SPOKANE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SACAJAWEA MIDDLE SCHOOL

SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

The Town Square
A New Way of Building Community in School



ALSC ARCHITECTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All great communities have a place where people come together to connect, learn, and grow. Throughout history, the ‘town square’ has served as a center for dialogue, socialization, and collaboration, fostering culture and belonging.

Sacajawea Middle School’s culture comes from the collective whole of committed teachers, highly interactive administration, and engaged students. What makes this culture remarkable is that it developed within a building with little spatial connectivity between programs. The original 1960s prototype school organized departments in isolation rather than as interconnected communities or neighborhoods. While this model served Spokane Public Schools for more than 50 years, the new Sacajawea Middle School reimagines how architecture can actively support the principles of the Sac Way.

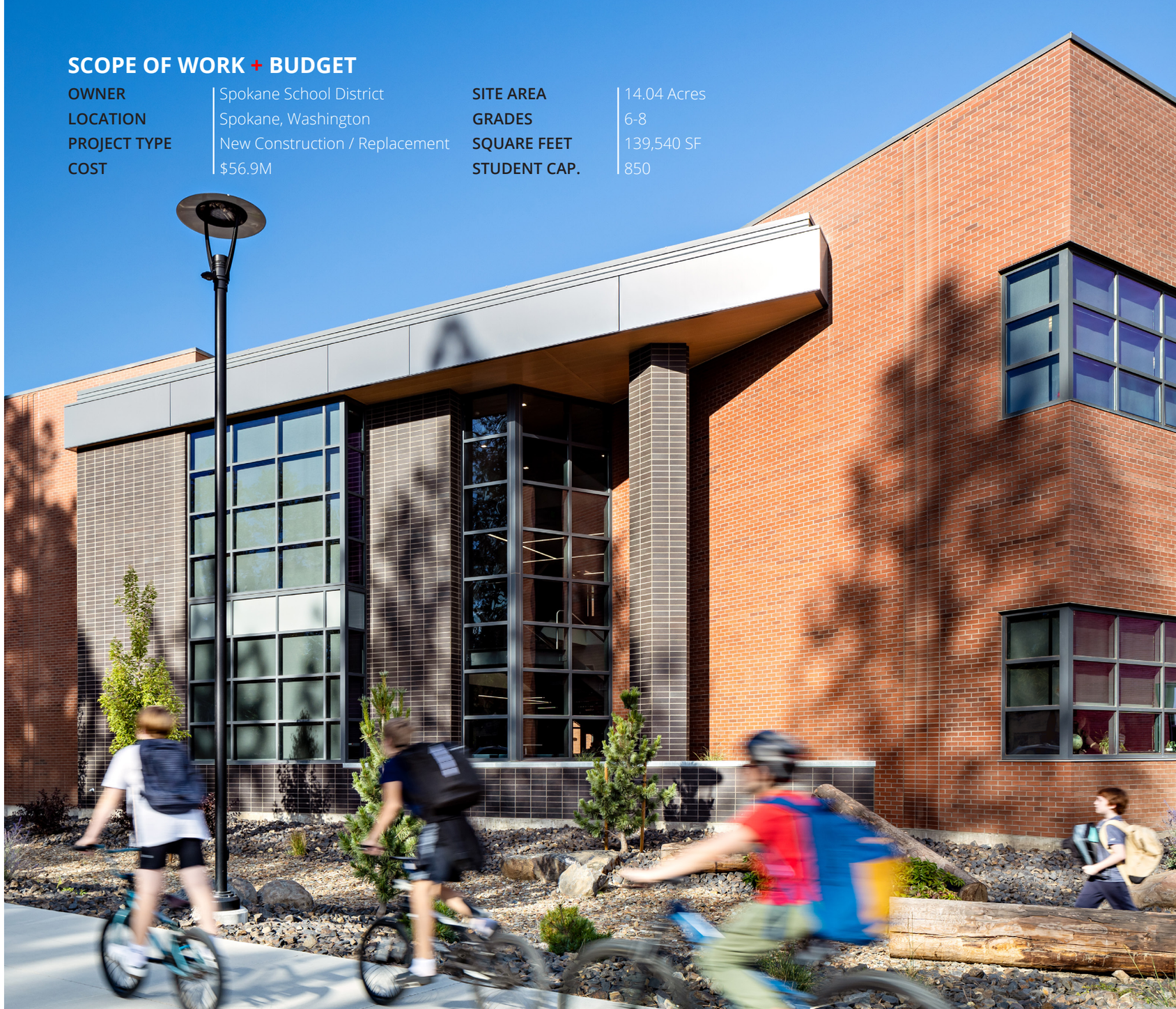
The town square became the guiding organizational concept for the school, bringing distinct programs together around a shared central space. Administration, student services, athletics, elective suites, and learning neighborhoods all engage directly with this center, each maintaining its own identity while contributing to the larger school community. The scale of the town square is further broken down to fit within the learning communities, providing a space where students can gather in smaller groups. The variety of spaces within the town square allows students to gather, collaborate, reflect, and learn in environments that support both shared interaction and individual experience.

This concept is especially fitting for middle school students, ages 11–14, a time of rapid self-discovery, growing independence, and social development. The town square encourages students to explore opportunities throughout the school while helping them build connection and a sense of belonging. From multiple vantage points, students can see the opportunities available throughout the school, while transparency between spaces makes teachers, programs, and activities more visible and approachable.

The proximity created by the town square also strengthens relationships between students, teachers, and administration, fostering an environment where students feel welcomed, supported, safe to take risks, and excited about their future.

SCOPE OF WORK + BUDGET

OWNER	Spokane School District	**SITE AREA**	14.04 Acres
LOCATION	Spokane, Washington	**GRADES**	6-8
PROJECT TYPE	New Construction / Replacement	**SQUARE FEET**	139,540 SF
COST	$56.9M	**STUDENT CAP.**	850



