

A4LE KELLEY TANNER
INNOVATION AWARD

Traverse Academy

A Transitional Program for Adolescents
in Acute Mental Health Crisis



Title of the Innovation: Traverse Academy: A Transitional Program for Adolescents in Acute Mental Health Crisis

Date Submitted: August 12, 2024

Applicant: MOA ARCHITECTURE

School District: Cherry Creek School District
Dr. Tony J. Poole
Assistant Superintendent of Special Populations

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MAIN ENTRANCE



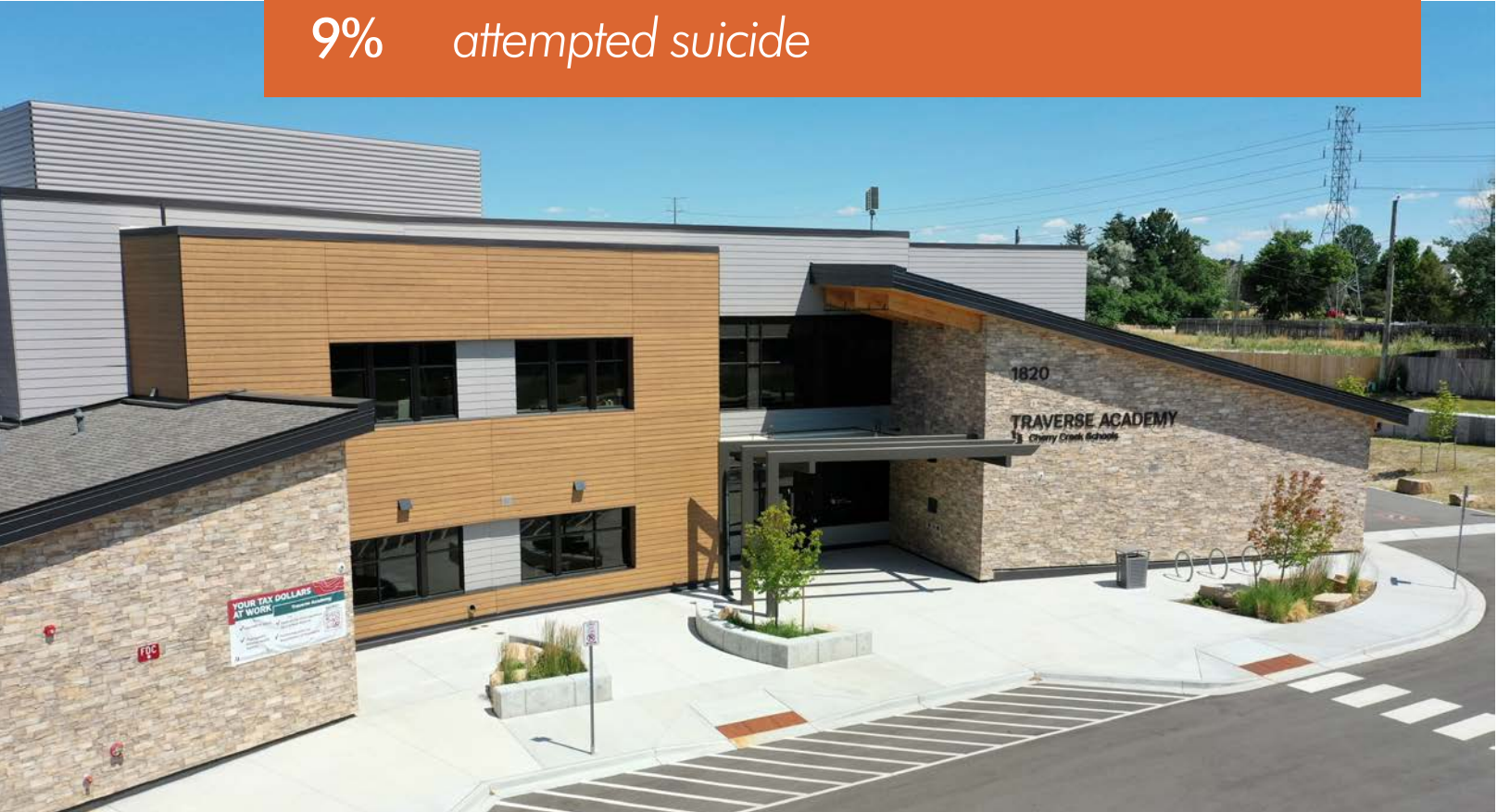
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THE INSPIRATION (NEED):

The adolescent mental health crisis in Colorado has been developing for twenty years. The steady decline of state level funding, changes in Federal laws, and the constant fluctuation of insurance reimbursement rates have driven the state to a crisis point. Suicide has become the leading cause of death for adolescents in Colorado. Day Treatment and Residential Facilities for youth in crisis have steadily closed their doors, from 77 facilities ten years ago to 13 presently. Actively suicidal adolescents who get sent to Children's hospitals most often have no placement options and end up being boarded in the emergency room for weeks at a time, or they are released to go back to their families and schools where they continue to live in crisis.

