Washburn Rural North Middle School

Topeka, Kansas



Multistudio

A4LE Project Awards - New Build

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Table of contents

Executive Summary 04

Scope of Work & Budget 05

Research & Engagement 06

Physical Environment 10

Educational Environment 17

Results 22


This project operationalizes Universal Design for Learning and biophilic design to create a calmer, more connected environment that advances socio-emotional well-being and makes learning visible—everywhere.

Executive Summary

Washburn Rural North Middle School was designed to relieve middle school overcrowding in Auburn-Washburn USD 437 and to support a reconfiguration that moves sixth grade into the middle school setting. The project also aimed to strengthen student well-being, connection to nature, and the flexibility of the learning environment.

The school is organized around a “Forest Walk” circulation spine that unites dining, library, and commons into a central learning hub. This spine supports social and academic interaction across grades while reducing the building footprint by nearly 10,000 square feet. The design embeds Universal Design for Learning and biophilic principles to create a calmer, more connected experience that supports socio-emotional well-being and reinforces how “learning happens everywhere.”



Photography by Michael Robinson

Scope of Work and Budget

Washburn Rural North Middle School

The project necessitated full architectural design services for Washburn Rural North Middle School, a major project within Auburn-Washburn USD 437's $145 million bond program approved in April 2022. The scope included programming, site planning, architectural design, and coordination of engineering to deliver a new middle school aligned with the district's grade-realignment and capacity goals.

The district emphasized completing the project on time, staying within budget, and prioritizing local partnerships. The school opened in May 2025 and met those goals. The design team led a UDL-informed design process, incorporating student surveys and workshops to shape the "Forest Walk," grade-level neighborhoods, and indoor-outdoor learning settings. The building was delivered within the district's bond-level budget targets, balancing a reduced footprint with high-value program spaces and local stewardship.

- → District Name: Auburn-Washburn USD 437
- → Occupancy Date: Start of the 2025 school year
- → Student Capacity: 650 students
- → Site Size in Acres: 57 Acres
- → Building SF: 138,000 SF
- → Total Cost: $44 million

A Strategic Response to Overcrowding

Washburn Rural North Middle School responds to a clear community need: middle school overcrowding in a district serving more than 6,000 students.

The district's strategic planning process identified capacity and grade configuration as major priorities, and the solution included building a second middle school and moving sixth graders from elementary to middle school.

Stakeholders included students, teachers, administrators, families, the Board of Education, and community members who supported the bond. The district pointed to local businesses and partners as important collaborators during construction.

At the onset the team understood that overcrowding was an issue and that a smooth transition from elementary to middle school was necessary. The project had to balance new construction with fiscal discipline, local procurement, and long-term flexibility.

The school and district also had existing assets to build on, including a strong community support base, a strategic planning process, and a clear educational culture centered on relationships and student growth. District materials describe the school community as one that values high expectations, belonging, and collaboration.







To support inclusive design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles were embedded from the outset. Using a co-developed "Deck of Spaces," the team aligned pedagogy with UDL's core framework—engagement (why), representation (what), and action and expression (how)—ensuring continuity between district goals, educator input, and spatial outcomes throughout the process.