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

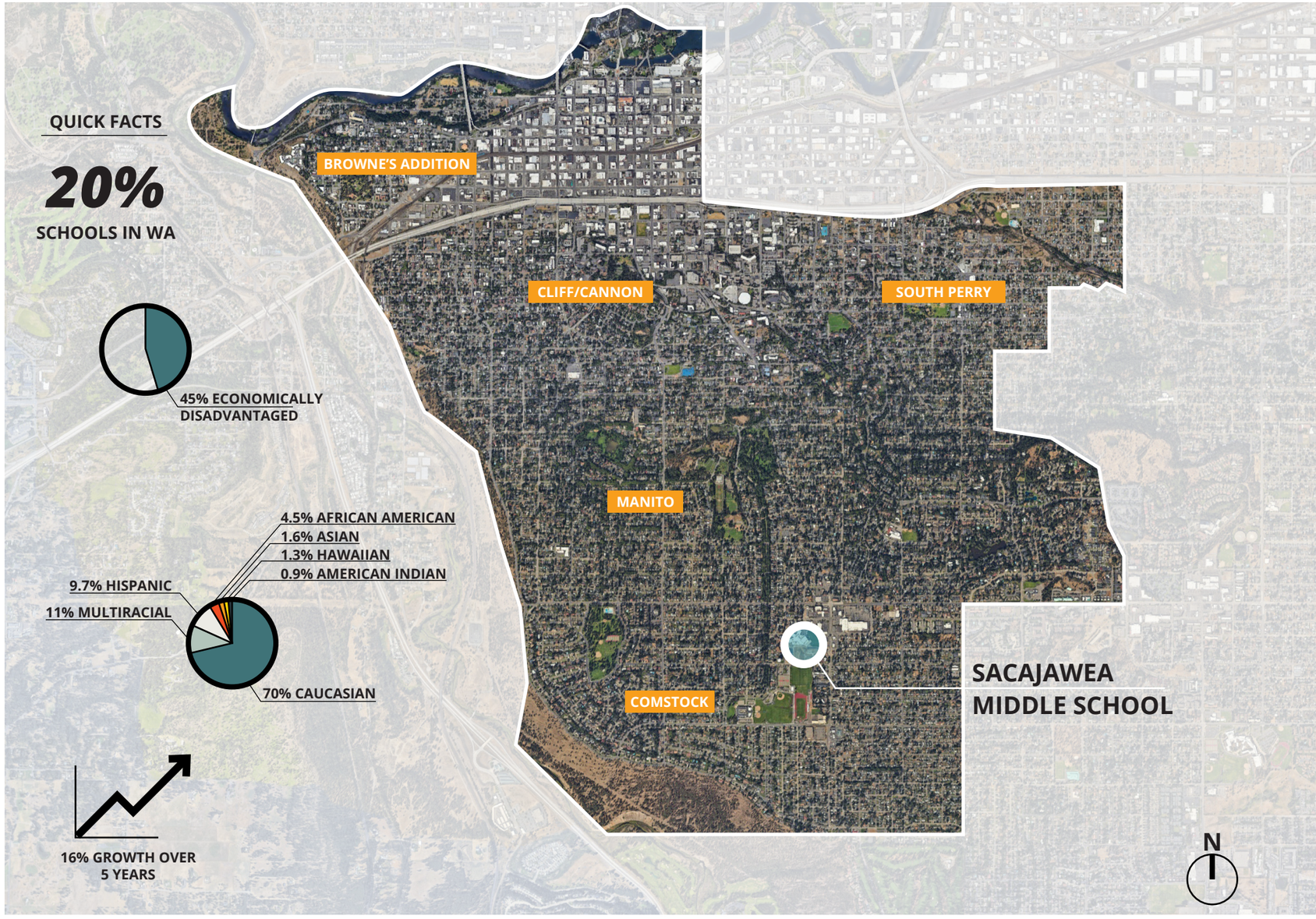
CONTEXT + CHALLENGES + ASSETS

COMMUNITY

The Comstock and Manito neighborhoods are known for their deep-rooted history and high rate of long-term residents, with families staying in the area for generations. Since many families walked the halls of the original Sacajawea Middle School, there's **a strong sense of pride and tradition** revolving around the Sac Way. However, with this tradition also comes **sensitivity to change**. Anxiety was a common emotion when asking the community about the new school, especially when it came to the size of a two-story school compared to the single-story historic craftsman homes. The new Sacajawea Middle School needed to be a place that recognized and celebrated the culture of the original school while blending and respecting the character of the neighborhoods.

STUDENTS AND STAFF

The Sac Way encourages students to stay curious, explore their opportunities, and discover new passions through their elective courses in order to become lifelong learners. This mission has consistently proven successful and has allowed students to achieve high academic performance, often ranking in the top 20% of all 2,088 schools in Washington. Though each elective on its own had a strong culture, there was no visibility within the existing school, creating a **silo effect where staff and student groups did not interact** outside of their circle. Teachers voiced feeling limited by their existing spaces. Students often felt cramped and rushed from one end of the school to the next. There were no spaces to connect, share, and build a school-wide community. It was important to create new spaces that supported the Sac Way, and gave staff and students the space to learn together.



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

CONTEXT







PROJECT GOALS

HISTORIC REFERENCE

Sacajawea was a member of the Agai-Dika band of the Shoshone tribe. Their ancestral lands were of the Great Basin, which include parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Nevada. The original design of the Thunderbird logo had many elements related to the coastal Salish people, which had no relation to Sacajawea.

AUTHENTIC REBRAND

To authentically reflect Sacajawea's namesake, Lacey Abrahamson, an eighth-generation descendant of Sacajawea, was invited to the table to ensure that the new design and logo were represented appropriately. The new designs focused on more geometric shapes, which symbolized Shoshone beadwork.

THUNDERBIRD

The Thunderbird is a symbol of strength, resilience, and protection. This symbolism influenced the planning of Sacajawea Middle School's spatial relationships. By designing various scales of space, collaboration and problem-solving are promoted, a sense of belonging is fostered, and reflection is encouraged, all of which build student strength and resilience.

*"**I want her memory and her spirit to be portrayed in the most positive and accurate way possible.** It's also good for the public to understand that there are different tribes. There's over 570 different federally recognized tribes in the United States alone. And many of us have our own cultural designs, we use our own colors, we have our own language, we have our own ceremonies. Sometimes it's all mushed together when people don't realize **how unique each and every tribe is**."*

~ Lacey Abrahamson, Eighth-Generation Descendant of Sacajawea

SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

PROCESS

CORE VALUES

Spokane Public Schools participated in a visioning workshop prior to the design of Sacajawea Middle School. The outcome created eight core values that the district wanted to be present in all future middle schools. Surveys were used throughout the educational specification process to identify what staff gravitated towards and what their ideal vision of spaces were. Weekly meetings took place with the entire committee to discuss the responses from the surveys in detail. This allowed for in-depth conversations to occur early in the design process, marking a crucial step for input and data gathering. This process was not focused on the building itself, but rather how SPS wanted to see students learning, engaging, and connecting with their peers, teachers, and environment. Quantitative data, like ranking the priority of each principle, and qualitative data, like describing what each principle meant to them, were used in tandem to develop the whole picture. Not only did this give the "why" behind decisions, it allowed for the committee of 20+ people to reach a consensus.

COMMUNITY
"A design that makes all the students and staff feel a part of something."

CENTER
"A place to gather, to just be. A central focal point of the community."

OUTSIDE & INSIDE
"Building spaces that blur the line between outside and inside."

