Sunset Junior High School

Davis School District | Sunset, Utah



GSBS ARCHITECTS

Executive Summary

Sunset Junior High School reimagines the junior high experience around the specific needs of early adolescence. Serving 1,200 students in grades 7–9, the school recognizes that junior high learners are forming identity, seeking independence, building social confidence, and preparing for the greater expectations of high school. The project responds with a learning environment that balances autonomy with support, movement with structure, and belonging with choice.

The design grew from a process of understanding before designing. Davis School District, school leaders, educators, students, parents, and the design team used an extended programming period to study the junior high experience, test planning assumptions, and develop a shared vision for the school. That work shaped four guideposts, **Welcome, Engage, Connect, and Launch**, which became the bridge between engagement, planning, and design.

Sunset also reflects Davis School District's commitment to long-term value. Multiuse spaces, flexible learning environments, durable materials, high-performance systems, renewable energy strategies, and a design EUI of 22 support both daily use and future stewardship.

The completed school turns a compact, sloping site into a connected campus organized around a daylit Commons and two clear points of arrival. Six Small Learning Communities break the scale of the 230,000-square-foot building into more personal academic neighborhoods, while project labs, collaboration zones, performance spaces, the Media Center, Counseling Center, Teen Center, Teacher Academy, and outdoor areas support the varied ways junior high students learn, gather, seek support, and grow. More than a replacement school, Sunset Junior High is a student-centered, community-serving, and future-ready model for what a 21st century junior high can be.



Scope of Work and Budget

Name: Sunset Junior High School

Location: Sunset, Utah

District: Davis School District

Grades: 7-9

Capacity: 1,200 students

Size: 230,000 SF

Site: 11.3 acres

Project Type: Rebuild of existing school on same site.

Opening Date: August 2025

Final Cost: $95,783,811





Research and Engagement

Understanding the Junior High Learner

Sunset Junior High School serves 1,200 students in grades 7–9, an age group often misunderstood in school planning. Junior high students occupy a distinct and often complex developmental stage, shaped by rapid cognitive, social, and emotional change. They are forming identity, seeking independence, navigating social relationships, and developing the habits that will shape their next stage of learning.



For Davis School District and the design team, serving this community required more than planning for capacity. It required a deeper understanding of early-adolescent development and the daily realities of junior high students, teachers, and principals. The team worked to translate that understanding into a school environment shaped by empathy, flexibility, exploration, connection, and student choice.



Junior high students need environments that balance:

- Autonomy and Guidance
- Movement and Structure
- Connection and Retreat
- Visibility and Dignity
- Choice and Belonging

Two Communities, One School

Sunset Junior High serves students from two distinct communities, with most students coming from Sunset City and others traveling by bus from South Weber City. The socio-economic makeup of these areas differs considerably, making the effort to bridge this divide an important part of the school's culture. School educators and leaders work on this continually, and it became a key consideration in the design of the learning environment.

The new Sunset Junior High replaces an existing school building on a compact 11.3-acre site with a 35-foot elevation change from back to front. Built while the original school still occupied the site, the project required careful planning around limited acreage, ongoing school operations, and different arrival patterns.

Rather than allowing those constraints to divide the student experience, the design uses two main entries that converge at a shared center of school life, giving walkers, bicyclists, bus riders, and students arriving by car clear paths into the same school community.





Design Challenge:

- Bridge Two Communities
- Multiple Arrival Patterns
- Active Campus
- Compact, Sloping Site

This construction aerial shows the original Sunset Junior High in the foreground with the new school under construction behind it, illustrating the tight replacement-school site and the need to plan around ongoing operations, limited acreage, and a significant back to front grade change.

Understanding Before Designing

Davis School District planned Sunset Junior High while also developing a district-wide junior high prototype. Because Sunset's compact site, grade change, and two-community context required a site-specific response, the District selected separate architectural teams for the two efforts.

When the District paused both projects for one year, our team used that time to deepen the programming process. Through workshops, benchmarking tours, stakeholder discussions, and focused study of early-adolescent learners, the team tested assumptions about junior high planning and developed an educational specification rooted in the needs of students, teachers, and the District.

The Pause Became Productive.

The extended process gave the team time to test assumptions, study junior high learners, and align stakeholders around a shared educational vision.