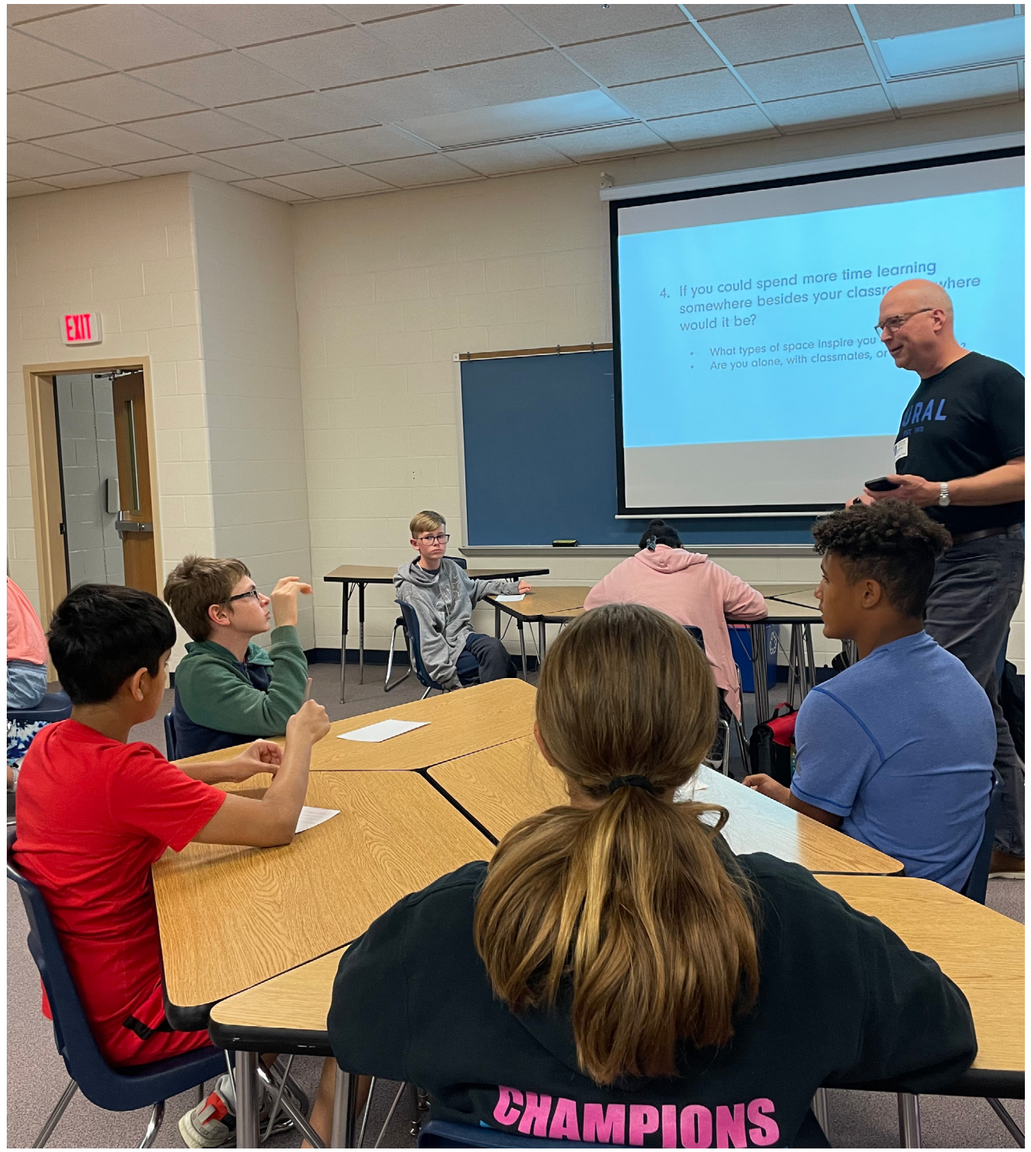
Grounded in Community Voice

The design was informed by student and faculty feedback through surveys and workshops. The district's broader planning process was also shaped by thousands of stakeholders, which established the bond and the facility priorities that followed.

That engagement added value by making the school more responsive to actual student and community needs rather than abstract assumptions. The project became an expression of community investment, and district leaders framed it as a shared achievement that benefits both current students and future cohorts.



Student Insights Driving Design Response



Breakthroughs from student surveys revealed unanimous pride in the logo as the school's defining symbol, strong connections to team pods and specific teachers/classrooms as "home bases," and high value placed on active, calming areas like the gym, library, and cafeteria for learning and socializing.

Critically, students flagged bathrooms (dirty/busy), hallways (overcrowded/rushed), and the office (intimidating) as top frustrations—insights that drove targeted redesigns to enhance comfort, flow, and approachability.

