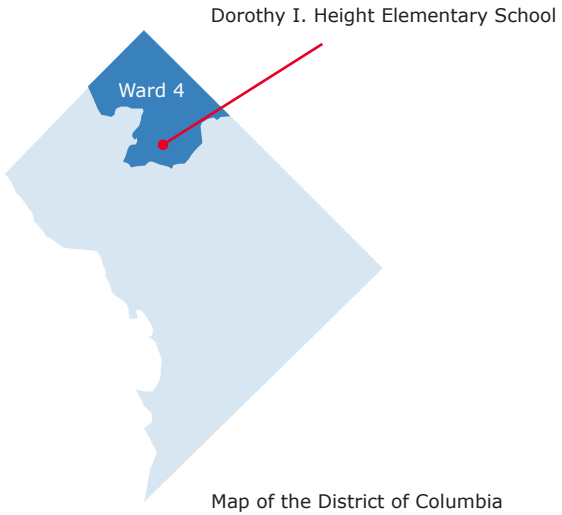
*Construction Completion*
August 1, 2024






*Aerial View of Site*

## Context



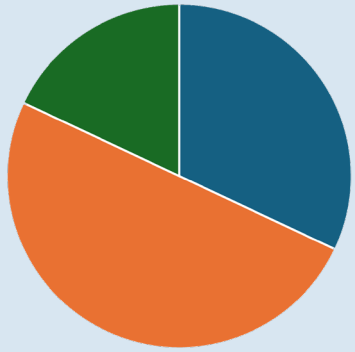

Map of the District of Columbia

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School is a Title 1, DC Public School located in Ward 4 and serves students from PK3 through 5th grade. The school has no enrollment boundary.

Located in the Petworth neighborhood of Washington, DC, Dorothy I. Height Elementary School sits among several other civic centers and parks that anchor the primarily residential neighborhood as a close-knit community.

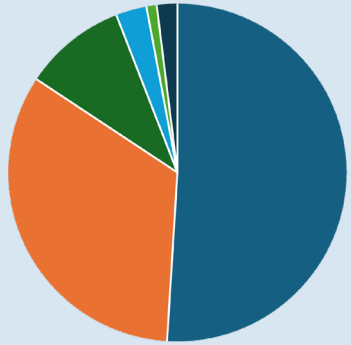
The school provides educational and extracurricular programs to over 400 children. With at-risk students comprising 50% of Dorothy I. Height Elementary School's population, stable access to school, is in many cases, life-affirming and essential to student well-being.

## Student Population



- *32%* English Language Learners
- *50%* At Risk
- *18%* Special education

## Student Demographics



- *52%* African-American
- *34%* Hispanic/Latino
- *10%* White
- *32%* Asian
- *1%* Native/Alaskan
- *18%* Multiple Races

## A Century of Promoting Equity and Well-Being

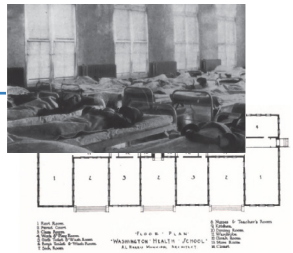
Dorothy I. Height Elementary School consists of two buildings. The 1924 Washington Health School, also referred to as the "Annex" is located on the south end of the site. The 1939 Vocational School building located on the north end of the site originally opened in 1939 as the Anna Burdick Vocational High School.



2015

Following its closure in 1996, the building was used as the Dorothy I. Height Community Academy Public Charter School until DC Public Schools took over operations in 2015, dissolving the charter school and converting it to a public elementary school.

1939



The Anna Burdick Vocational High School provided career training for white girls. Later the school was renamed to Burdick Career High School and expanded to be integrated and co-ed.



1925

1925
WASHINGTON HEALTH SCHOOL

This school opened in 1925 and provided education to children suffering from tuberculosis.