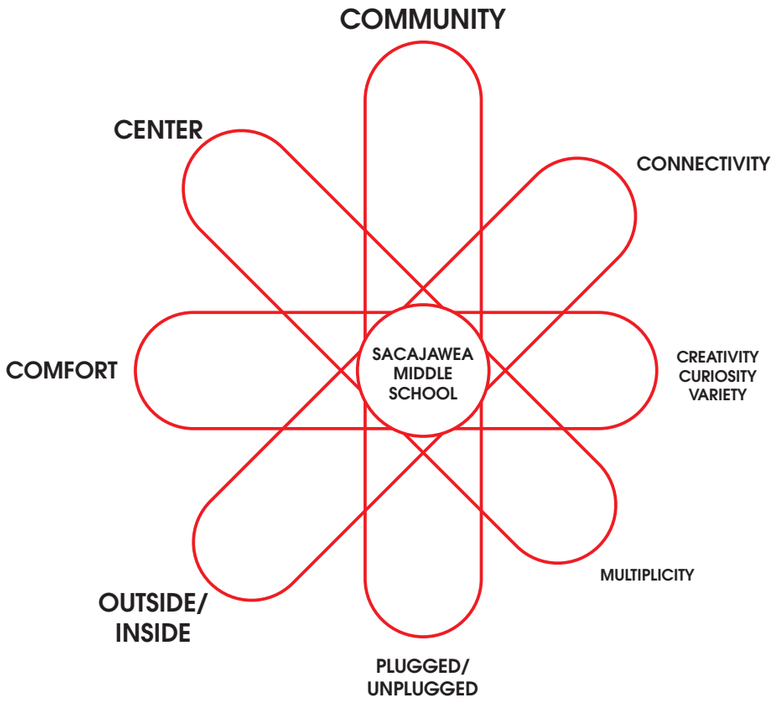
COMFORT
"Feeling like you are part of a home or family at school."

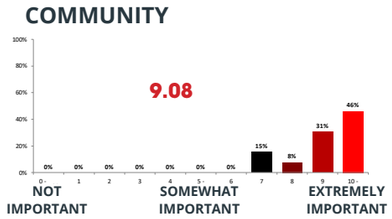
CONNECTIVITY
"The more possibilities for connections in physical and spatial aspects, the more [the school] creates possibilities for students."

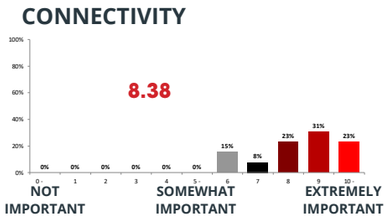
PLUGGED & UNPLUGGED
"Learning spaces that allow students to effortlessly pop back and forth between guided input sessions, independent practice, small group work and whole class instruction."

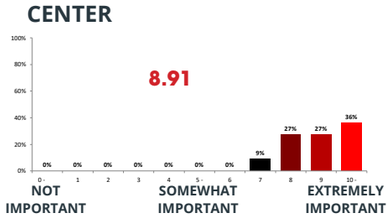
CREATIVITY, CURIOSITY, AND VARIETY
"Space that invites, promotes, and provides a variety of ways for learners to understand their curiosity through creativity."

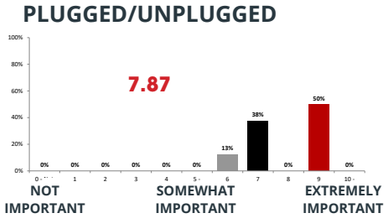
MULTIPLICITY
"The school becomes a place to nurture the whole child rather than a narrow focus of test prep, academics, and college prep courses."

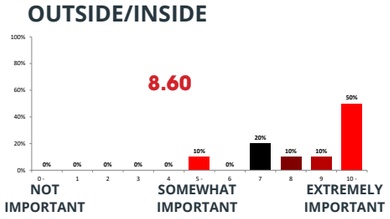


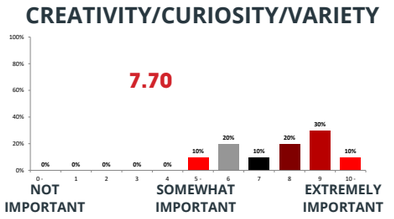


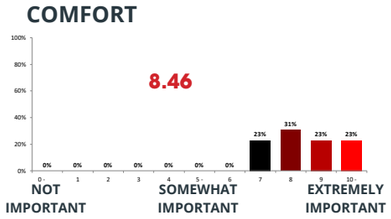


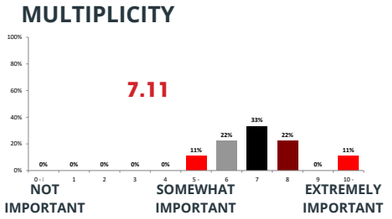












SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

PROCESS

The process brought everyone's voices to the table, from the superintendent to the choir teacher to the maintenance director. In the original facility, rarely did staff collaborate outside of their immediate programs. This design process was the first time that staff were able to come together and dream about how their students would learn. Discussion revolved around how to teach to the individual learner, how to break out the day into formal and informal activities, what should group sizes look like, and how to balance active and static learning.

The process cultivated a strong sense of ownership over the new facility. Local identity, culture, and history were woven into every design decision. Every grade level, every elective, and every department were represented at the table.