Key Survey Insights

→ Unanimous Symbol: Every student selected the logo to represent the school, signaling a powerful branding breakthrough.

→ Beloved Spaces: Classrooms/teachers, pods (comfy/active), gym (playful), library (calm), and cafeteria (social hub) topped favorites for safety, learning, and joy.

→ Pain Points: Hallways and bathrooms drew overwhelming negativity for crowding/dirt; office seen as "scary" despite utility.

Shaped by Landscape, Light, and Movement

Set near a wooded edge, the building's design connects students and teachers to the rural Kansas landscape through daylight, vegetation, seasonal change, and sky. The most prominent organizing feature is the "Forest Walk," which serves as both a circulation route and a social-learning spine.

The building fits its community context through a restrained palette of wood, brick, and metal, while also referencing the local landscape's rhythm and scale. The school's grade-level wings each connect to indoor and outdoor collaboration zones, reinforcing a campus-like experience that feels rooted in place.



Context as Catalyst

Rural context drives every decision—from massing to materiality—shaping a cohesive architectural response grounded in place.





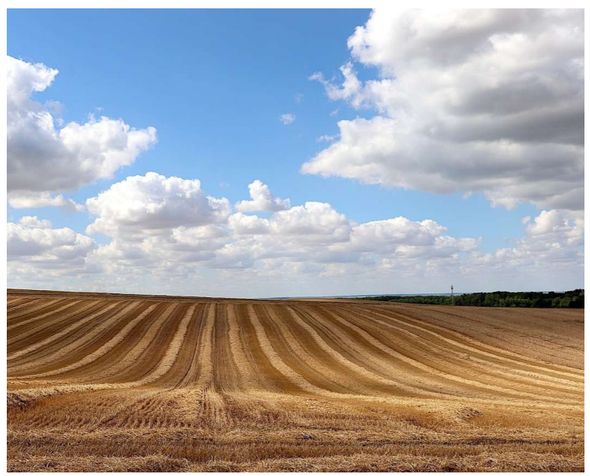
The environment is meant to inspire through natural light, outdoor access, and a layout that encourages discovery across “space between” settings of varied scale and privacy. Those qualities also support sustainability and wellness by bringing students closer to nature and by encouraging movement, daylighting, and healthier learning conditions.

The project also advances DEI by providing intuitive wayfinding, varied settings for different comfort levels, and grade-level collaboration spaces that support belonging and participation. In practical terms, that means students can choose between more public and more private settings depending on task, mood, and social need.