PLAY COURT AND DINING, CAFETERIA BEYOND

## Stakeholders

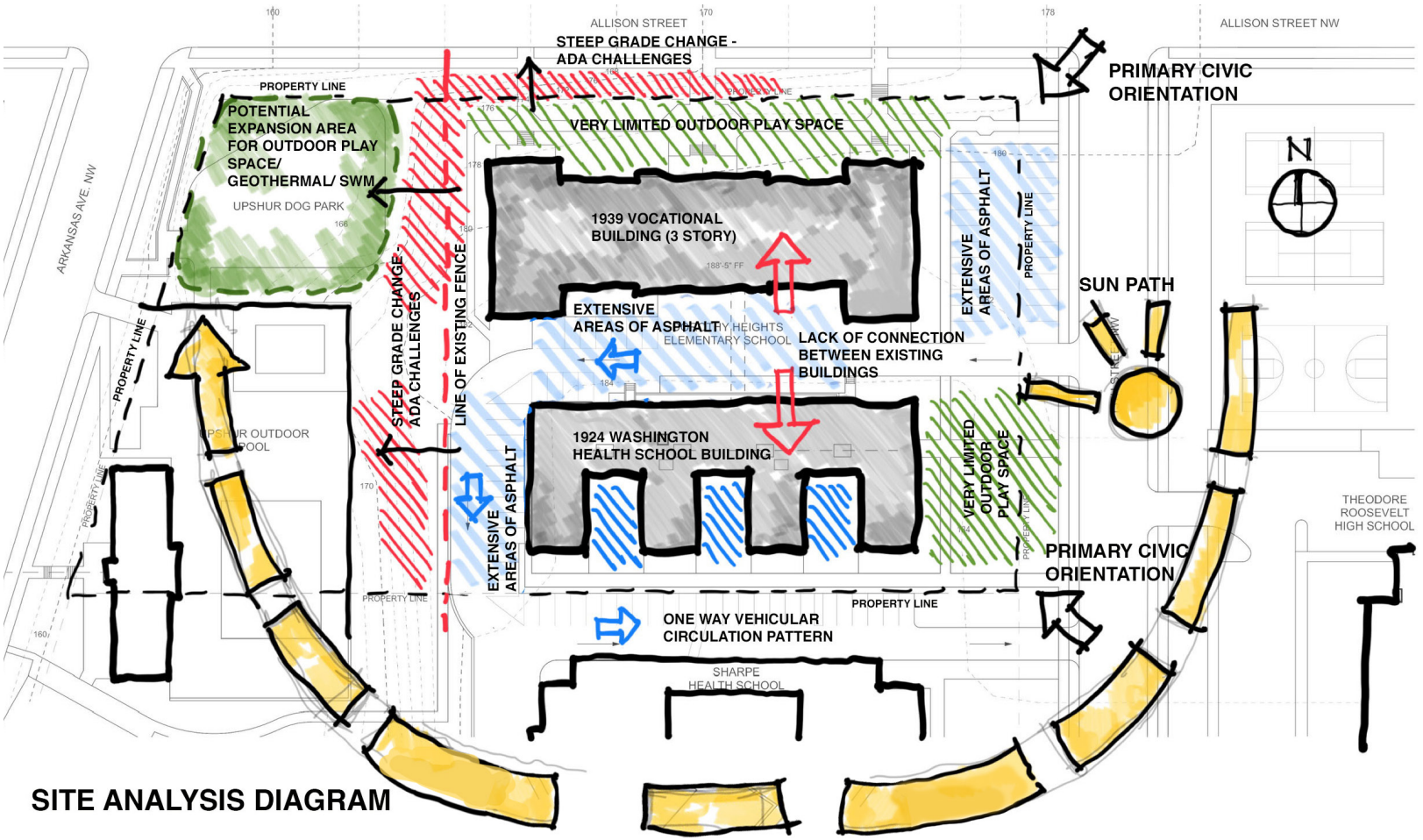
The stakeholders for the Dorothy I. Height Elementary School modernization include first and foremost, students, faculty DC Department of General Services, DC Public Schools, DC Historic Preservation Office, Commission of Fine Arts, the Dorothy I. Height Elementary School community, and DC's School Improvement Team (SIT).

## Challenges

- Steep grade on a tight, urban site
- Merging two existing buildings
- Historic preservation
- Tight schedule

## Assets

- Adjacent dog park provides potential expansion space
- East-West sunpath is optimal for energy efficiency
- As a citywide, no boundary school, Dorothy I. Height Elementary School uniquely benefits from a highly engaged school and local community
- Diverse student population




SITE ANALYSIS DIAGRAM

## Visioning

A series of SIT visioning meetings helped the design team to establish the following goals: meet DC education specifications, address ADA non-compliance, maximize outdoor space, preserve the historic fabric, and design for sustainability. The design team also worked with the DC Historic Preservation Office to ensure the modernization was respectful to the existing context while also meeting DC Public Schools' needs.

## Value to Community

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School acts as an anchor for the surrounding community, a robust, residential neighborhood. The community felt strongly that the project aligned with their standards.



### Key Project Goals:

**Update** and **expand** programming to meet District of Columbia education specifications.

**Address Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** requirements throughout the building.

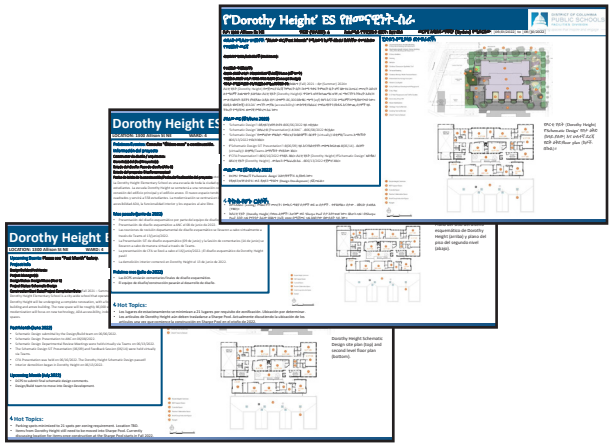
**Maximize** outdoor space.

**Maintain** and **preserve** the historic fabric of both existing buildings.

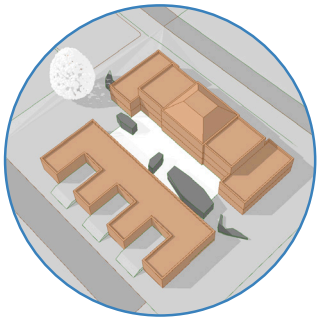
Designed to incorporate a **minimum of LEED Gold** for Schools.

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The design decisions were grounded in the feedback received from the school district, children, faculty, parents, and neighbors. This deeply collaborative process yielded a modernization that prioritizes equity and inclusion by utilizing input from these stakeholders throughout the design process. Information and updates were published throughout the project in English, Spanish and Amharic to keep stakeholders informed.