IN 2023, THE CDC REPORTED THAT AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:

- 20% seriously considered attempting suicide
- 16% made a suicide plan
- 9% attempted suicide

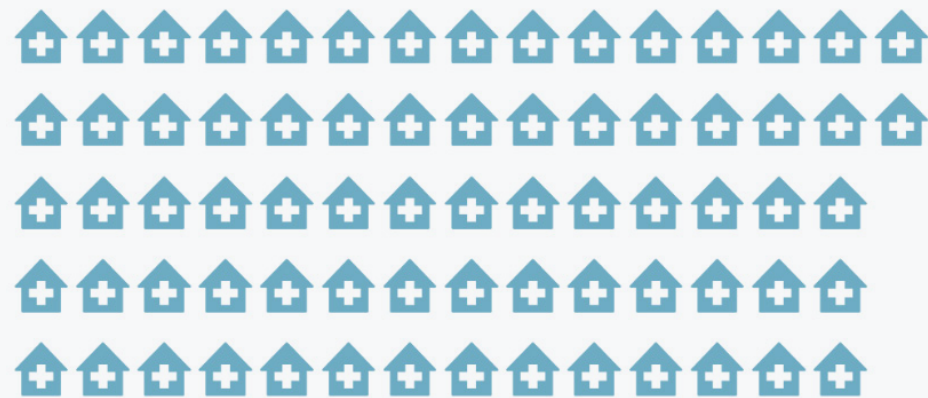


In any given year....



We place 50-100 students in day treatment facilities at a cost of \$1.25 to 3 million

10 years ago...



The State of Colorado had 77 placement options.

Today...



The State of Colorado has 13 placement options

At any given moment...

CCSD has an active waiting list of 5-15 students in crisis.

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THE DEVELOPMENT (SOLUTION):

The Cherry Creek School District in Colorado decided to do something innovative to address the problem by opening the first of its kind in the nation, school district built and operated, therapeutic level mental health facility.

THE IMPLEMENTATION:

Serving students ages 10-18, Traverse Academy has just completed its first year. With 22 educational staff and 6 licensed mental health clinicians, Traverse offers a full range of educational offerings as well as 9 hours per week of individual, group, and family therapy, all at no cost or barrier to students in crisis. Thoughtfully designed and built to destigmatize and deinstitutionalize mental health treatment, the building is as unique as the concept. Instead of a traditional school lobby or an institutional registration desk, the front entrance features an airy coffee shop with comfortable seating. Two family therapy rooms tucked in the back corners allow private intake opportunities. The building itself is built on a curve, with splashes of color, warm lighting, and wood features throughout. Four therapy home bases allow for students to be grouped by age and severity. Each is a warm and inviting classroom area with plentiful natural lighting and nook seating in the large windows, as well as two individual therapy rooms with adjustable LED lighting and one group therapy room. In addition, there are two transition classrooms where students go when they are ready to transition back to their neighborhood schools. These rooms are traditional square classrooms with lockers so students get the sense of a normal school environment. They also include an individual and a group therapy room in case students continue to need therapeutic interventions. To ensure students don't miss out on any required educational opportunities there are two innovation classrooms. One of them is clean for robotics, and one messy for art such as paint splatter projects and science labs. These provide educational opportunities to ensure students don't miss out on their curriculum. There is also a half size gym with a basketball court and a two story climbing wall and a cafeteria with gorgeous views sits at the opposite end of the building from the gym. The gorgeous outdoor space has amphitheater style classrooms bookending the property, linked by a walking path that leads to an outdoor seating area, a labyrinth walking feature, and a sport court.