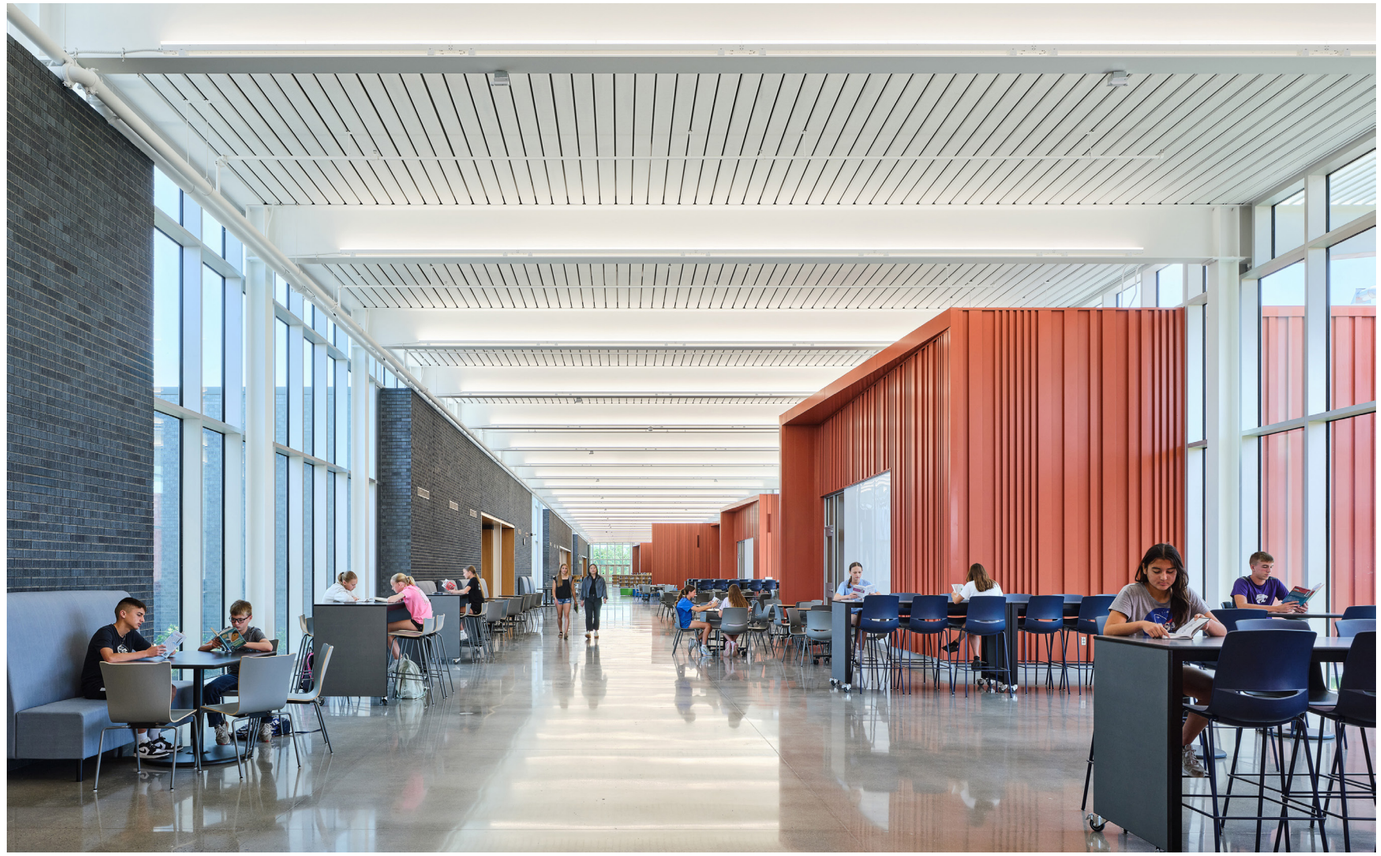


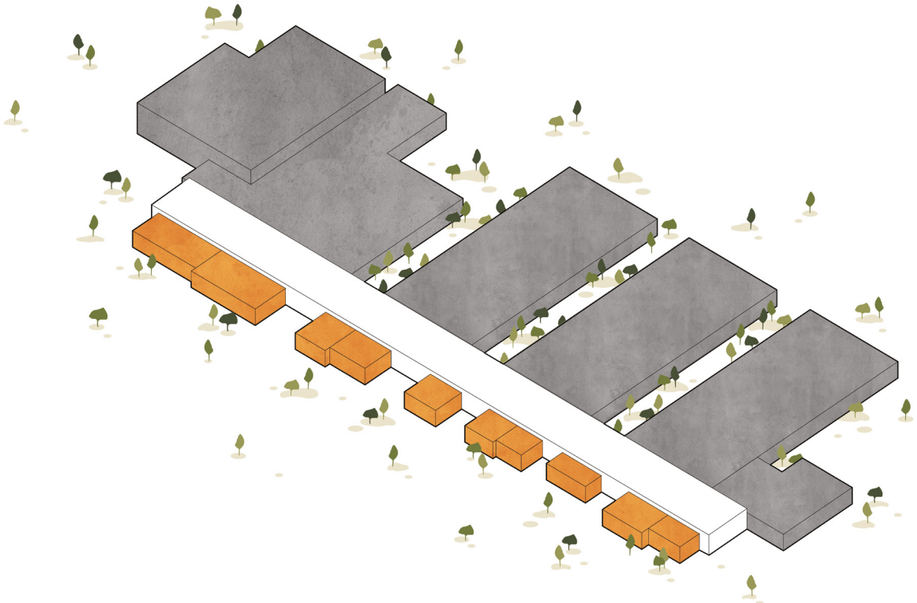


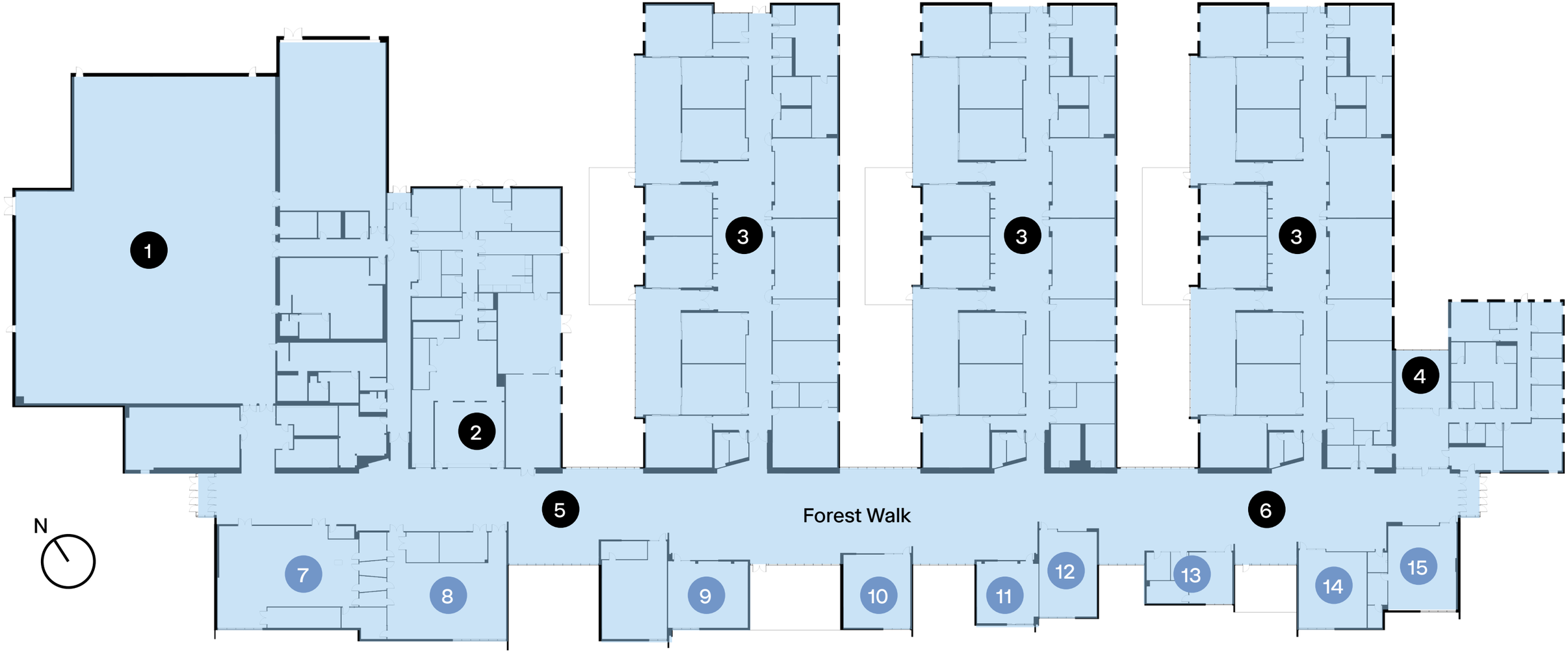


Playful forms align the Forest Walk, celebrating hands-on exploratory programs like art, music, and environmental science. Arranged like pebbles scattered along a path, students may also explore the "space between" – each unique in scale, privacy, and connection to the outdoors.