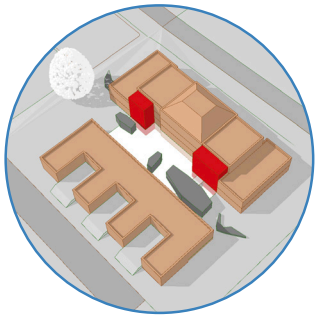



## A Collective Approach



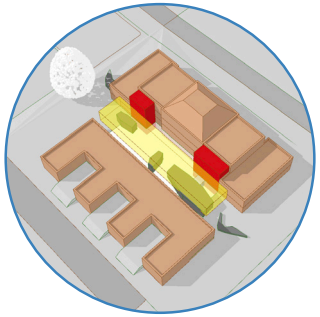
**Open Layout at First Floor**

- Main entrance
- Admin and storage within trapezoidal scattered "objects"
- Connection to both buildings
- Transparency and/or views to outdoors



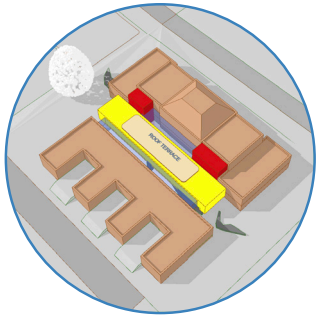
**Stair Towers and New Elevator**

- Accessible connection to all floors and roof terrace
- North building basement connection



**Second Floor Bar**

- Second floor pulled away from existing building facades
- Light wells to admit natural light into program spaces
- Optimal east-west orientation for energy efficiency




**Skylights and Roof Terrace**

- Large skylights introduce natural light into center of building
- Terrace on roof of addition with outdoor classroom



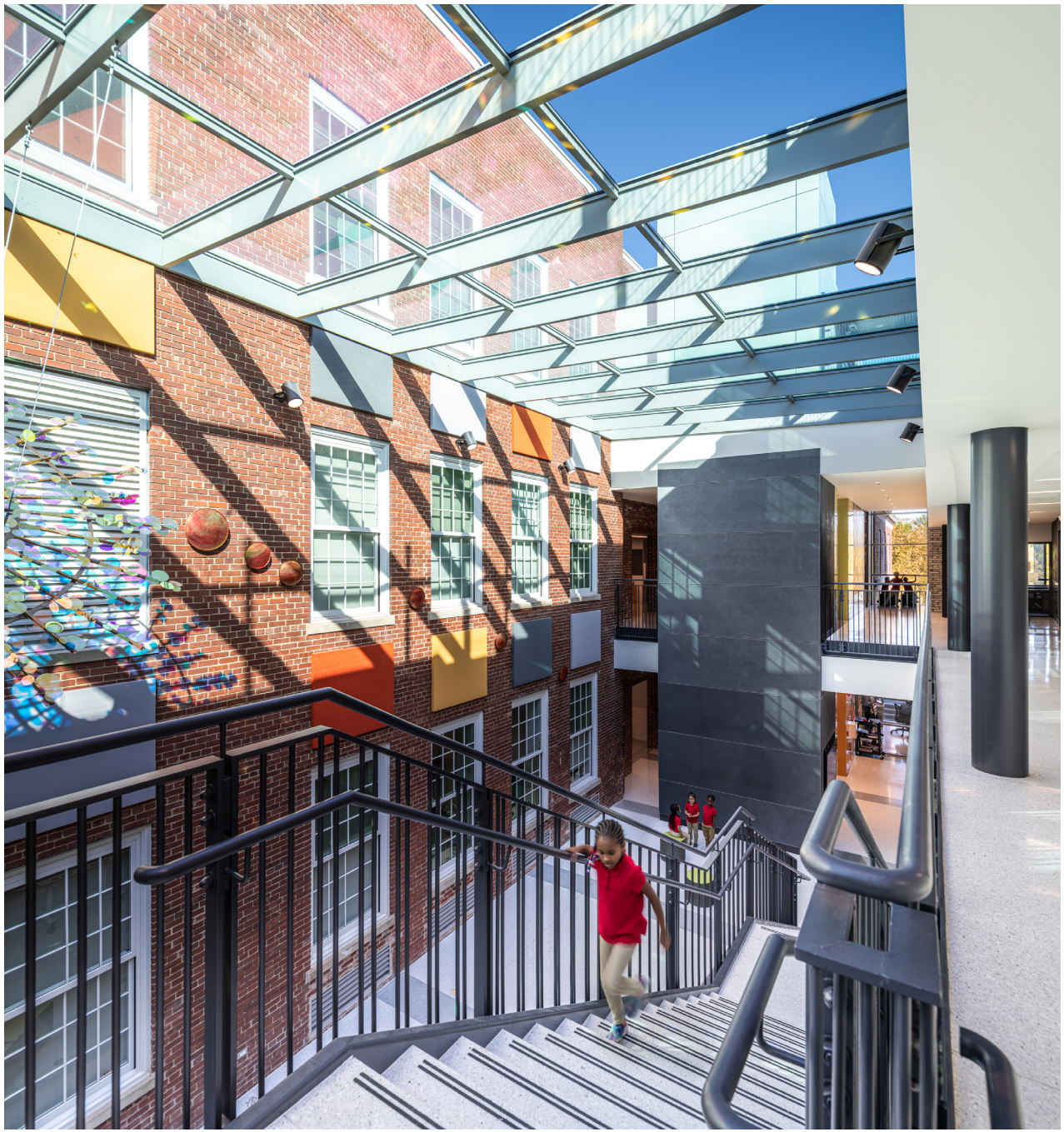
**Biophilic Design**

- Inspired by the school's mascot, a monarch butterfly
- Adoption of geometric forms found in nature
- Connections to the outdoor environment via glazing - curtainwall and skylights
- World climate zones theme integrated in to finishes