NATURAL LIGHT

CONNECTION

FLEXIBILITY OF SPACE

KIDS CAN BE KIDS

INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

VARIETY OF SPACES TO LEARN

BRING NATURE CLOSER

WELCOMING COLORS & STYLES

SPARKS CREATIVITY

FEELING OF TRANQUILITY

OPEN

CARE & SUPPORT

ACCESS

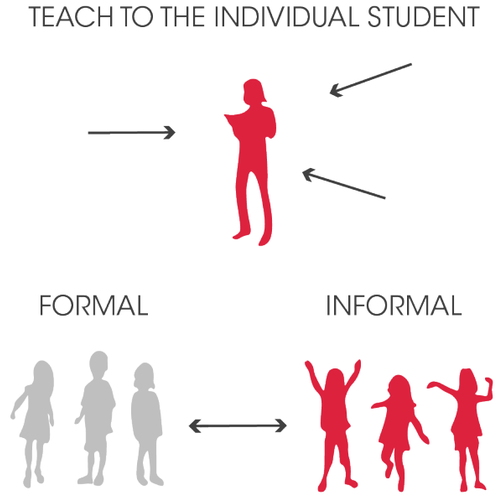
INVITING

USER CHOICE

WARM

TACTILE LEARNING

CASUAL

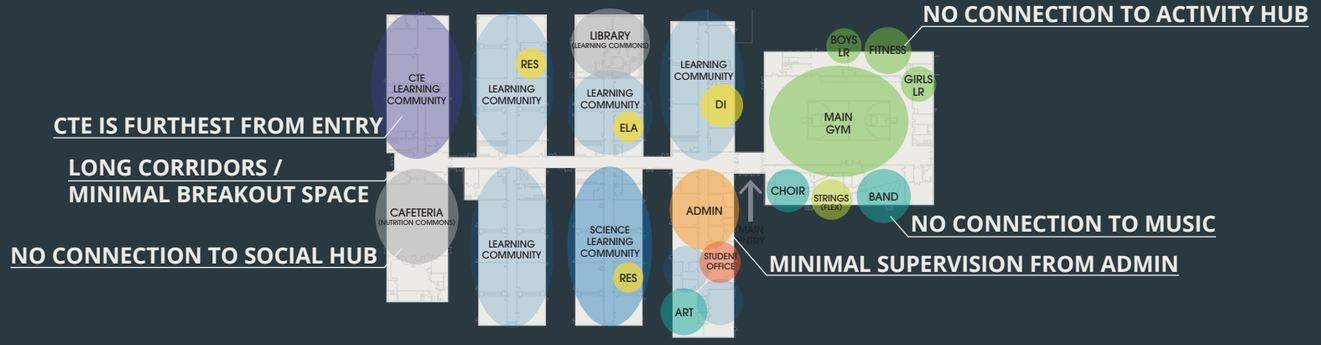


PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT

ORIGINAL SACAJAWEA MIDDLE SCHOOL

Constructed in 1960, the original Sacajawea Middle School showcased the standard “cells and bells” model of student learning. Long corridors pulled students away from a centralized hub, with electives and opportunities outside of typical coursework were buried in the back. Students had to rush from class to class in cramped halls and didn’t have a space for connection or respite. This introverted and disconnected nature made it impossible for programs to share with the student body and spark curiosity.

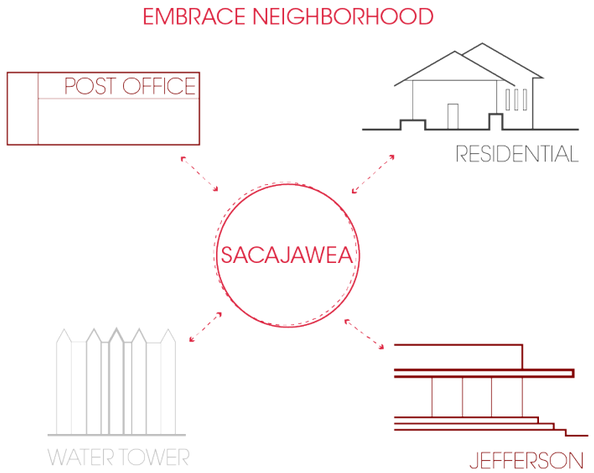


PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT

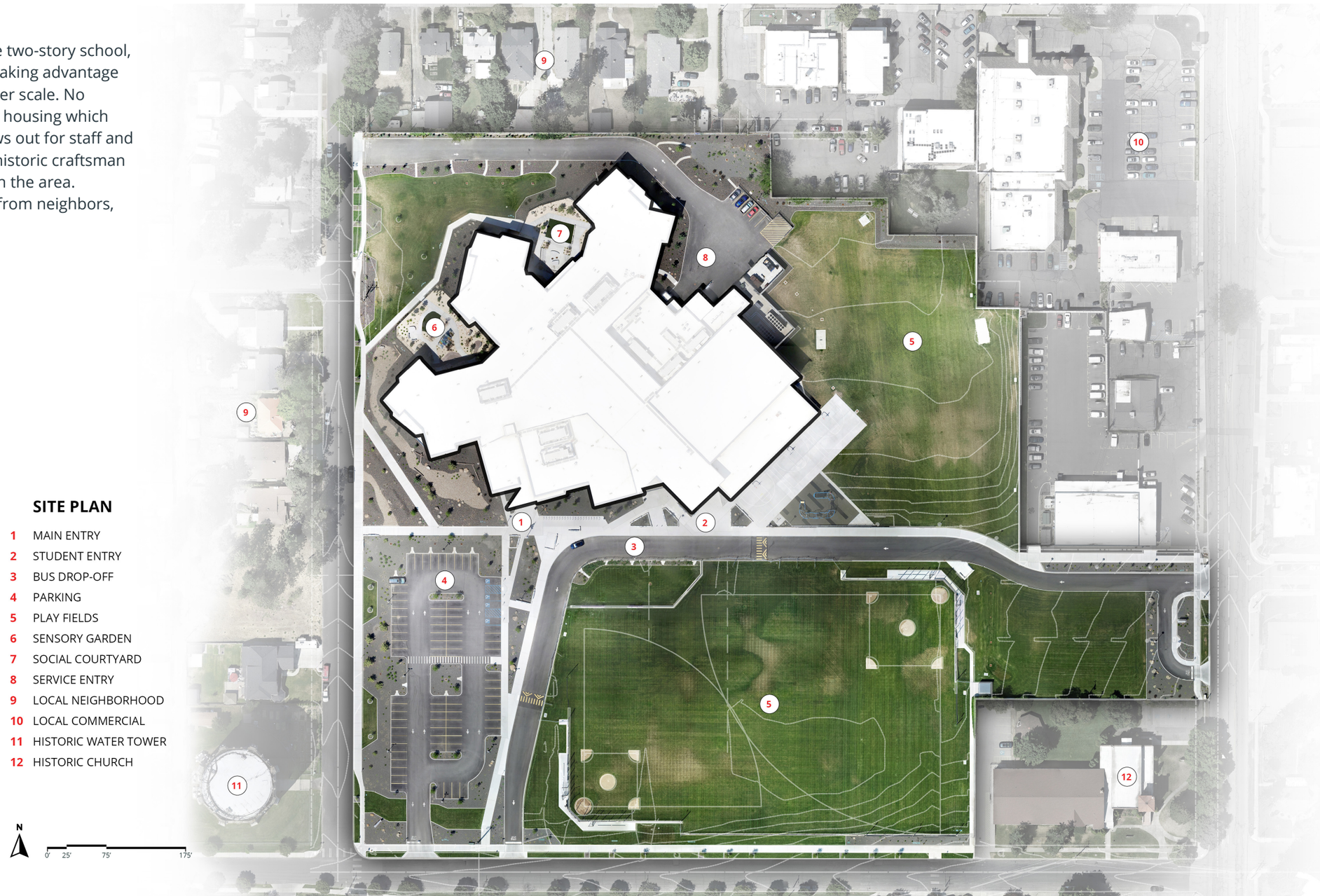
BLENDING WITH THE NEIGHBORHOOD

To address neighborhood concerns about the scale of the two-story school, the new facility was nestled on the lower end of the site, taking advantage of the existing contour and creating the illusion of a smaller scale. No part of the school is directly parallel with the surrounding housing which protects the privacy of neighborhoods while allowing views out for staff and students. Materials were inspired by the red brick of the historic craftsman homes and the natural tones of the basalt outcroppings in the area. Edge conditions were thoughtfully designed to pull away from neighbors, minimizing disruption throughout the school day.



