

EXPEDITION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Puyallup, WA - Bethel School District

A4LE 2026 Project Award

"I CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY WE USE EVERY ASPECT OF OUR BUILDING AND GROUNDS TO THE FULLEST POTENTIAL." - *SARA OLSON, PRINCIPAL*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A NEST FOR LEARNING IN A NEW COMMUNITY

Preface: Expedition Elementary is a new elementary school in a recently built residential development. As the only civic building within a planned development, the project creates a hub that connects neighbors and fosters community.

A Nest For Learning: Nestled against the backdrop of Mount Rainier in a walkable neighborhood, Expedition Elementary was envisioned as a sanctuary for young learners to explore, engage with the environment around them, and connect with another. The form of the building draws inspiration from a bird's nest - its exterior is protective, welcoming, and calm, while the interior is full of life, vibrancy, and provides a sheltered space for students to grow. At the center of the "Nest" lies the courtyard that supports informal gathering, outdoor learning, and provides natural walking paths that can be used for decompression.

A Civic Hub for a New Community: Previously a golf course, the Lipoma Firs community is a newly constructed residential development with an abundance of walking paths, but no anchor that provided a sense of connection or identity. The site design for Expedition began with a focus on the pedestrian experience, particularly on the north of the site, where a gentle sloping lawn and a large public plaza encourage the community to gather near the entry to the school. To blend within its context, the project utilized gable roofs that matched the motif of the housing around it, while standing out with pops of color and texture that showed signs of life and vibrancy within the neighborhood to become a symbol of pride.

A Flexible School to Meet the Needs of All Learners: The planning process for Expedition Elementary began in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the challenge of designing for a new school located in a new residential community that was still under construction. Without yet knowing the future students and families the school would serve, it was key to design a building that was flexible enough to adapt to the needs of its future students. A Design Committee was assembled from a diverse mix of district personnel and educators. The design team began engaging the committee through virtual workshops, and presented to them throughout the design process to get feedback. Together the team shaped goals for cost effectiveness, inclusivity, and the quality of the educational spaces. Input from educators led to the adoption of L-shaped classrooms that incorporate small group areas, allowing for more push-in services and less pull-out. Shared learning spaces and small group rooms are placed at the angled junctions of the plan, putting them where classroom wings connect and come together.

Materiality and Expression: The school's color palette appropriately came from a local nested creature: Anna's Hummingbird. The vibrant greens come from the iridescent feathers that line the birds back, while the pops of fuchsia come from the rosy shades that adorn the throat and crowns of the males. The interior utilizes warm materials that contrast the cool colors, with textures and patterns that spark interest and offer tactile experiences for students. The exterior walls of the courtyard and entry are covered in acetylated wood siding that instills a connection to nature.



SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET: KEY PROJECT STATISTICS

Location:	**Puyallup, WA**
Design Capacity:	**512 students**
Building Area:	**69,447 sf**
Site Area:	**11.58 acres**
Final Construction Cost:	**$31,819,264**
Doors Open:	**Fall 2024**

TEAM

Owner:	**Bethel School District**
Architect:	**NAC Architecture**
Structural Engineer:	**Coughlin Porter Lundeen**
Electrical Engineer:	**NAC Electrical**
Mechanical Engineer:	**Metrix Engineers**
Civil Engineer:	**Sitts & Hill**
Landscape Architect:	**Fora Landscape Architects**

HIGH IMPACT, LIMITED BUDGET

With limited resources this elementary is able to deliver big on many fronts, educational, design, and sustainability.

The unique plan links form to function, eliminating extra area and maximizing on angles to support the educational goals of small group learning spaces, informal learning spaces, and an approachable feel to the school by not having long corridors. Overall area was able to be reduced from a rectangular courtyard style building, saving on area and cost.

Built in light wood construction, the project minimizes its carbon foot print in utilization of material upfront and lightening the weight of the building, which in turn reduces the amount of concrete on the project. Additionally, the wood in the building acts as carbon sequestration. Furthermore the material selection of wood and metal siding further supports these sustainability goals. This elementary is also the first project in the district to be all-electric and net-zero ready; all delivered on a modest budget.