## Inspires and Motivates

Between the two historic structures of Dorothy I. Height Elementary School, an infill addition serves as the new entrance to the fully modernized school. discovery commons serves as a flexible and adaptable hub for the entire school community. Designed to support a wide range of activities and group sizes, the space can easily accommodate large gatherings beneath the skylights, while adjacent breakout areas provide opportunities for smaller group collaboration, quiet learning, or informal interaction. The commons seamlessly connects to the lunchroom below and extends outward to the outdoor play space, creating a fluid environment that can evolve throughout the day to support learning, social engagement, events, and community use.

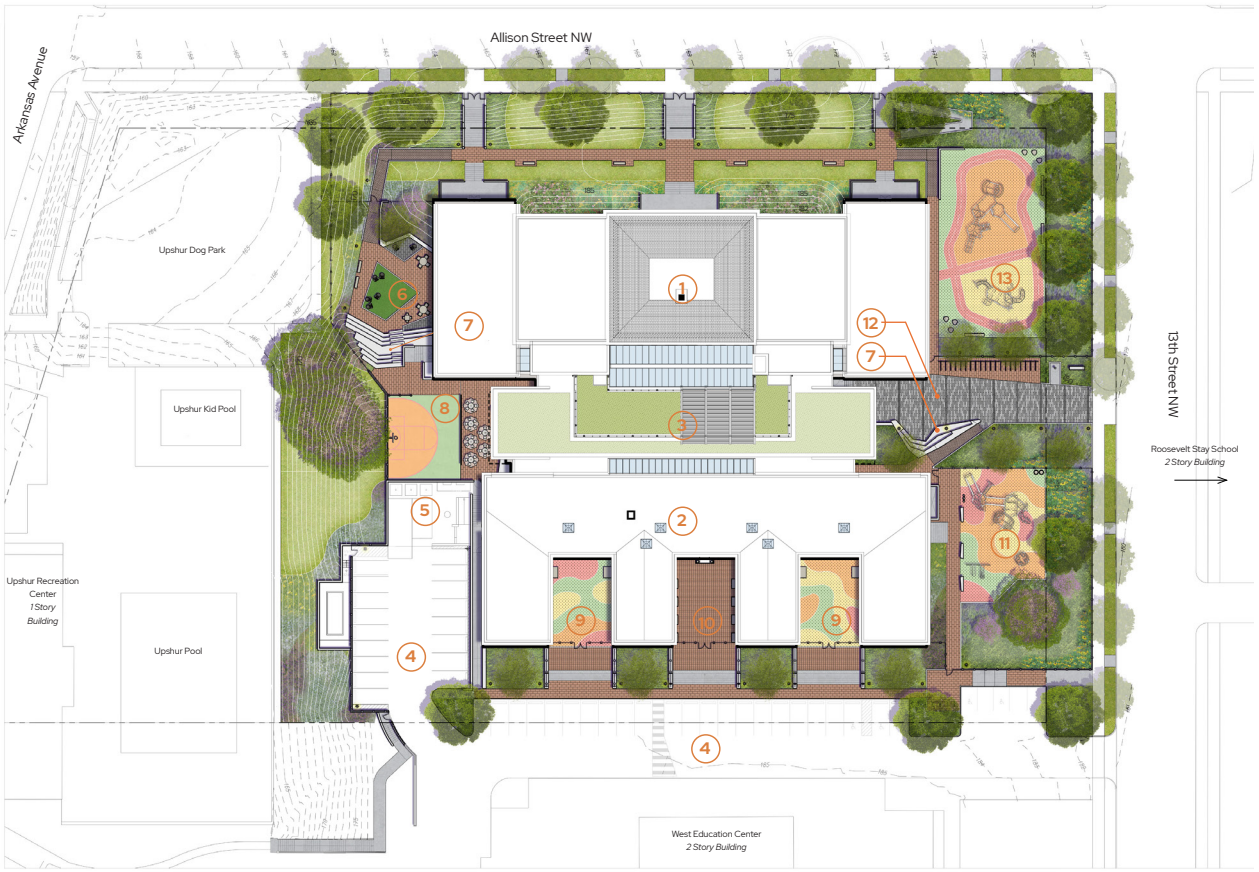
The atrium is bathed in natural light, promoting a sense of well-being. Classrooms for the youngest students, housed in the historic Annex Building, extend outward, and open courtyards are nestled between them. These courtyards provide direct access from the classrooms, allowing for spontaneous outdoor play and movement breaks. Finally, the rooftop classroom adds a unique element of discovery, offering a panoramic, bird's-eye view of the surrounding neighborhood.



# Site Plan

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School is located at 1300 Allison St NW in the Petworth neighborhood of Ward 4 in Washington, DC. The school is comprised of two detached buildings, the 1939 Vocational Building located on the north end of the site and the 1924 Washington Health School building, located on the south end of the site.