SITE PLAN

1 MAIN ENTRY
2 STUDENT ENTRY
3 BUS DROP-OFF
4 PARKING
5 PLAY FIELDS
6 SENSORY GARDEN
7 SOCIAL COURTYARD
8 SERVICE ENTRY
9 LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD
10 LOCAL COMMERCIAL
11 HISTORIC WATER TOWER
12 HISTORIC CHURCH



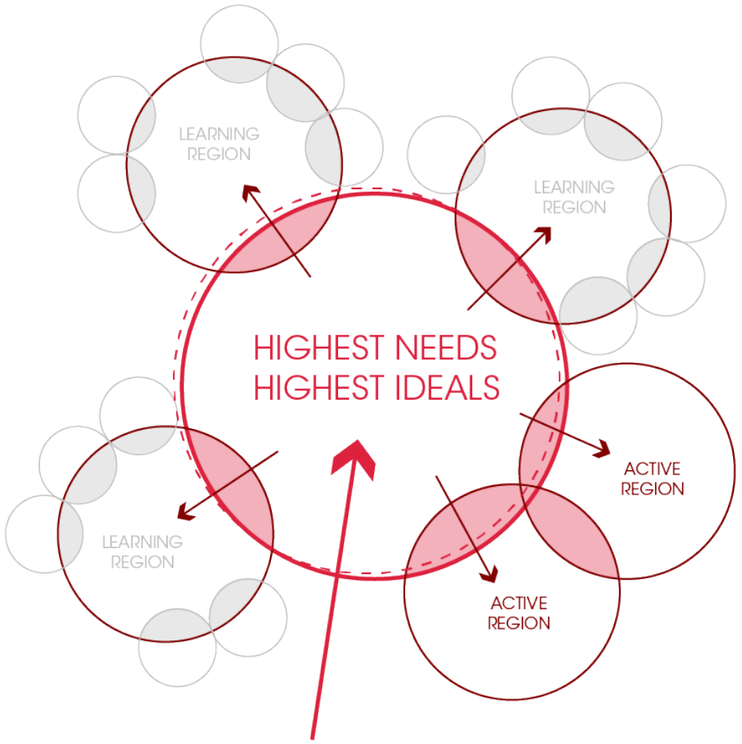
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

INNOVATIVE, INSPIRING, & MOTIVATING

THE TOWN SQUARE

The town square analogy can be seen in every adjacency and scale throughout the school, from the main commons to the individual learning neighborhoods. All electives have a face along the town square, including music, CTE, art, fitness, and technology. This physical and visual connection promotes agency within students by displaying all their options and encouraging them to try new things. It builds a community and belonging when students can see each other creating and learning.

All roads lead back to the town square where learning and creation are constantly on display. It is the heart of the school, and a place where students and staff can build connections.





PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

INNOVATIVE, INSPIRING, & MOTIVATING

THE TOWN SQUARE

The layout of the neighborhoods provides strong visual connections between all classrooms with ample gathering space in the center. All classrooms have the flexibility to open and spill out into this central space through operable glass walls. The stairs and huddle area offer the unique opportunity for small group or individual learning, but they are still connected to the larger gathering space.

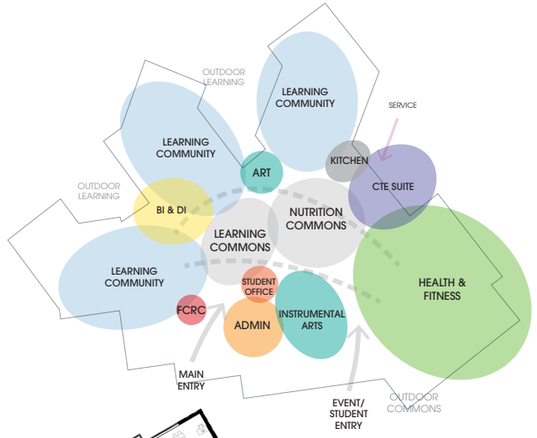


*"**We want to build memories with them, we want to build experiences...** I tell them sometimes in 20 years I want you to be like middle school is amazing, I had a great experience in middle school and I think that there is a tradition here and kind of a culture where we give that to them."*
~ Aaron Allen (Teacher)

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

OPPORTUNITIES ON DISPLAY

Music, CTE, and fitness all face inward towards the central social hub on the first floor. When looking up, students can see science, art, and school information. Each learning neighborhood has customizable plywood panels, creating pride within grade levels and serving as a means of wayfinding. This multi-story display showcases possibilities to students in a dynamic and enriching environment.



LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN

1 MAIN ENTRY
2 STUDENT/AFTER HOURS ENTRY
3 LOCKER ROOM
4 GYMNASIUM
5 CTE CLASSROOM
6 NUTRITION COMMONS
7 KITCHEN
8 LEARNING COMMUNITY
9 SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS
10 LEARNING COMMONS
11 COUNSELOR OFFICES
12 FAMILY/COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER
13 ADMINISTRATION
14 BAND ROOM
15 CHOIR ROOM
16 ORCHESTRA



LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN

17 FITNESS
18 MAT/AEROBICS
19 LEARNING COMMUNITY
20 ART CLASSROOM
21 ART GALLERY
22 SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS
23 OPEN TO BELOW







PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

CONNECTION TO PAST

PATTERNING AND SHADOW

The original facility was home to a totem pole, one of the only representations of Sacajawea's namesake. To incorporate more representation into the physical design of the school, geometries, patterning, and shadow were added. Whether at the diamond-shaped columns supporting the neighborhood canopies, the site benches alternating heights, or the masonry detailing, geometries inspired by Shoshone beadwork and patterns are found throughout.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

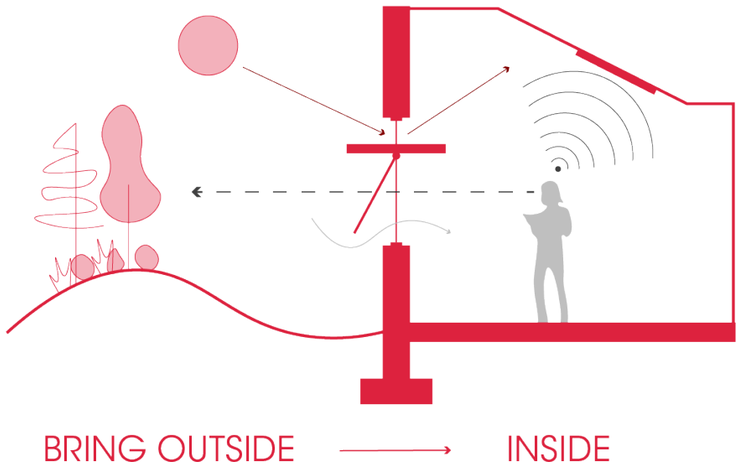
DIVERSITY & WELLNESS

CARE & LAUNCH

A variety of learning spaces is not only necessary for addressing different types of learners, it's crucial to provided spaces that foster support and care versus spaces that inspire students for launching to high school. Themes of prospect and refuge are seen throughout the physical environment at Sacajawea. Activity is always on display within classrooms physically and visually to excite and inspire students. While calmer spaces like study rooms or the two outdoor courtyards are just off the main circulation. This sensory balance allows students to explore and engage their social brains while having spaces for reflection and calm.