A DIVERSE AND FAST GROWING DISTRICT

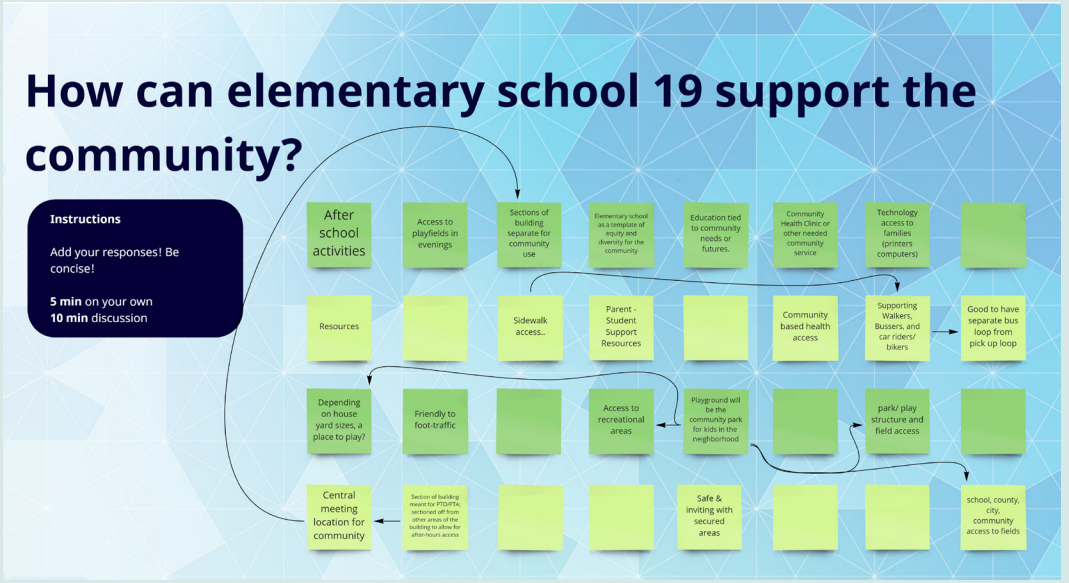
Expedition Elementary belongs to one of the fastest growing school districts in the nation, one that has added over 3000 students in the past 10 years. As its population has grown in size, it has also grown more diverse. Because the neighborhood around the school was still under construction during design, it wasn't completely clear who would make up the community. The team prioritized design concepts that were flexible and could instill community pride/ownership.

CRITICAL INPUT FROM SCHOOL DESIGN COMMITTEE

The visioning process for Expedition Elementary included taking the Design Committee on tours of other projects, virtual workshops, on-site observation sessions at other district schools, and discussions with a variety of stakeholders.

During the series of workshops, questions were asked including:

- What changes do you see in elementary education over the next 50 years?
- How can the new elementary school support the community?
- What have you learned about educational environments recently that impact considerations for the new school? How can we best support student, teacher, parent & staff needs?



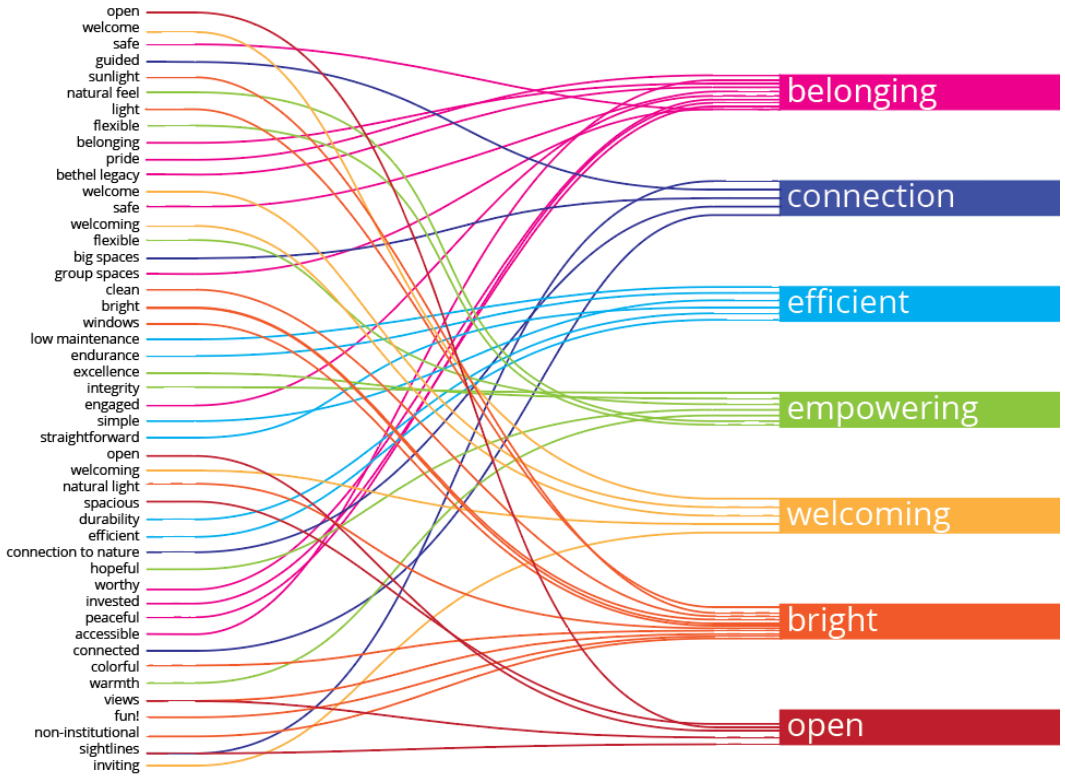
SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: VALUE OF PROCESS AND PROJECT TO COMMUNITY