Blue Sky Workshop



2018

- *Project awarded in July 2018*
  District put project on hold
- *District formed Steering Committee in November 2018*

2019

- *Planning Process began in January 2019*
- *Blue Sky Workshop held in February 2019*

2020

- *Planning process continued to February 2020*

Project went on hold again due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2021

- *Design Process restarted in October 2021*

2022

- *Design Process continued and bond was passed by voters to fund construction.*

2023

- *Construction began in March 2023*

2025

- *School opened in August 2025*
- *Original school was demolished and site work completed.*

Engaging the Stakeholders

The project brought together a broad group of stakeholders whose perspectives shaped both the design process and the final outcome. The stakeholder group included district leaders in curriculum, instruction, technology, facilities, and operations; student and parent representatives; the three Sunset Junior High principals whose tenures spanned the course of the project; and principals from three other district junior high schools.

At the outset, the team convened a collaborative Blue Sky Workshop to imagine what Sunset Junior High could become. Through interactive visioning sessions, participants shared aspirations for community, flexibility, belonging, student engagement, career and technical exploration, safety and security, future adaptability, and academic innovation.

Those conversations helped the team move beyond generic school planning assumptions. Stakeholder input pointed toward a school that would balance independence with supervision, provide a smaller sense of community within a large building, support active and varied learning, normalize student support, and give teachers better spaces and tools for collaboration.

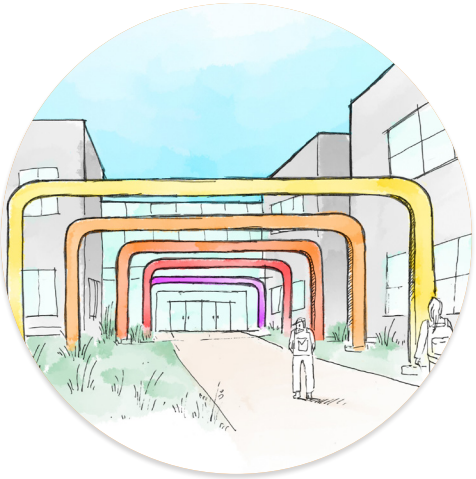
This broad stakeholder group remained engaged through an extended programming period, after Davis School District paused both the Sunset replacement school and a district-wide junior high prototype effort for one year. That additional time allowed the team to test assumptions, study the junior high experience more deeply, and align around a shared educational vision.

Blue Sky Workshop Takeaways:



From Engagement to Guideposts

These guideposts became the bridge between engagement and design. They shaped the organization of the school, the character of shared spaces, the scale of academic neighborhoods, the approach to student support, and the flexibility built into learning environments.



Welcome

From the entry sequence to the building's scale and transparency, everything is designed to create a positive first impression and make it easy to find your way.



Engage

Student-centered spaces that support active learning, collaboration, making, performing, and exhibiting work.



Connect

Flexible settings for small and large groups, visual transparency between learning spaces, and windows that connect students to daylight, nature, and the surrounding neighborhood.



Launch

Preparing students for high school and beyond through exposure to exploratory learning, tools, and environments they'll encounter in future academic and professional settings.

Physical Environment

Environment, Building, and Site



Sunset Junior High replaces an early-1960s school on a compact 11.3-acre site shaped by a 35-foot elevation change from back to front. Rather than treating that grade change as an obstacle, the design uses it to organize arrival, circulation, daylight, and vertical connection.

The 230,000-square-foot school is organized around two main entries at different levels: one serving bus circulation, and the other supporting walkers, bicyclists, and parent drop-off. Both entries converge in the Commons, giving students from different arrival patterns a shared point of welcome.

From this central hub, students move intuitively through the school, making a large junior high feel connected, legible, and easy to navigate.



A challenging site became an organizing strategy

The grade change supports two active entries, vertical connection, and a shared center for school life.



The Commons as a Shared Horizon

At the heart of Sunset Junior High, the daylit Commons brings circulation, student life, and shared school functions into one active, central space. Like a shared horizon, it gives students from different arrival patterns and communities a common point of orientation, connection, and possibility.

One Space, Many Verbs:

Dine | Gather | Navigate | Perform | Present | Assemble | Connect

Small Learning Communities within a Large School

Sunset serves 1,200 students, but its academic organization is intentionally scaled around smaller student communities. Six Small Learning Communities divide the building into more personal, navigable neighborhoods, giving students a stronger sense of identity within the larger school.