BRINGING OUTSIDE IN

Nature isn't far away when students are inside Sacajawea. High amounts of glazing provide ample natural daylight. The two courtyards nestle in between the learning neighborhoods, one focused on engagement and learning and the other providing a calm sensory-focused space. Classrooms can open their windows to these spaces, and each learning neighborhood has a direct connection out, allowing for seamless indoor/outdoor learning.





EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT
PROGRAMS ON DISPLAY



ART GALLERY



SCIENCE



CTE SUITE



GYMNASIUM

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

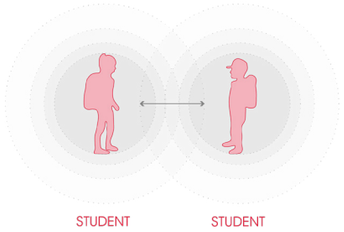
CURRICULUM

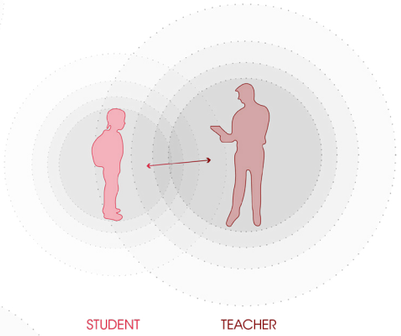
DESIGNATED ZONES

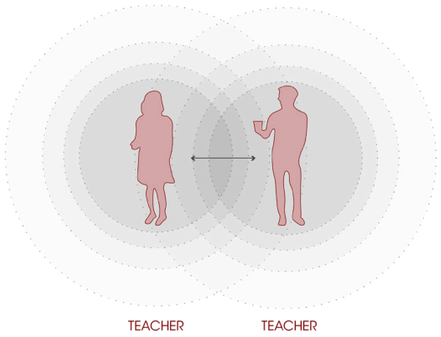
Within the larger community spaces like the learning commons, designated zones were created to give staff the flexibility of how they wanted to teach that day. There's research and technology zones, individual places to read, and movable tables for various sizes of group work, creating an adaptable space where students can find where they learn best.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS - STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

These spaces also provide the opportunity for staff and students to build relationships and connections. The open concept "living room" of these spaces gives breathing room and a place for pause, which was impossible in the original facility. These relationships create safe and welcoming environments for students to take risks, ask questions, and engage more openly in lesson plans.







*"This is a really unique opportunity to have a brand new building that is **set up exactly the way our staff have envisioned it.** They had a lot of input in the design and to have these spaces that are going to be flexible and **we are going to be able to plan and do things that aren't possible in [the existing] space**."*
~ Tracey Leydy (Principal)

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

LEARNING VARIETY

SCALED SPACES FOR ALL LEARNERS

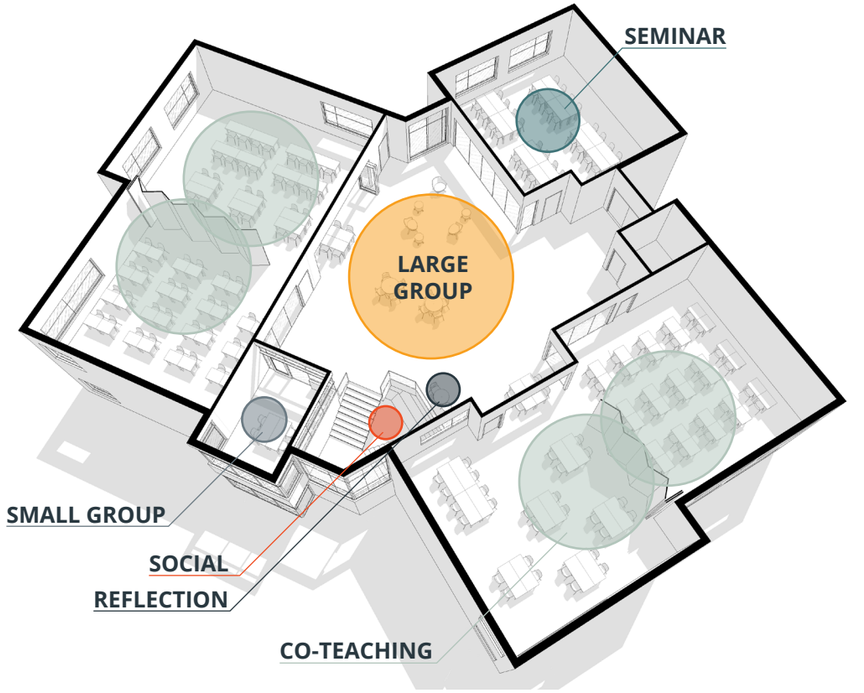
No one learner is the same. Some students thrive in the traditional classroom environment, while others need to move around and learn through doing. Sacajawea provides all of these different scales of spaces. Students have the autonomy to choose how they learn best, and can find peaceful places of refuge directly off the main learning spaces. Though these spaces might be quiet, their proximity to the larger, more active spaces ensures that no student will feel isolated or left behind.