CHALLENGES: CAPTURING THE DIVERSE RANGE OF THOUGHTS AND IDEAS

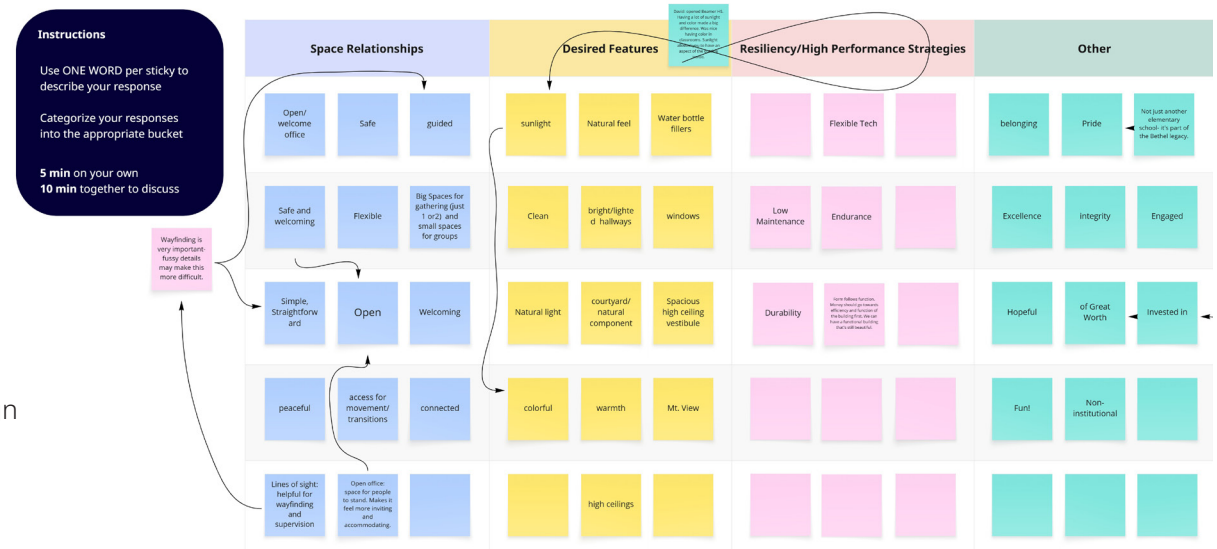
Multiple factors challenged community feedback - The school visioning occurred before a vast majority of the houses in the school's catchment area were built. Also, pandemic social distancing and safety concerns limited access to typical early community involvement.

Early on, the design team relied on virtual workshops with a design committee made up of a diverse collection of district personnel and educators who could each represent the voices of a different community within the district.

Once safety and time allowed, a community open house was held at a neighboring elementary and utilized VR to envision their new community hub.



In ONE WORD what do you want to feel when you walk into Elementary 19?



CRAFTING A VISION

The design team ran an exercise where they asked the committee, in one word, to describe how the wanted to feel when they walked into the new elementary school.

The responses were recorded and synthesized to create the project's **Power Words**, which were the guiding concepts in forming the vision statement.

The new Elementary School will be the bright, open, and fun heart of the community, empowering ALL learners through a culture of belonging and connection.

The learning will be enhanced through flexibility and functionality, inspiring this supportive culture of the whole child. Learners, Educators, Staff, and Families will take pride in their safe and welcoming environment. A focus of collaboration and inclusivity will foster critical thinking and instill core values, allowing learners to understand their importance and great worth.



In discussing important adjacencies and site elements, the team utilized program blocks with the design committee to quickly visualize, discuss and evaluate ideas.



Later on in the design process, the team was finally able to present the design concepts behind their future school directly with community members and receive feedback.

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE AS A BUILDING?

Prioritizing Spatial Qualities

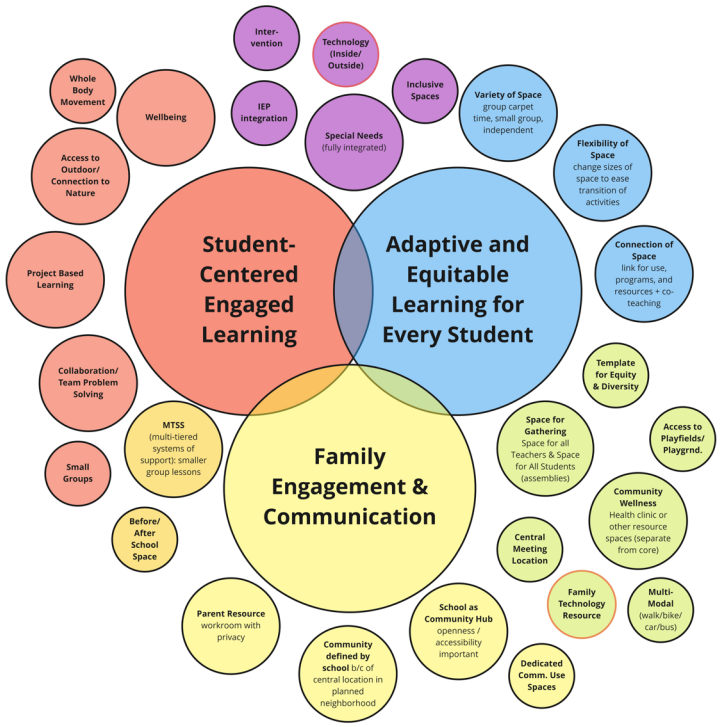
Utilizing the power words and vision statement, the design team and committee began to look more closely at the ways a building could take shape to accomplish these goals. Some clear spatial concepts and priorities identified were:

CREATE SPACE FOR THE COMMUNITY ON THE SITE. With no other civic presence in a new neighborhood in which most students will walk, creating a public space for the community to gather in and use was a key goal to create a sense of ownership for the community and it's new school.