Each Small Learning Community includes classrooms, open collaboration spaces, and a shared project lab. Sliding glass storefronts connect classrooms to collaboration zones, creating transparency and allowing learning to expand beyond the classroom.

This organization helps the school feel both large enough to offer broad opportunities and small enough for students to feel known, oriented, and connected.





- Six Small Learning Communities
- Smaller academic cohorts within a large school
- Transparency between classrooms and shared learning areas
- Classrooms + collaboration zones + project labs
- Supports team-based and interdisciplinary learning and teaching

Large School. Smaller Home Bases.

Six academic neighborhoods help students navigate the building, build relationships, and feel part of a more personal learning community.



*All 7th graders at Sunset JHS read **The Outsiders.** Did you know that S.E. Hinton wrote **The Outsiders** when she was still a teenager?*

Designed to Inspire & Motivate

Sunset Junior High was designed as a brain-friendly learning environment for early adolescence, balancing openness and structure, energy and calm, visibility and choice. Daylight, transparency, color, and environmental graphics help students understand where they are and what is possible around them.

- ***Identity through Color:*** Each Small Learning Community is distinguished by a unique color and graphic language.
- ***Learning on Display:*** Glass throughout the school creates views into classrooms, collaboration zones, and academic wings.
- ***A Horizon of Possibility:*** Sunset-inspired interiors connect transition, optimism, and early-adolescent growth.
- ***Visible Opportunities:*** Views into elective, performance, and applied learning spaces invite students to see what is happening around them and imagine where their interests might lead.
- ***Subjects as Signposts:*** Large-scale wall graphics feature subjects such as geography, math, science, and language arts, helping students navigate the school while turning the path to class into moments of discovery.













Innovation Through Multiuse and Flexibility

Sunset's most innovative spaces are designed to do more than one thing well.

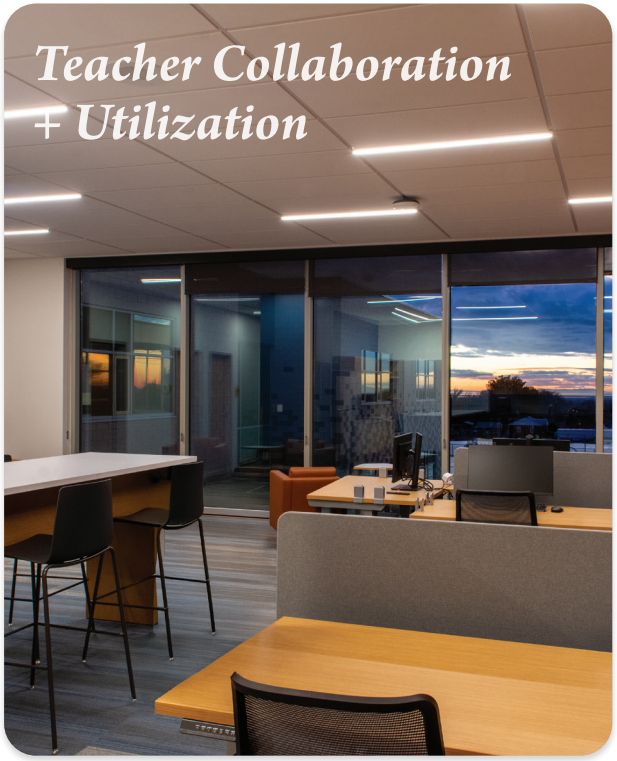
A central innovation of the planning strategy is the efficient and flexible use of space. Rather than assigning rooms to single purposes that sit vacant for portions of the day, the building was designed around adaptable, multi-use environments that support a variety of activities throughout the school day.

Dedicated Professional Learning Community (PLC) spaces are one of the clearest examples. These shared open-office environments give teachers areas outside the classroom for planning, collaboration, mentoring, and instructional coaching. Each PLC accommodates up to ten teacher workstations with adjacent conference, storage, restroom, and kitchenette support.