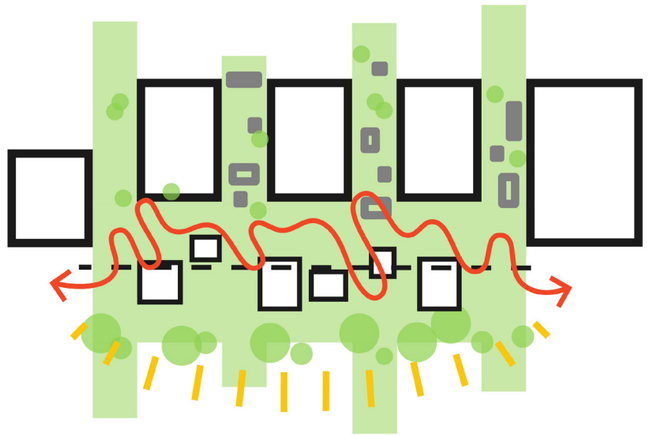
General Education

1. Gym
2. Kitchen
3. Grade Level
4. Admin
5. Cafeteria
6. Library/Media

Exploratory Programs

7. Band
8. Choir
9. Family & Consumer Science
10. Environmental Science
11. Foreign Language
12. Technology
13. Makerspace
14. Digital Storytelling
15. Art