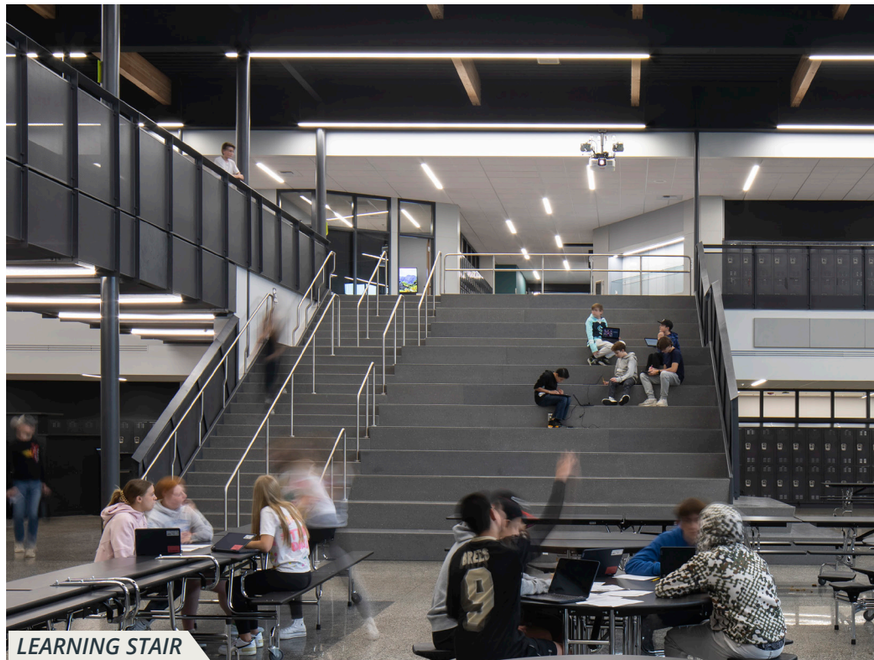


LECTURE



READING NOOK





LEARNING STAIR

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

ADAPTABILITY & FLEXIBILITY

TRANSFORMER

All the large gathering spaces in Sacajawea act like transformers. They can be adapted quickly due to their use of:

- Mobile furniture - Most furniture is lightweight or on wheels, allowing for easy mobility and rearranging of the space
- Varied Seating Types - Students can decide between typical desk and chair, benches, living room-like chairs, or media tables
- Open Zoning - Zones are clearly defined and can be rearranged to support various types of activities
- Power - Points of connection to power and data are scattered across the open space, allowing for various technology locations.

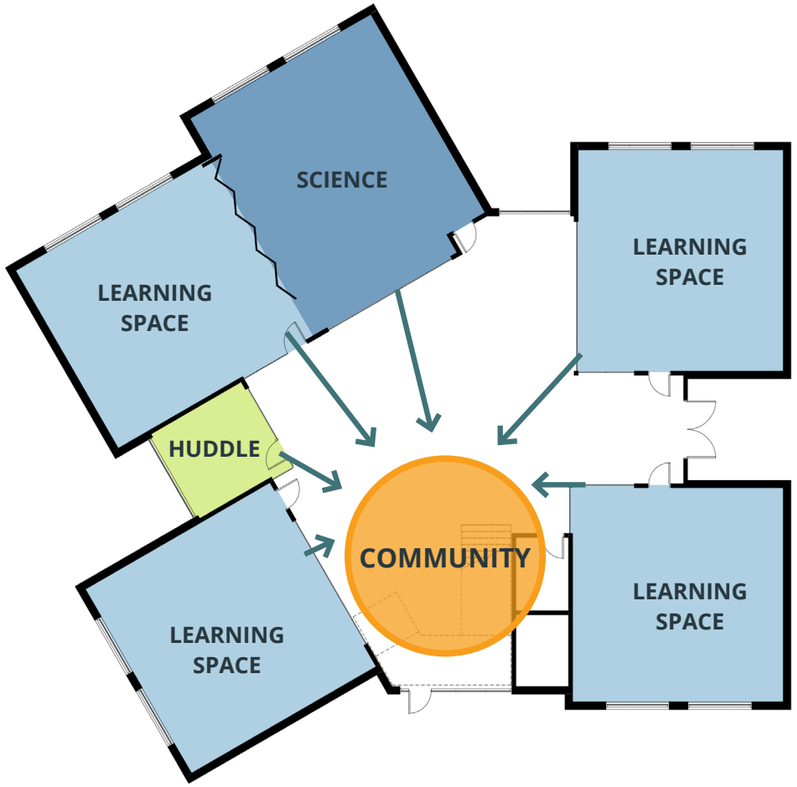


EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

INNOVATION

DISSOLVING BARRIERS THROUGH BELONGING

The town square model creates a closeness between programs, which translates to a broader sense of belonging and community for the students. Learning stairs are central to each neighborhood, accompanied with soft, flexible seating. These areas can organically serve as informal working zones, casual social areas, places for refuge, and spontaneous connections. Their connection to the outdoors with expansive glazing creates a place students want to be, a place to let their guard down and build connections with peers and teachers. It functions as a spur off the main large group gathering, again giving students the agency to find where they are most comfortable to learn, socialize, and foster a sense of community.





EXTERIOR OF NEIGHBORHOOD



NEIGHBORHOOD STAIR

RESULTS EDUCATIONAL GOALS



BELONGING

Breaking from organizing the school around departments, a sense of belonging for both students and staff is established by programs becoming a neighborhood. Students build confidence by having the autonomy to find their own way of learning. They are seen and supported by an entire community.



COMFORT

The defined space outside of the programs gives a sense of scale and student-centric zones. Physical and emotional comfort is created through passive supervision, daylighting strategies, and putting student learning and achievements on display.



COLLABORATION

Once grouped within their neighborhoods, increased collaboration can happen between all programs. The town square offers a place for students and staff of all programs to engage in dialogue, showcase their work, and work together to develop cross-program solutions.







RESULTS DISTRICT GOALS

COMMUNITY

Students have the support of their learning neighborhood, the school as a whole, and the outside community.

> ***"I think [the design] gives community to the school** - that was one of the things the design focus group worked hard to accomplish, to have the feeling of community."*
> *~ Greg Forsyth (Director of Capital Projects)*

PROGRAM EXPOSURE

Each program invites new students to see all opportunities within the school through display and exposing the program's operations.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

By creating learning spaces that range in sizes, relationships can be built between students and teachers, creating an environment that brings out the safety and comfort of learning.



RESULTS COMMUNITY GOALS

TRADITION

A top goal for the community was to preserve the last 60 years of tradition and celebrate the history of excellence at Sacajawea Middle School. All programs have become standouts in the culture of Sacajawea, and showcasing these programs is integral to the design. Display cases and locations for art were reserved throughout the building to bring the outside community in and show the current students of Sacajawea how rich the history of the school is.

SENSITIVITY

To mitigate anxieties over the new school, it was essential to show the community by using scale, orientation, and materiality the facility would not overwhelm the existing features of the neighborhood. Placing the building along the lower portions of the site and shifting geometries to avoid being parallel to residents gave the illusion that the school was smaller than it is. Red and black masonry, dark metal accents and concrete site features tied the character to existing features like the water tower, Jefferson Elementary, and the historic churches and homes in the area.



"It's beautiful. It's a great space, [there's] lots of cool common areas, great classrooms, faculties, etc. [I] just love the layout [and] natural light [here]."
~ Brandon Vasquez (SPS Parent)

RESULTS UNINTENDED

COMMUNITY USE

It was anticipated that the school would be used for recreational sports after hours. Because of the large, open gathering spaces, Sacajawea has become a center for the community, hosting church groups, political group discussions, and even a large Girl Scout troop rally. The office manager noted she has seen a spike in interest of booking the learning commons, nutritional commons, and the gymnasium since opening three years ago.