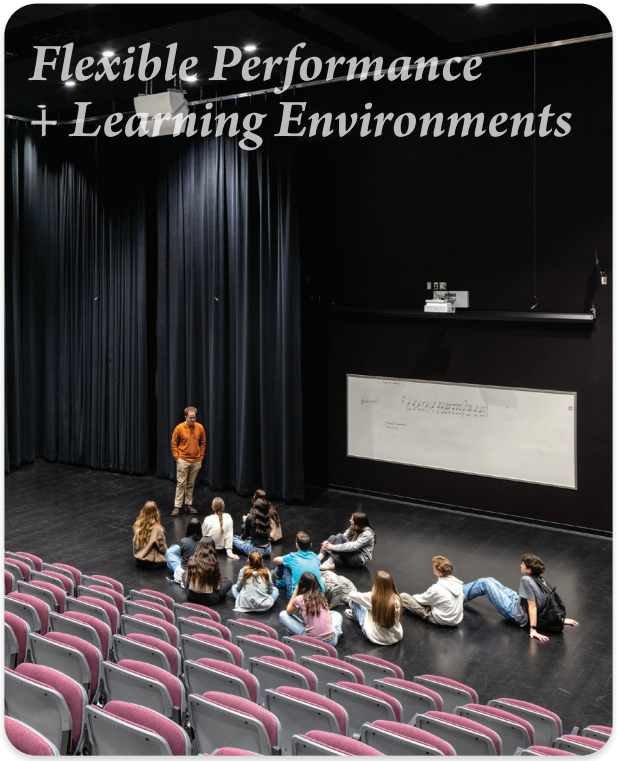
By relocating teacher planning and storage functions into shared collaborative hubs, instructional spaces remain available for continuous student use. Classrooms also gain more usable wall and floor area for flexible furniture arrangements and adaptable learning configurations.



A multiuse daily space supports dining, gathering, presentation, performance, and assembly.



PLC spaces support teaming while keeping classrooms focused on student learning.



The Black Box is one example of Sunset's adaptable learning and performance spaces, with movable seating for a range of uses.

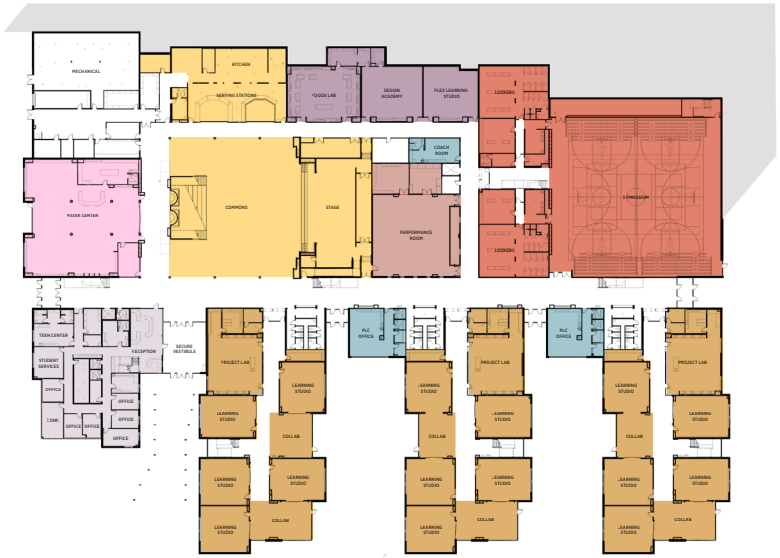
Belonging, Access, Choice



DEPARTMENT LEGEND

- PHYSICAL EDUCATION
- CORE CLASSROOMS & SUPPORT
- COMMONS
- PERFORMANCE
- CTE
- MEDIA CENTER
- ADMINISTRATION
- COUNSELING
- TEACHER ACADEMY
- FACULTY SUPPORT

Level Two



DEPARTMENT LEGEND

- PHYSICAL EDUCATION
- CORE CLASSROOMS & SUPPORT
- COMMONS
- PERFORMANCE
- CTE
- MEDIA CENTER
- ADMINISTRATION
- COUNSELING
- TEACHER ACADEMY
- FACULTY SUPPORT

Level One

Equity at Sunset is embedded in the organization of the school. Students in grades 7–9 do not all learn, socialize, recharge, arrive, or seek support in the same way, so the building provides a range of settings that support different needs, preferences, and levels of comfort.

The Commons gives students an active shared environment for gathering, dining, performance, and schoolwide identity. Directly adjacent, the Media Center offers a quieter alternative during lunch or unstructured time. Student support spaces, including the Teen Center and visible Counseling Center, make guidance, basic-needs resources, and care more accessible within daily school life.

Inclusion also shows up in everyday logistics. Two entries respond to different arrival patterns while leading students to the same shared Commons. Hybrid restrooms with fully enclosed stalls, occupancy indicators, and shared sink areas support privacy, visibility, and flexibility. The main entry vestibule accommodates students who arrive before the official start of the day, creating a safe and welcoming place to gather before classes begin.