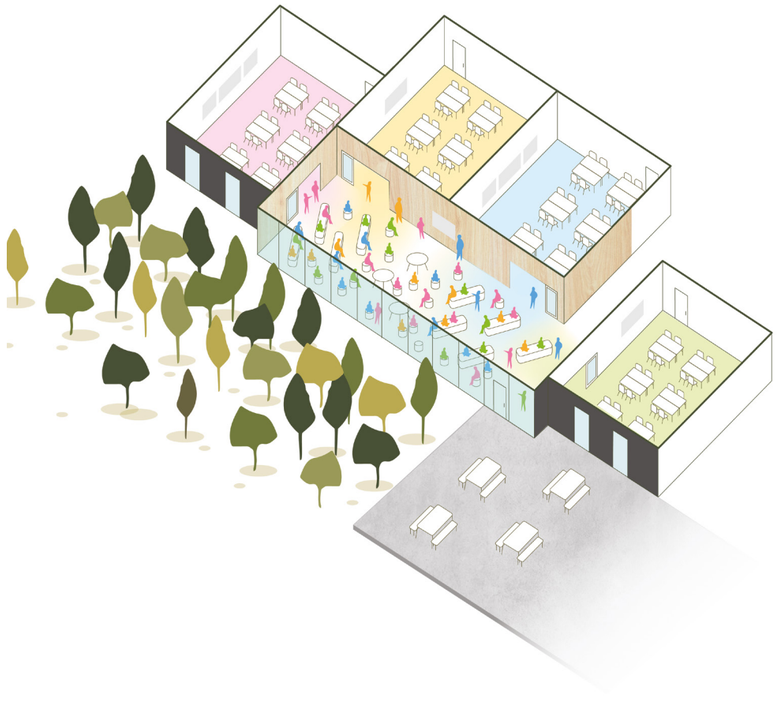


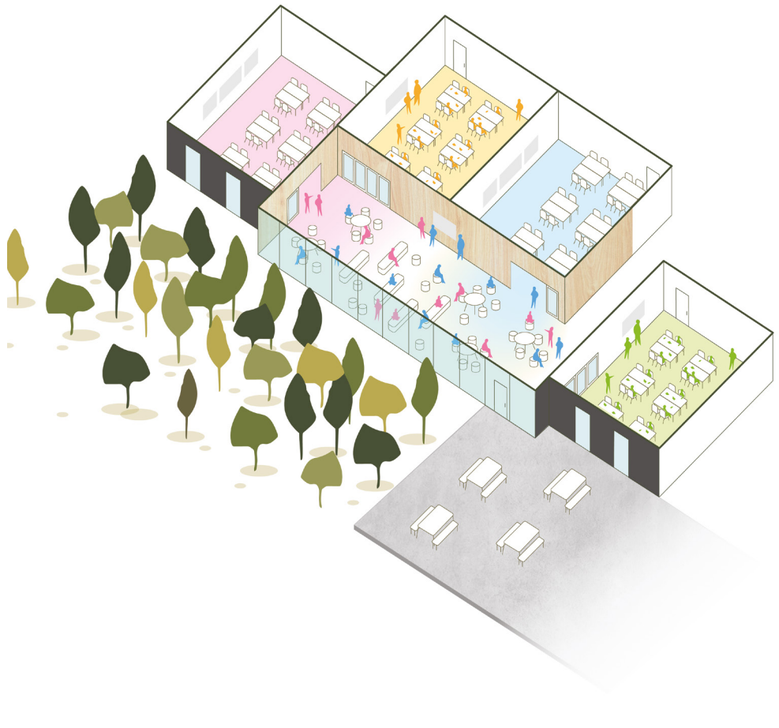


Linking Play & Learning Through Nature

The school's organizing feature, a central circulation spine known as the "Forest Walk," draws inspiration from the adjacent woodland edge. This corridor weaves together public commons, dining, and the library into a continuous, flexible, learning-focused environment.

Educational Environment







The educational vision centers on socio-emotional well-being, collaboration, and the idea that “learning happens everywhere.” The school is designed to support the transition into middle school while helping sixth graders adapt developmentally and academically.

The environment supports curriculum through open, flexible commons spaces, connected grade-level teams, and immediate access to library, dining, and outdoor learning areas. That combination makes it easier to use project-based learning, interdisciplinary work, and informal teaching moments throughout the day.

It also supports multiple teaching and learning styles by offering a variety of settings, from open collaborative zones to quieter “space between” areas.

The building is adaptable because its program areas are intentionally consolidated and the layout leaves room for different uses over time

The most innovative educational move is the integration of social, academic, and outdoor learning into one spatial system rather than separating them into isolated functions. That structure turns the building into an instructional tool.

A Community of Connected Spaces

By extending the general classroom, a shared commons becomes a flexible and adaptable resource to facilitate team teaching, hands-on learning, and classroom break-out activities.

This space, facilitating community functions, acts as a threshold to other auxiliary and outdoor learning opportunities. For this reason, it is aptly clad in wood per the building language established with the project's simple material composition.







Outdoor Learning

Just beyond the classroom commons, every grade level is connected to its own outdoor learning environment.

A series of interconnected work spaces are interwoven with a tapestry of aspen trees and native grasses.





Advancing Learning, Stewardship, and Pride

The project achieves educational goals by creating an environment that supports middle school transition, student autonomy, collaboration, and emotional well-being. It also aligns with district goals by addressing overcrowding and helping the district reconfigure grades more effectively.

It serves community goals by turning a widely supported bond investment into a tangible public asset and by strengthening local pride in public education. The district explicitly credited community participation for making the project possible

An important unintended achievement is the strengthening of community identity around the school, especially through student excitement about being the first class to occupy and shape the new building. The project also appears to have amplified public confidence in the district's ability to deliver major capital work responsibly.

The project demonstrates good stewardship by delivering a major facility within the district's stated time and budget goals while also reducing square footage and prioritizing local partnerships. Its sustainability and wellness outcomes include daylight access, outdoor learning, native planting, connection to nature, and a healthier spatial experience for students and staff.

"They nailed the balance of beauty and function-ality. It doesn't feel like a middle school. It feels like a college. It's warm and inviting, and exactly what our students need."

Charles Stoltenberg
Principal, Washburn Rural North Middle School

750 seats designed to support sixth-grade transition and belonging

Student input shaped spaces for autonomy, connection, and expression

Expanded middle school access for a district serving 6,000+ students