A BRIGHT, OPEN, & INVITING BUILDING. The design committee was adamant, they didn't want a building made up of long, packed corridors. The entry and community spaces needed to feel inviting and open. The building should feel connected to it's site and nature.

FOSTER COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY. Spaces needed to inspire collaboration among students. Creating a structure for informal learning and empowering students to make the most of their education was a must.

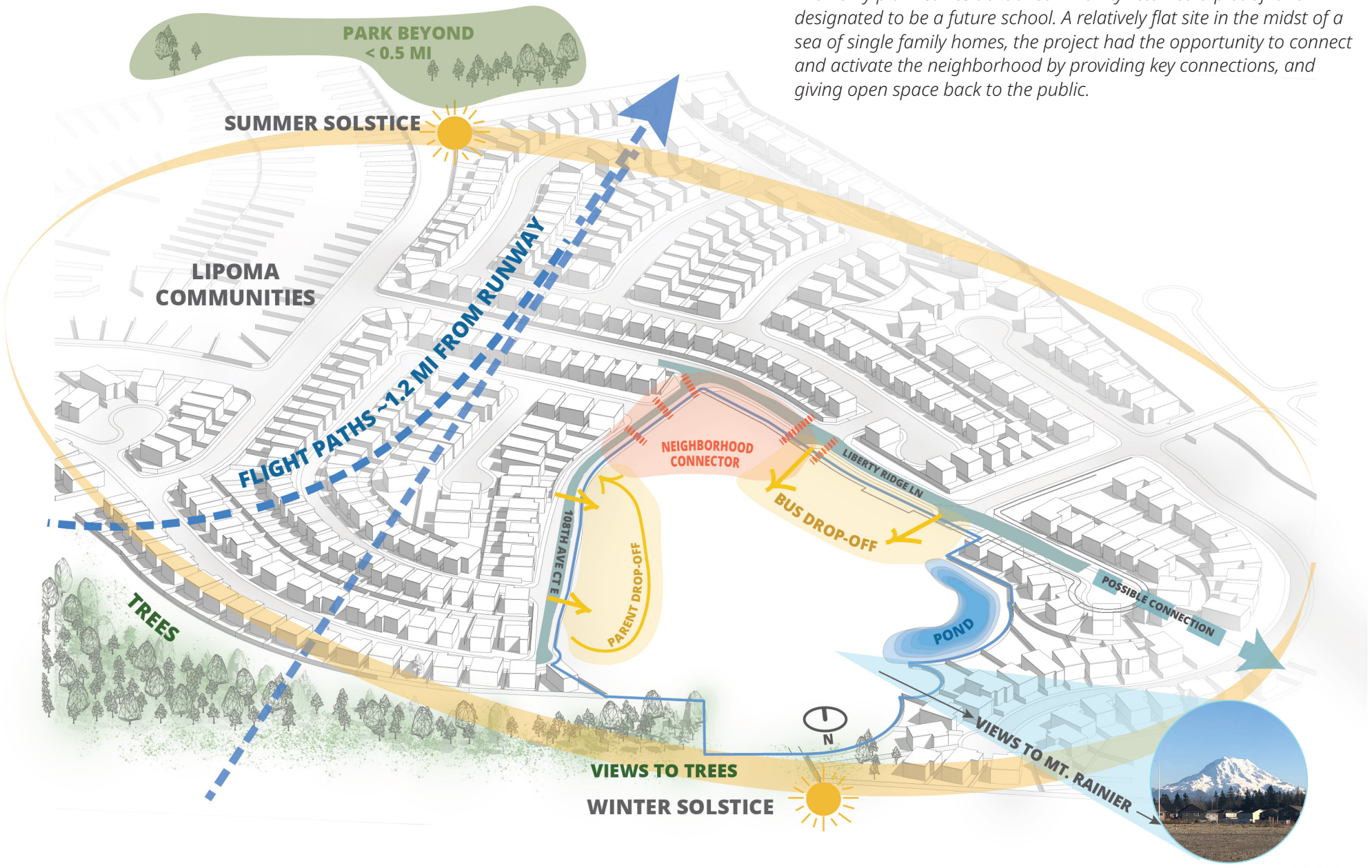
SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE. The academic spaces should be flexible and allow for more push-in services that can give students the support they need in and around the classroom.




EXPEDITION
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT:
AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT ACROSS A BLANK CANVAS