GATHERING

The neighborhood gathering spaces are being used by students before and after school to socialize and build their community. Students will rush to drop their things into the classrooms and immediately flood back out to the social hub, promoting connection and social development.

WELCOMING

The learning commons, which programmatically houses the library and the media center, has become one of the most inclusive spaces in Sacajawea. As opposed to the traditional closed-off library, students are not intimidated to enter this space for studying, research, or leisure reading. Its adjacency to the nutritional commons allows students to flow seamlessly between high activity and socialization to calm and individual spaces.

FLEX

Scattered throughout the building are several flex classrooms. Due to its adjacency to the commons, one has become the College and Career Readiness classroom, exposing all students to their opportunities beyond the middle school classroom.

> *"I like that there are no doors to the library. I like books a lot; I read a lot of books.* ***I just like the idea that everyone is always welcome to come and get a book****."*
> *~ Julia Contay (8th grader)*



LEARNING COMMONS



GYMNASIUM

RESULTS STEWARDSHIP

COMMUNITY

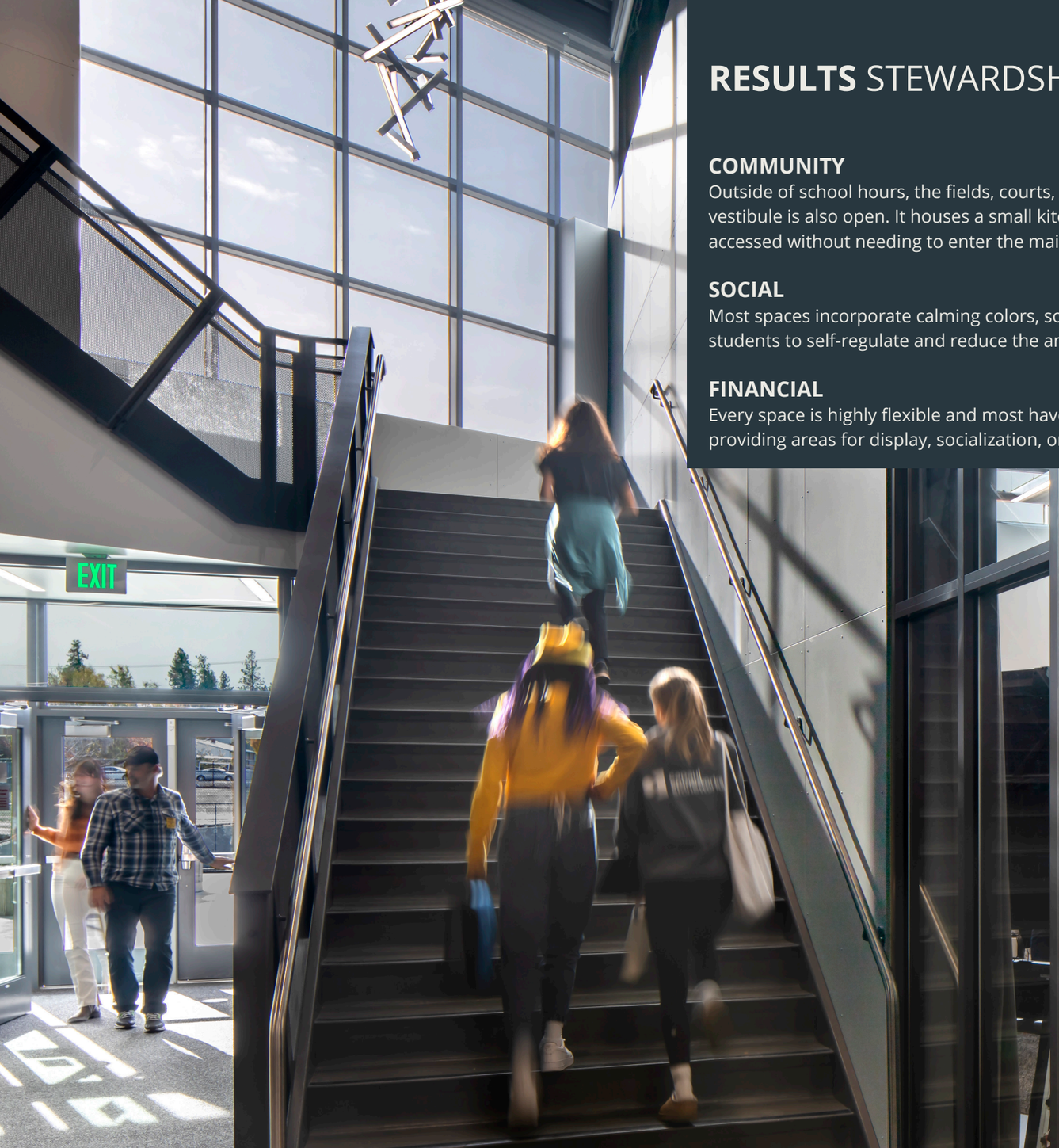
Outside of school hours, the fields, courts, gymnasium, and playground are accessible to the general public. A community space just inside the school vestibule is also open. It houses a small kitchenette, a food and clothing pantry, and a washer and dryer. This space is open to the public and can be accessed without needing to enter the main area of the school, making it usable during school hours.

SOCIAL

Most spaces incorporate calming colors, soft forms, balanced acoustics, and connection to nature. These trauma-informed spaces create moments for students to self-regulate and reduce the amount of high stimulation that often comes with daily school activities.

FINANCIAL

Every space is highly flexible and most have dual purposes, stretching the value of every square foot. Even the corridors reduce wasted space by providing areas for display, socialization, or learning opportunities.





RESULTS SUSTAINABILITY AND WELLNESS

NATIVE & NATURAL

The use of turf, native plants, and natural rock bed landscapes were used to support local ecosystems, build long-term climate resilience, and cut down on maintenance and irrigation costs.

SENSORY

To promote wellness of all students, sensory spaces and a sensory courtyard were designed with close proximity to BI/DI classrooms and resources. The sensory courtyard engages touch, sound, smell, and sight. Each node of the trail serves a different sense, giving students the refuge they need to regulate during the school day.

DAYLIGHTING

Daylighting is essential for student success, well-being, and sustainability. Classrooms, breakout spaces, and corridors all have direct connection to daylight and the outdoors, no matter how central in the building students and staff are.





"It feels very open, there's lots and lots of light. ***There's times when you're standing almost in the middle of the building and there's four walls between you and the outside, but you can still see outside*** *because there's just so many windows and so much light."*
~ Aaron Allen (Teacher)



"There's a whole group of people here, and has been for a long time, who really care about kids - [people] ***who just care about kids' experiences and want to make this just the best middle school.***"
~ Aaron Allen (Teacher)