Different needs. Shared belonging.

Sunset gives students active places, quiet alternatives, visible support, clear arrival, and dignified access to resources.

Sustainability & Wellness

Wellness is embedded in the daily student experience through daylight-filled gathering areas, quieter retreat spaces, outdoor courtyards, play areas, performance environments, visible counseling resources, and the Teen Center. The Counseling Center's visible location overlooking the Commons and warm, residentially inspired interior help normalize access to guidance.

Durability also supports wellness and stewardship. Mock-ups and iterative problem-solving helped refine guardrail details, writeable wall performance, portal entry paint, polished concrete texture, and finish quality for the demands of daily junior high use.







Educational Environment

Educational Vision and Goals

Sunset Junior High was planned for students in grades 7–9, an age group with distinct academic, social, and emotional needs. These students are forming identity, seeking independence, developing executive function, building social confidence, and preparing for the greater expectations of high school.

The educational vision responds to this stage of life with a school organized around belonging, movement, choice, collaboration, supervision, wellness, and growth. Six Small Learning Communities give students academic cohorts within the larger school and support team-based teaching, interdisciplinary work, and stronger day-to-day relationships.

The guideposts developed through engagement, **Welcome, Engage, Connect, and Launch**, helped translate the District's aspirations into learning spaces that orient students, support active participation, strengthen relationships, and prepare learners for high school and beyond.



Designed for Early Adolescence

Belonging | Movement | Choice | Collaboration | Supervision | Wellness | Growth

Extending the Learning Environment

Sunset's educational environment extends learning beyond the classroom without losing the structure of the academic neighborhood. Each Small Learning Community includes core classrooms, collaboration zones, and a shared project lab, placing flexible, project-ready space directly within the daily path of students and teachers.

This proximity gives teachers options. Instruction can remain focused in the classroom, expand into the collaboration zone for group work or coaching, move into the project lab for hands-on exploration, or use the adjacent study courtyard for reflection, discussion, or a change of setting. The same framework supports different subjects, teaching styles, and learning preferences.

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Classrooms open onto shared collaboration zones, with study courtyards beyond, allowing teaching and learning to shift between focused instruction, group work, hands-on exploration, and reflection within the same academic neighborhood.



More Than One Way to Teach and Learn

Sunset's learning spaces were planned to support varied teaching methods, not a single classroom setup. Teachers can shift between direct instruction, coaching, discussion, independent work, small-group collaboration, and presentation without relying on one fixed room arrangement.

Furniture plays a central role in that flexibility. The design team worked closely with the furniture dealer to treat furnishings as part of the educational environment, not a late-stage selection. Room proportions, circulation, technology, storage, and furniture layouts were considered together so daily teaching and learning could work as intended.

Professional Learning Community spaces extend that flexibility to teachers, giving teams dedicated space for planning, collaboration, conferencing, and preparation while classrooms remain focused on student learning.

This approach carried into implementation. Through mock-ups and iterative problem-solving, the design team and contractor refined durability, constructability, material performance, and the long-term resilience of the school's interior environment.





- Coaching
- Small Groups
- Individual Work
- Presentation
- Discussion
- Movement
- Quiet Study

Flexible by Design



Exploration as Part of the Junior High Experience

Sunset's educational environment extends beyond core academic instruction to give junior high students meaningful opportunities to explore interests, build confidence, and discover future pathways. Performing arts, CTE, media, athletics, and applied learning spaces are visible and accessible parts of the school experience, reinforcing the guidepost of Launch.



Perform

Choir | Band | Drama | Practice Rooms | Black Box Theater



Make

Sewing Lab | Teaching Kitchen | Maker's Lab | Project-Based Learning Areas



Move

Gymnasium and Physical Education spaces support wellness, competition and school identity



Teach

The Teacher Academy embeds future educators in the daily life of a functioning junior high.

Results

Sunset Junior High demonstrates how a complex replacement school can do more than solve capacity, infrastructure, and site challenges. The project transforms a constrained, active campus into a developmentally responsive learning environment for students in grades 7–9.

The design supports the skills students need for high school, lifelong learning, and future opportunities: collaboration, communication, creative thinking, adaptability, and confidence. Those goals are not treated as abstract educational ideals. They are supported through the daily environment, including Small Learning Communities, project labs, collaboration zones, performance spaces, visible student support, and flexible places to gather, learn, make, and present.