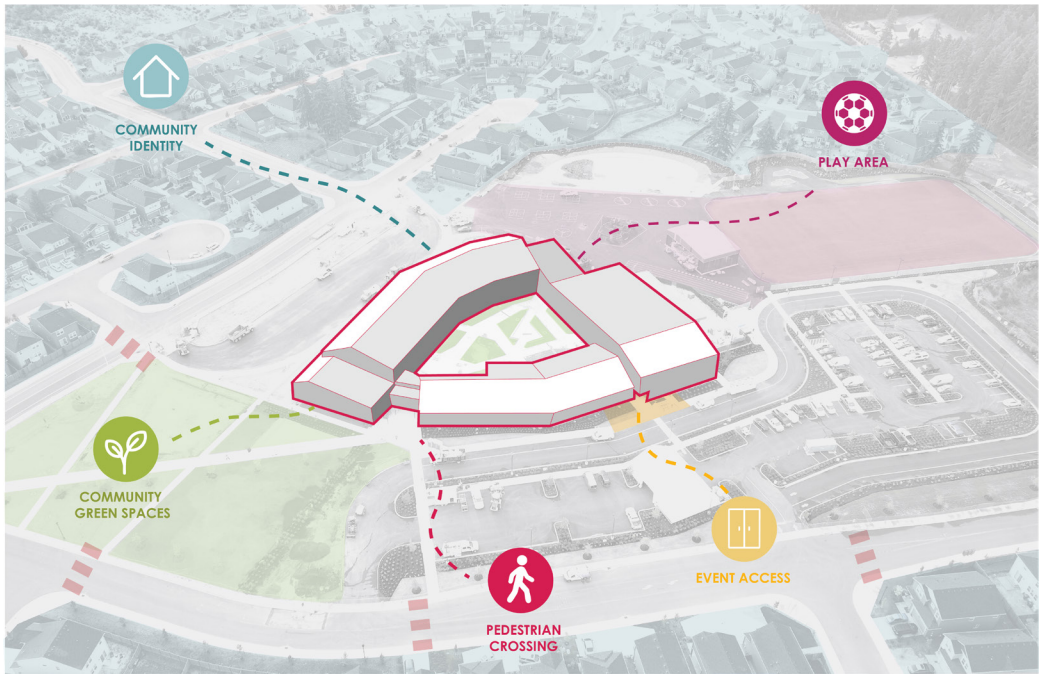
The newly planned residential community retained a plot of land designated to be a future school. A relatively flat site in the midst of a sea of single family homes, the project had the opportunity to connect and activate the neighborhood by providing key connections, and giving open space back to the public.



NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT:
A NEW TYPOLOGY FOR EDUCATION IN A NEW RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY

Designing a civic hub before the neighborhood was built presented challenges to the team. The future community would be entirely made up of single-family homes, a large boxy building could feel out of place. By utilizing the familiar form of the gable while introducing new materials, asymmetry, and pops of color, the design team strove to create a new typology for education that recognized the vernacular of the community around it, while still standing out as a civic presence.

Large diagonal pathways reach across from the main entry to the northern corner of the site and connect to the community where 90% of students walk to school. A large front lawn and public plaza site in front of the main entry and gives space for the community to make the site their own, whether during the week before and after school, or on the weekends.





PRIORITIZING OUTDOOR SPACE

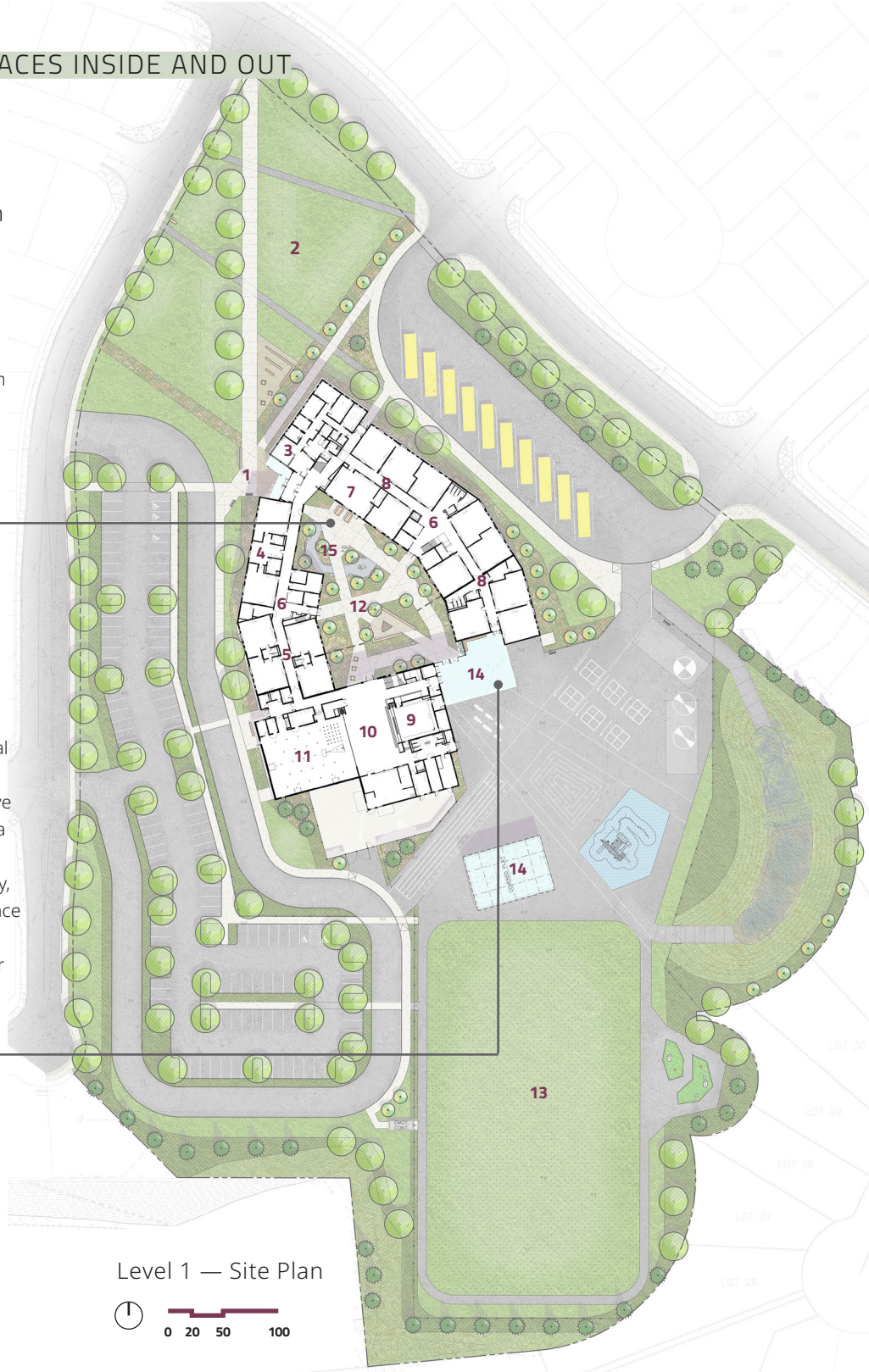
The outdoor spaces at Expedition elementary are thoughtfully crafted, vary in scale and program, and are directly connected to indoor learning environments. These outdoor spaces welcome uses from full classrooms, students calming themselves on a sensory walk, and outdoor art tables.