An infill addition replaces the drive aisle and connects the existing buildings. By excavating the basements of both buildings, the new design was able to further leverage the existing buildings by maintaining a minimal footprint.




1. Vocational School | Burdick Building
   *3 Story Brick Building with Basement*
2. Washington Health School | Annex Building
   *1 Story Brick Building with Basement*
3. 2 Story Addition
4. Parking
5. Service
6. Outdoor Classroom Synthetic Turf
7. Terraced Seating
8. Outdoor Dining / Multi-Purpose Space
9. Rubberized Surfacing Courtyard
10. Historic Courtyard
11. Early Childhood Development Playground
12. Entry Plaza
13. 5-12 Year Playground and Traffic Garden

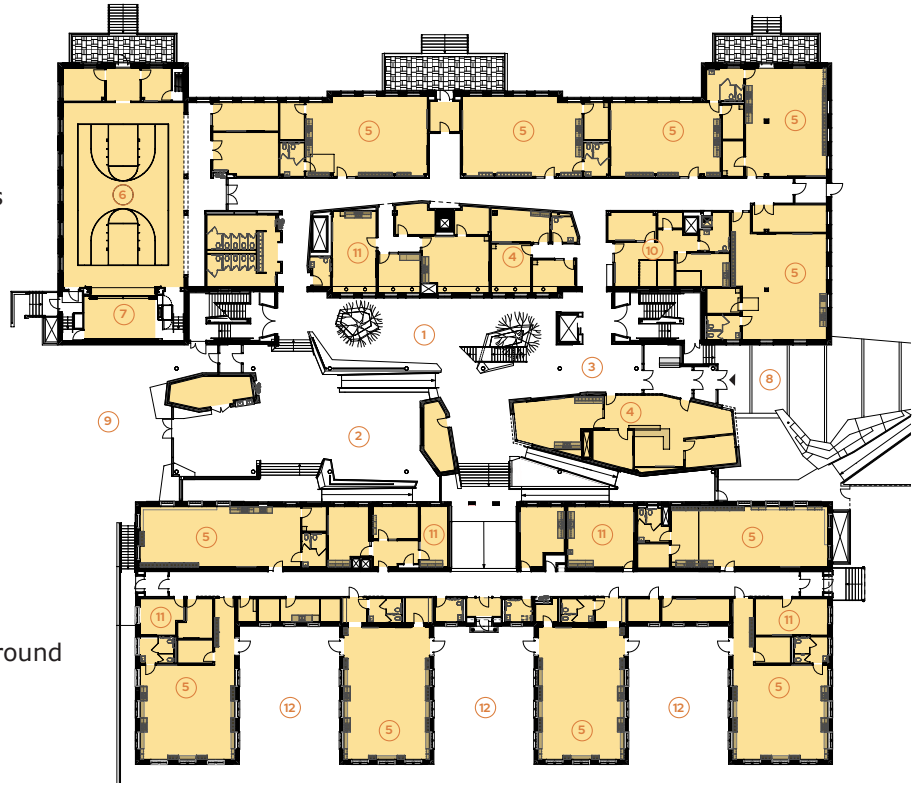


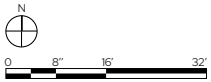
OUTDOOR COURTYARD ADJACENT TO PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

# Floor Plans

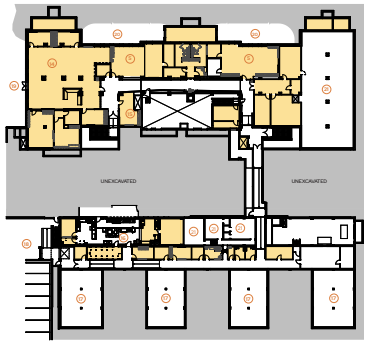
## FIRST FLOOR PLAN

1. Double Height Commons
2. Cafeteria
3. Entrance Lobby
4. Administration
5. Classroom
6. Gymnasium
7. Restored Historic Stage
8. Entry Plaza
9. Dining Terrace
10. Health Suite
11. Student Support Space
12. Historic Courtyard Playground