The guideposts developed through the process, **Welcome, Engage, Connect, and Launch**, connect the needs of early-adolescent learners to the physical and instructional design of the school.

A junior high designed for what comes next.



Open Learning, Integrated Safety

For Davis School District, safety and security are integral to the planning and design of learning environments. Sunset responds with a campus that balances openness, visibility, and collaboration with secure, resilient infrastructure.

During daily use, learning suites, collaboration zones, and shared spaces support clear sightlines and natural supervision, allowing the school to remain open and connected. During emergencies, integrated security strategies allow areas of the building to be secured quickly and efficiently.







Open by Design

- Clear Sightlines
- Natural Supervision
- Transparent Learning Suites
- Collaborative Shared Spaces

Secure by Strategy

- Secure Access Controls
- Automated Door Systems
- Zoned Lockdown Capabilities
- Integrated Communication Technologies

A Rebuilt Campus—A Stronger Community Resource



Original School

The community's goal was to replace the original 1964 Sunset Junior High, which had cramped classrooms, outdated infrastructure, no air conditioning, and did not meet modern seismic safety standards. The new campus provides modern educational facilities with collaborative learning spaces while preserving the school's role as a warm, welcoming hub for students and families.

The project also reshaped the site for broader community value. By moving the school to the upper east half of the site, the lower west half became an expansive public open space with an artificial turf soccer field, walking track, pickleball and basketball courts, and water-wise xeriscape landscaping.

This open space is now closer to neighboring homes, making it more visible, accessible, and inviting for everyday community use.



Value & Stewardship

Sunset Junior High reflects strong value and responsible stewardship by focusing on long-term benefits for students, teachers, and the community. The District prioritized energy-efficient systems, natural daylight, flexible spaces, and high classroom utilization to reduce operating costs while supporting effective learning for years to come.

The building's organization helps spaces work harder throughout the day. The Commons combines dining, gathering, presentation, performance, and assembly functions in one daily-use environment. Professional Learning Community spaces support teacher collaboration while keeping classrooms available for instruction. Flexible academic neighborhoods, project labs, and shared collaboration areas allow the school to adapt as teaching methods and student needs change.

Durability also supports stewardship. Timeless design, long-life materials, exposed CMU, large-format tile wainscot, durable flooring in circulation areas, full-height tile in restrooms and kitchen areas, and carefully refined details protect the District's investment in a school designed for heavy daily use.



*This quote from **The Outsiders**, which every seventh grader at Sunset Junior High reads, embodies the school's values.*

Built for long-term value.

Efficient systems + flexible space + high utilization + durable materials = lasting public investment.

Value Matrix

Stewardship Strategy	How Sunset Delivers Value
Efficient Operations	Energy-efficient systems, natural daylight, and reduced operating costs help the District direct more resources toward teaching, learning, and student support.
High Utilization	The Commons, PLCs, project labs, and collaboration zones help spaces work harder throughout the day.
Durable Investment	Exposed CMU, large-format tile wainscot, durable flooring, full-height tile, and refined details support heavy junior high use.
Adaptable Future	Flexible academic neighborhoods and shared spaces can respond to changing teaching methods and student needs.

Sustainability & Wellness Outcomes

Sunset Junior High pairs ultra-low-energy systems with daily comfort, indoor air quality, and visible sustainability for students and the community.



Ultra-Low Energy Performance

Projected EUI: 22

Ground-source heat pumps, high-efficiency boilers, evaporative cooling, radiant heating, and a rooftop solar PV array reduce energy demand and support long-term operating savings.



Healthier Indoor Environment

Low-velocity thermal displacement ventilation supplies air gently near the floor, moving stale air upward and out of occupied spaces to support indoor air quality, comfort, and wellness.



Sustainability Students Can See

Daylighting, glare control, the rooftop PV array, radiant heating, and high-performance systems make sustainability part of the school's learning environment, not just its infrastructure.



Sunset translates the complexities of early adolescence into a school built to ***Welcome, Engage, Connect, and Launch.***

For Students
A school that supports identity, confidence, exploration, wellness, and belonging.

For Teachers
Collaborative spaces, flexible tools, and better support for varied teaching methods.

For the District
A secure, efficient, ultra-low-energy model for junior high learning.

For the Community
A rebuilt campus with modern educational spaces and a more visible, accessible public resource.