The art room has its own access to the courtyard, with dedicated tables and easy supervision from the classroom allowing art class to transition outside on any day where the weather allows.



Expedition Elementary has 2 covered play areas: A traditional separate structure out in the play yard that is suited for active play and basketball, as well as a secondary one tucked close to the building beneath the library, creating sheltered outdoor space for students who would like to be outside, but prefer a quieter environment on the periphery.



LEGEND

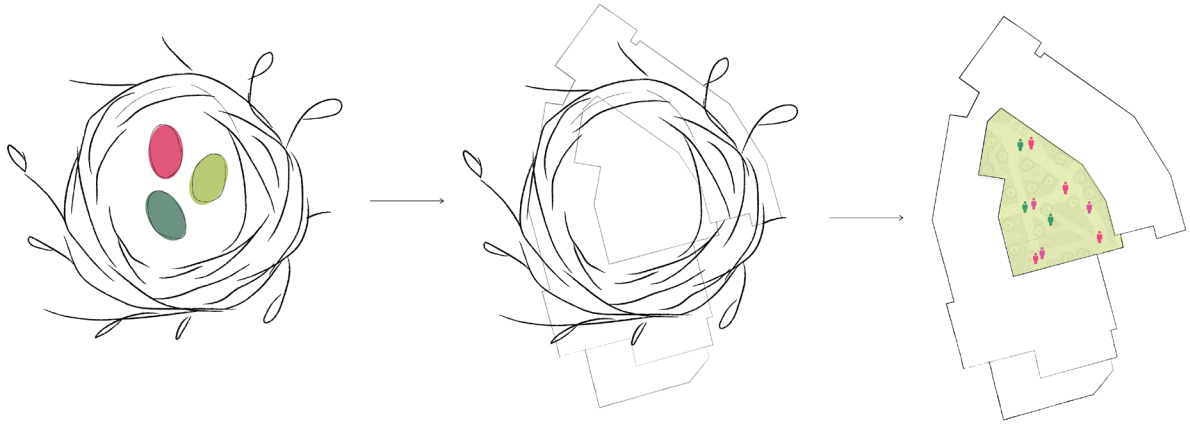
1. Main Entry Plaza
2. Front Lawn
3. Admin + Reception
4. Pre-K
5. Kindergarten
6. Shared Learning
7. Art
8. Grades 1-4
9. Music Stage
10. Commons
11. Gym
12. Courtyard
13. Playfield
14. Covered Play
15. Sensory Garden

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: SHELTERED AND SECURE OUTDOOR LEARNING

THE CENTER OF THE NEST

The courtyard of Expedition Elementary is the heart of the school. It serves as a space for connection, exploration, outdoor learning, and at times decompression. It was important to provide a variety of choice for students in the courtyard, that could meet the needs of each student.

At the center lies the large outdoor classroom, where an entire class of students can gather. Smaller and less formal areas are also provided: a natural gravel walking path with spaces to sit on the periphery, a less formal natural area where a small group of students can gather, and tables for activities right outside of the art room, all of which support student wellness by adding secure and protected access for students and staff to the outdoors.









NATURAL IN ITS SETTING

Careful consideration was given to the materials selected by the design team. The school needed to be durable with materials that would last and fit within a limited budget but could still match the character of exploration and growth.

The public facing exterior of the building is clad in standing seam metal panels in a more subdued palette, forming the protective outside of the “Nest.” Small pops of color at window bays and stripes add excitement, and hint at the vibrancy that lies inside. Public entries and the courtyard are clad in acetylated wood siding and accompanied by a more colorful palette that feels natural alongside the coordinate plantings.