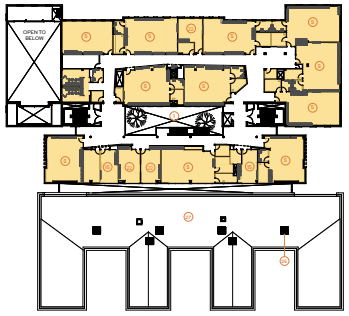




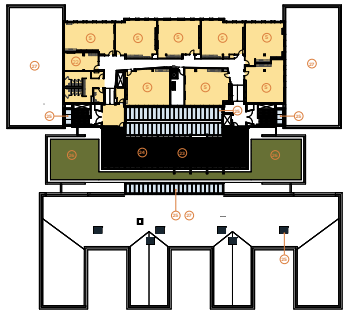

BASEMENT



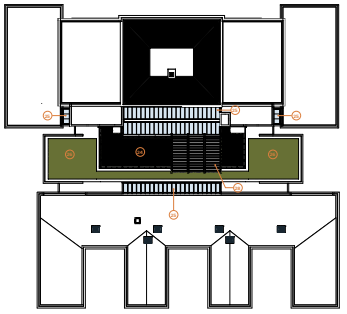
SECOND FLOOR



THIRD FLOOR



ROOF



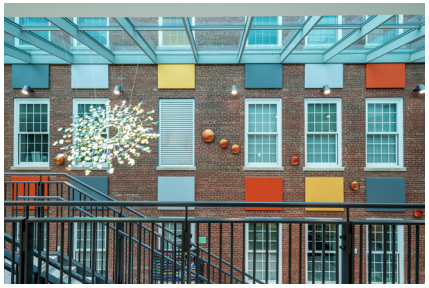
## Historic Preservation

Special attention was paid to the rehabilitation of the Washington Health School and Vocational Building. The exterior facades of both buildings were cleaned and restored, including smaller details like replicating and replacing the railings of the Vocational School or refurbishing the sign on the Washington Health School. The exterior facades of both buildings have been preserved on the interior where they meet the addition.

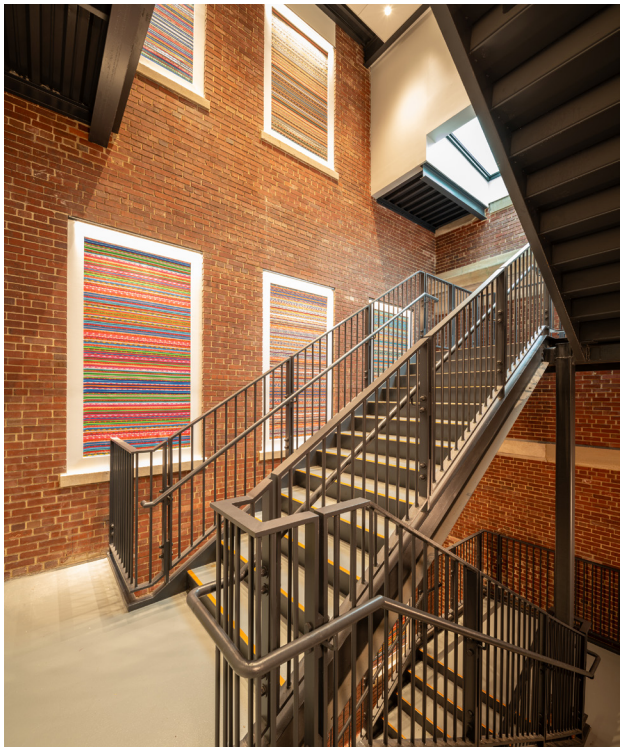
The team preserved the historic casework around the door frames and windows in the classrooms of this building and replicated the wooden doors that connect the classrooms to the corridor.





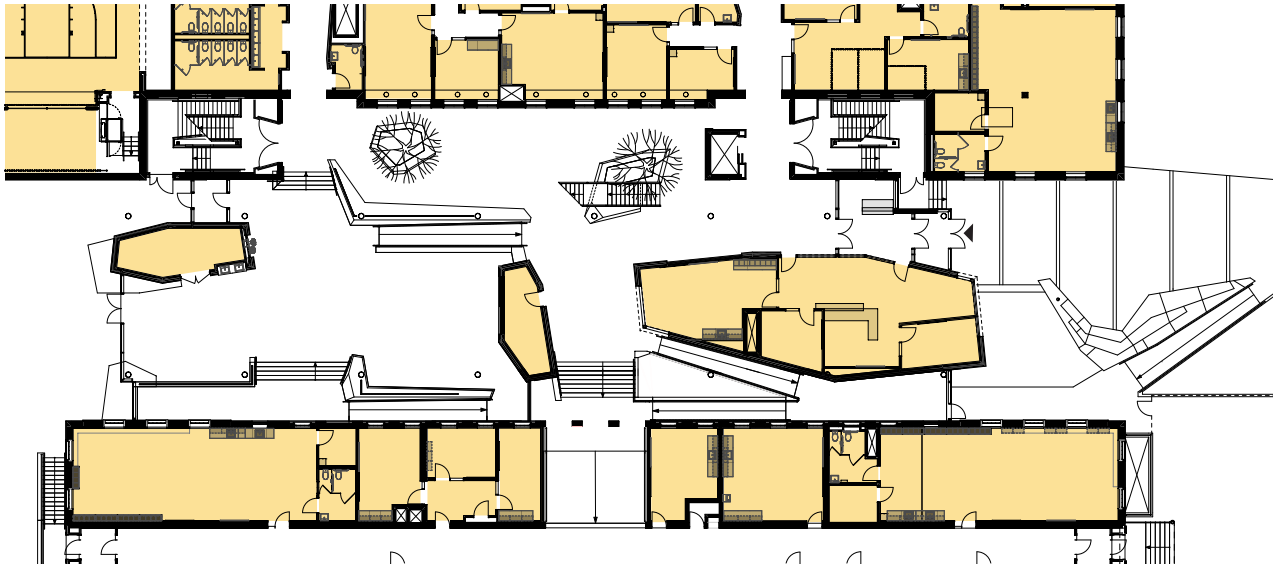






## Innovative Aspects

The difference in floor elevation between the two historic buildings is addressed in the addition by a series of ramps and steps integrated with the sculptural walls, offering playful movement through the space. This design metaphor emphasizes a dynamic world, encouraging student exploration.









## Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Community engagement and family involvement is a core value of Dorothy I. Height Elementary School's teaching philosophy. The design team incorporated this feedback by creating an entrance plaza that facilitates parent and family participation. Concrete benches, low walls, and angled volumes provide a space for students, teachers, and parents to gather.

Reorienting the main entrance from the north to the east side of the infill addition further promotes equity and inclusion by creating an accessible main entrance. The entire school community, regardless of ability, can enter the school together.

R




ENTRANCE PLAZA

# Sustainability and Wellness

The modernization project achieved LEED Platinum. Sustainability highlights include:

- 110 geothermal wells.
- 42,000 SF of permeable pavers to reduce surface water runoff.
- A stormwater infiltration trench beneath the south playground.
- Ground-source heat pumps that provide energy-efficient heating. cooling, and domestic hot water.
- High efficiency, low-consumption toilets.
- An all electric kitchen.



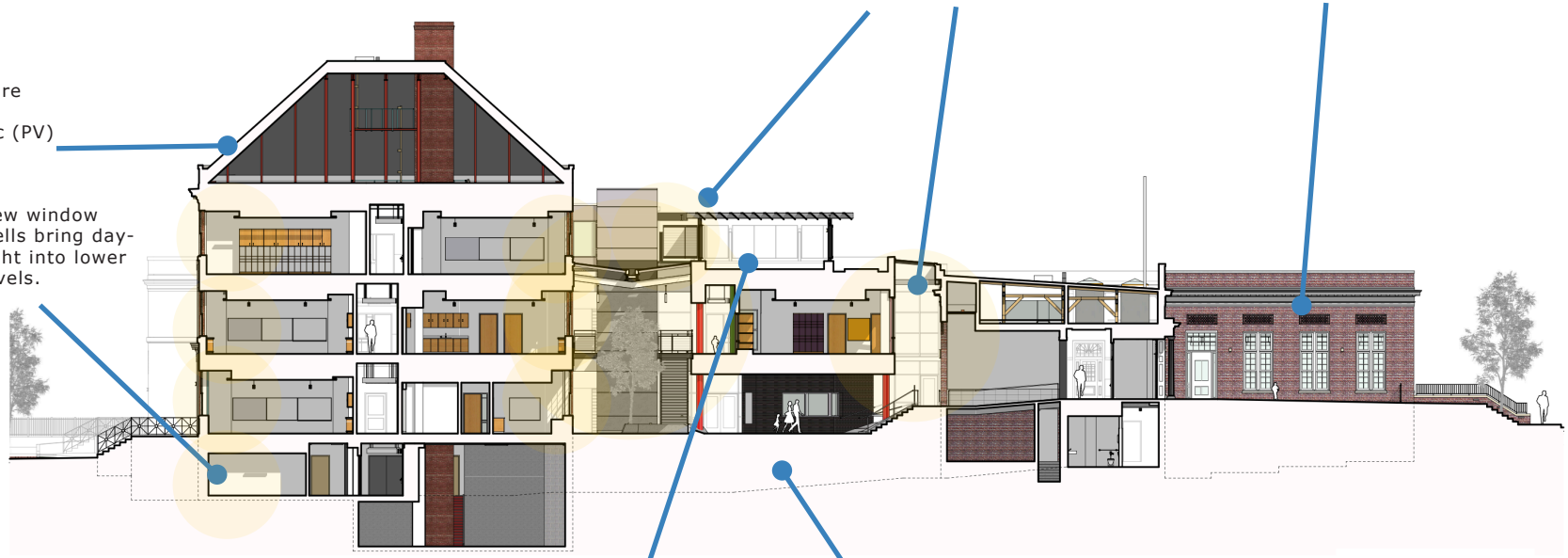
Large skylights bring daylight into center of building.



Daylight introduced via courtyards.

Infrastructure for future photovoltaic (PV) panels.

New window wells bring day-light into lower levels.





A 2,958 SF green roof.

Additional outdoor space.



## Context

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School takes pride in their diverse school community and works to shape students into lifelong learners who celebrate and appreciate all cultures and perspectives. The school works collaboratively with families to provide academic and social-emotional learning experiences centered around their core values of Accountability, Discipline, Integrity, and Trust.





## Design for Legacy

Named for civil and women's rights activist, Dorothy I. Height, the project honors its namesake by incorporating eleven works of art that reflect on her legacy and impact. Artworks were commissioned by local artists and include a 3D collage, a solar calendar, mosaic benches, 2D fabric art and terrazzo embeds.

The school's mascot, a monarch butterfly, symbolizes transformation and illustrates Dr. Height's vision for a more equitable society. These artworks and Dr. Height's legacy encourage inclusivity within the school community.