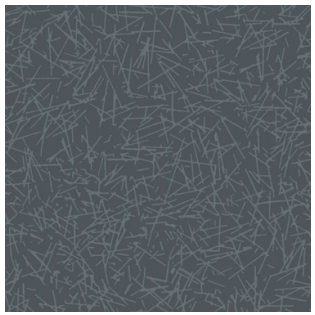
A NEST INSIDE AND OUT

The inspiration behind the colors for the building came from another nest: Anna's Hummingbird. The vibrant greens come from the iridescent feathers that line the birds back, while the pops of fuchsia come from the rosy shades that adorn the throats and crowns of males.



The "Nest" concept goes beyond just the shape and color of the building, textures and patterns continue the theme across other materials and finishes. The feature lighting in the public areas of the project are composed of crisscrossing fixtures reminiscent of the twigs that make up a nest. Similar patterns can be found on the countertops in all of the classrooms, the carpet tiles, and even under the canopy at the entry of the school.

The warm tones of the clear sealed MDF wall panels contrast and balance the cooler tones. At featured spaces and in the hallways, textured panels provide a tactile experience for students as they move through the building.











EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT:
EDUCATIONAL VISION AND GOALS OF THE SCHOOL

Reaching All Students with Adaptable and Flexible Options with Limited Area

Classroom neighborhoods are destinations within the school, not simply places to pass through. The district had interest in incorporating more small group and shared informal learning spaces into the program on this school, but had limited area they could allot for doing so.

The faceted form of the “Nest” allowed the design team to accomplish multiple goals that straight hallways could not:

+ The angled hallways are visually less continuous and create more intimate, smaller feeling neighborhoods around each bend.
+ The angled junctions where neighborhoods come together are where shared spaces such as small group rooms and restrooms are located, keeping them directly accessible to learning environments without assigning ownership to any single classroom neighborhood.
+ Shared informal learning spaces such as benches and nooks efficiently carve in to angled spaces that wouldn’t otherwise be suitable for other programmed spaces.



Level 2 — Floor Plan

LEGEND

1. Classroom
2. Small Group Room
3. Multi-Lingual Education
4. Restrooms
5. Staff Lounge
6. Library
7. Office
8. Stair/Shared Learning Area
9. Commons Below
10. Gym Below

Second floor plan shows how individual classroom neighborhoods are created along a single hallway, using the bends in the plan to break what would be a long continuous bar into smaller pieces.

Making Space to Come Together at the Junctions



LEGEND

1. Classroom
2. Resource Room
3. Small Group Room
4. Informal Learning Space
5. Shared Office
6. Restrooms
7. Courtyard Access



Providing students with Adaptable and Flexible Learning Spaces at the Junctions. Inclusive teaching and learning spaces were a key priority during visioning for the design committee, with the goal of providing spaces that foster a sense of **Belonging**, sparked **Connection** between students, and **Empowered** them to have a bigger say in their learning process.

Small Group Rooms were intentionally placed along the open connection between the two floors, putting them they were not only easy to supervise but extremely visible to all students and staff as a reminder to use them. Under the stair, a small nook was carved out to offer an informal learning area at one of the brightest and liveliest moments in the school. Shared staff offices are placed nearby to keep staff close to learning spaces instead of at the front office. And importantly, there is a direct and easy connection to the courtyard, allowing learning to flow outside as seamlessly as possible.

Bright, Open, & Connected Spaces



RESULTS:

FLEXIBILITY WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

For students who need added support during the day, it can isolating to be pulled out of their classroom and taken to another part of the building. To give students a better sense of belonging, classrooms and their surroundings needed to be flexible to allow for students to receive support in their normal academic spaces.

L-shaped classrooms allow for a variety of teaching spaces and push-in support for students, supporting the district goal of keeping students in the classroom as much as possible.

Small group rooms are strategically located at nodes between classroom neighborhoods, meaning that when students do leave the classroom they are never going far.





L-Shaped classrooms provide smaller scaled focus areas opposite the teaching wall to support push-in services

Small Group rooms are located immediately adjacent to classrooms. Their bright colors and openness make for exciting learning environments.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Early results from the state are showing that students at Expedition Elementary have higher rates of attendance and proficiency in Math, ELA, and Science than the averages for the district.

Students at or Above Foundational Grade Level Knowledge and Skills

71.6%	61.9%	61.8%
ELA	**MATH**	**SCIENCE**

Community Spaces Full of Life





BRIGHT, LIVELY, AND INVITING COMMUNITY SPACES

As a space that serves both the daily routines of the students and the community during special occasions, the design of the Commons was carefully considered.

A colorful stairway with playful lighting flows between the Commons and the Library. A playful and textured surface frames the bright blue opening of the proscenium, allowing it to stand as a prominent fixture when the stage is in use, while still providing warmth and interest to the space when the stage classroom is closed off.

A tall, glassy wall provides a direct connection between the commons and the courtyard (students are rewarded for good behavior by getting to have lunch with a buddy in the courtyard), and playful windows dance their way up the stairs to give students unique views of the courtyard as they traverse their way up to the library.

A Bright and Inviting Entry



Upon entering the school, students and visitors are greeted with an open view to the courtyard, a colorful and playful stair that climbs to upper floor of the academic wing, and a colorful nook in a textured wall. There are no long, dark, or packed corridors.