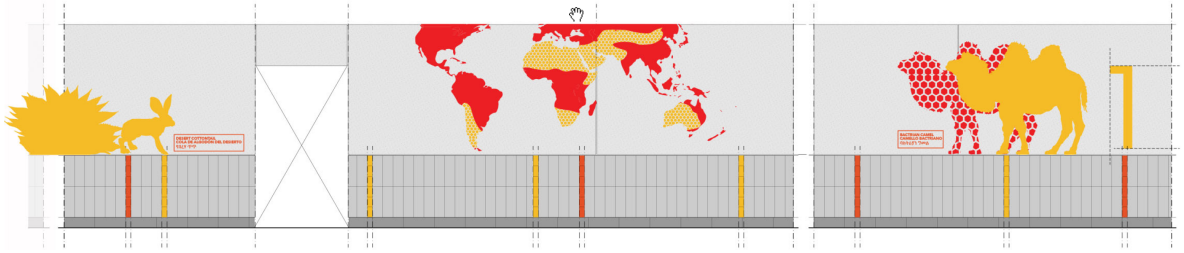

DISCOVERY SITTING AREA WITH PUBLIC ART SHOWCASED IN THREE LOCATIONS

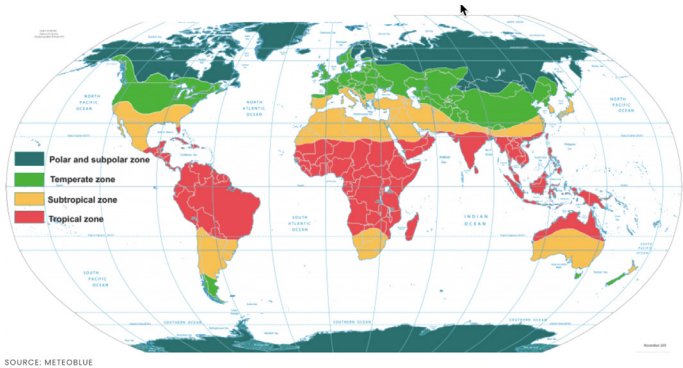
## Design for Curriculum

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School's specialized curriculum focuses on global and environmental stewardship. The design responds by incorporating themed spaces that correspond to these focuses and to teach young students about their environment and the importance of protecting Earth's finite resources. The design celebrates the dynamic nature of our world—weather patterns, seasons, and day-night cycles—encouraging exploration and connection to the planet. A mobile sculpture in the atrium reflects the passage of time as light and shadows shift throughout the day and seasons. Each classroom floor is associated with a climate zone and corresponding color scheme. Continental maps and images of regional flora and fauna, with names in English, Spanish, and Aramaic, adorn the plaster walls.








SOURCE: METEOBLUE




CLIMATE ZONE GRAPHICS IN DECORATIVE PLASTER

## Design for Wellbeing

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School's new biophilic design features a spacious indoor-outdoor connection through large windows, skylights and outdoor learning spaces. This approach enhances aesthetics while supporting student and staff wellbeing.

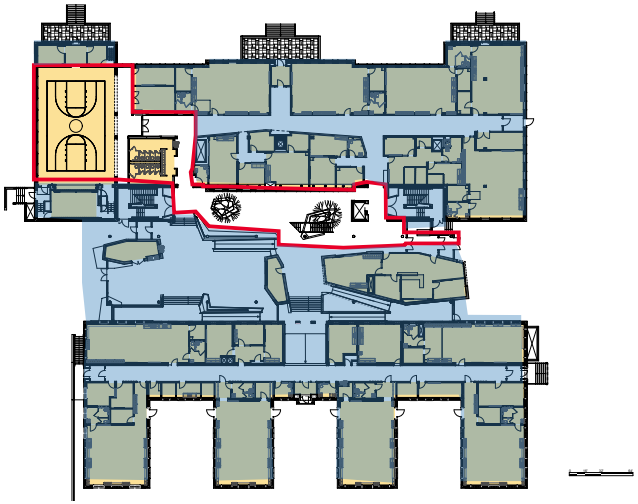


ROOFTOP CLASSROOM

## Design for Flexibility and Adaptability

The discovery commons serves as a flexible and versatile hub for the entire school community. Designed to support a wide range of activities and group sizes, the space is perfect for school-wide meetings or socializing between classes. This space is also available for community-use after-hours. The gymnasium and ampitheater are also available for community-use after the school day.

Breakout areas adjacent to the discovery commons provide opportunities for smaller group collaboration, quiet learning, or informal interaction. A multipurpose room located in a section of the existing Vocational School doubles as an assembly space and a gymnasium.



*Space Available After-hours*



# Empowering the Next Generation

The Dorothy I. Height Elementary School modernization project aligns closely with DC Public Schools' priorities by enhancing student learning environments, improving operational efficiency, and supporting long-term strategic planning. It advances academic outcomes by creating spaces that are adaptable, inclusive, and conducive to modern teaching practices.

Additionally, the project reinforces the district's commitment to equity by ensuring all students have access to high-quality facilities and resources, while also supporting staff effectiveness and retention through improved working conditions.

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School serves as a community asset by providing safe, accessible, and flexible spaces that extend beyond school-day use. The modernization strengthens community engagement by accommodating local events, partnerships, and shared services. By reflecting community values the project fosters pride and creates a sense of shared ownership, while also contributing to neighborhood vitality and long-term development.



**Programming was right-sized** to meet District of Columbia education specifications. The student enrollment capacity increased to 558 students, accounting for future student population growth.

The new main entrance is **ADA accessible** and **welcomes all students**.

**6** new outdoor spaces.

The project not only complies with DC Historic Preservation Office standards, but **received honors for craftsmanship, renovation and restoration (including awards for masonry restoration)**.

Dorothy I. Height Elementary School achieved **LEED Platinum**, the highest certification level.

**“Today is a reminder and a celebration of how far we’ve come together and the opportunities we continue to create for our children. This beautiful school is a wonderful way to honor the legacy of Dr. Height.**

**Mayor Muriel Bowser**
*Mayor of the District of Columbia*




ENTRANCE PLAZA