Supportive Design that Works for Students and Staff

SINGLE USER RESTROOMS

Single user restrooms were an important point of discussion between the design team and the committee. The district had some experience converting existing restrooms into operating as gender inclusive at other schools, but had not ever designed one from the ground up. For young students, the single-user restroom design is closer to the restrooms they are used to from home. Staff members would have an easier time of supervising in case a student needed assistance.

The team designed the handwashing area as an extension of the hallway, and gave the space lively colors that matched the other spaces of the building. The threshold is marked with tiles made up of all the other colors in the school, with each water closet marked with a vibrant door. A single teacher can monitor a group of students in the hallway or shared learning space while keeping an eye on a student in the restroom.





SPACE TO DECOMPRESS & SELF REGULATE

Students can become overwhelmed during the day, and need space and time to decompress and regulate themselves before returning their focus to their school day. Expedition Elementary has a sensory room located in the admin suite for any student to use.

The space is filled with cool, calming colors. Soft textures invite students run their hands over them, tracing the contours as a tactile opportunity for regulation. Soft furniture allows them to sit, lay, or curl up in whichever way they choose. The counselor and assistant principal can both monitor the space through one-way mirrored windows, allowing students to have a moment of privacy while staying safe.

Students are empowered to request the space as needed at Expedition. Use of the space is reported as being highest at the beginning of the school year, with requests for the space tapering as students become more comfortable in their routine and environment.

POST OCCUPANCY EVALUATION

Following Expedition Elementary being operational for more than a full school year, the design team performed a Post Occupancy Evaluation to measure the success of the designed environment amongst students, staff, and community members.

Community and Family Feedback

4.9/5.0

This school looks like a place where I will be welcomed

4.8/5.0

The appearance of the building reflects what is unique and special about our community

4.8/5.0

The inside of the school building makes me feel safe and calm

4.7/5.0

The building design supports inclusion and the diverse needs of the students

4.5/5.0

The building design supports inclusion and the diverse needs of the community

Staff Experiences and Feedback

83% Strongly Agree
17% Agree

Overall, the classrooms in my school are high-quality environments

50% Strongly Agree
42% Agree

The lighting in my classroom is comfortable

75% Strongly Agree
25% Agree

I have good access to natural views and elements in my classrooms

50% Strongly Agree
33% Agree

The building meets students needs during unstructured periods (before & after school)

50% Strongly Agree
33% Agree

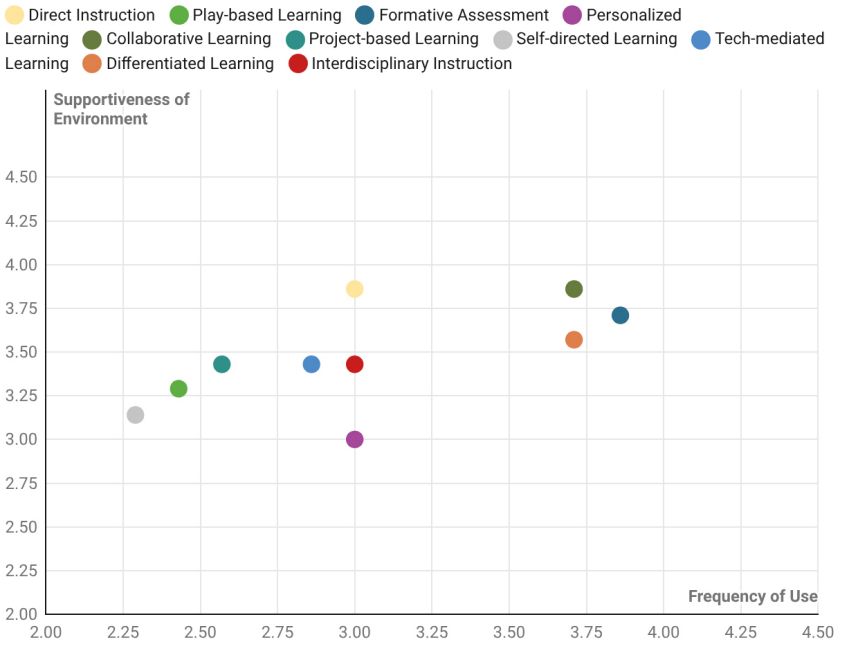
There is adequate gathering space and variety of space for meeting students social/ emotional needs

50% Strongly Agree
50% Agree

The design allows for good passive supervision of students in hallways and shared learning areas

Pedagogy Profile

Reported as weighted averages



Teaching Method	Frequency of Use	Supportiveness of Environment
Formative Assessment	3.86	3.71
Differentiated Learning	3.71	3.57
Collaborative Learning	3.71	3.86
Project Based Learning	2.57	3.43
Tech-mediated Learning	2.86	3.43
Personalized Learning	3.00	3.00
Play-based Learning	2.43	3.29
Interdisciplinary Instruction	3.00	3.43
Direct Instruction	3.00	3.86
Self-directed Learning	2.29	3.14

Results show that the learning environment is overall supportive of most teaching methods, and that the flexibly designed spaces are seeing a wide variety of teaching methods being used in moderate amounts.

A Nest Where Students and a Community Can Grow



NAC