"You see these kids hurt. I've seen them hurt for a really long time. I've seen families have to navigate really, really difficult situations, red tape... so to be able to offer something like this in my lifetime and their lifetime, it's pretty incredible"

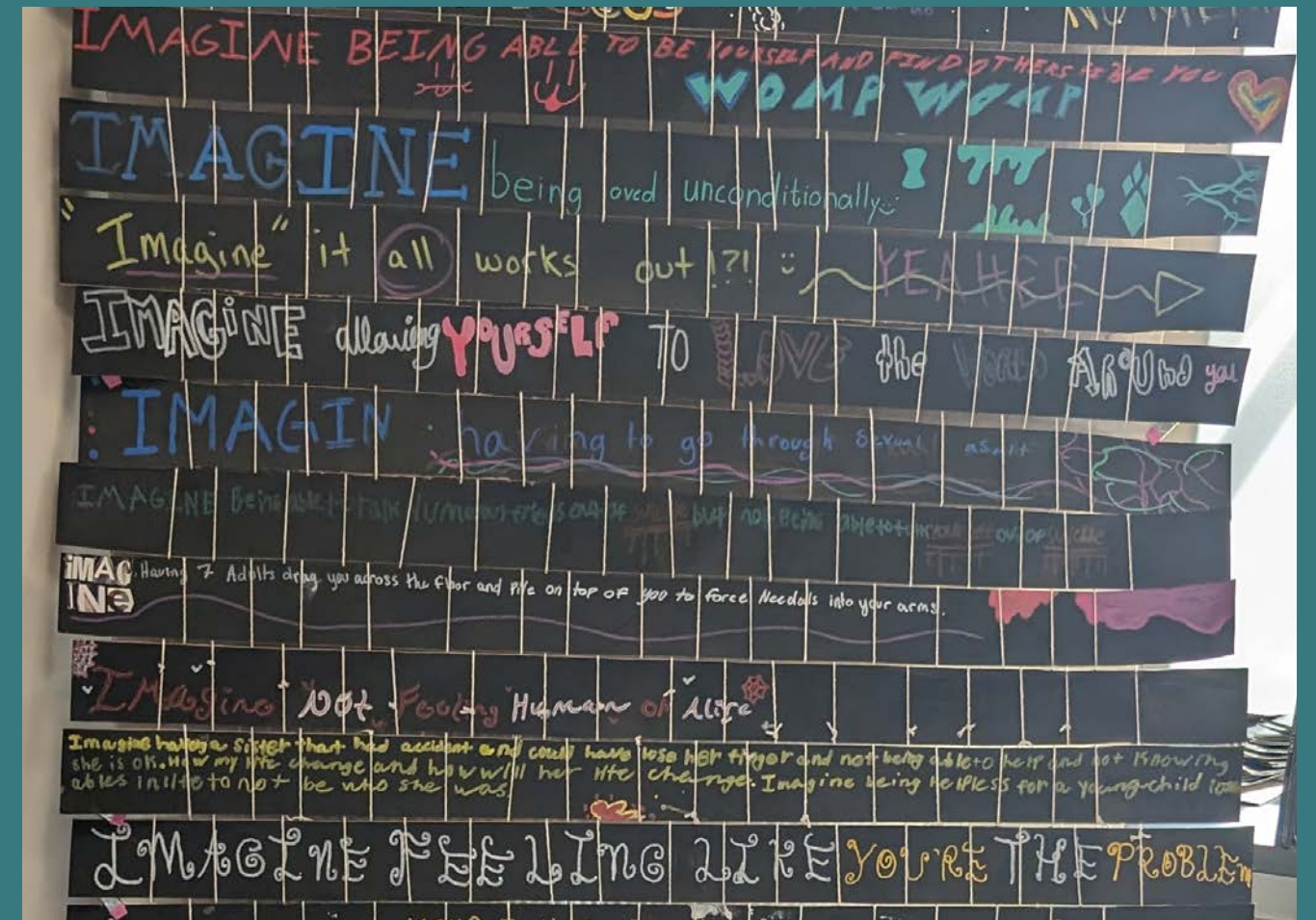
KIMBERLY AVALOS, TRAVERSE PRINCIPAL

THE IMPACT:

Fifty students completed the program at Traverse this year. The students came with a range of mental health issues, from suicidality to schizophrenia, but they all had one thing in common – other treatment options were unavailable. Each of the 50 students were successful in their treatment and follow up reports from the parents and students show that they continue to use the skills learned at Traverse. All have found success reintegrating back in to their regular school and home lives. By all accounts, Traverse Academy has been a success. Traverse will continue to do what it was designed to do – save lives in a unique and special setting filled with amazing people.

"I went to therapy nonstop, but none of it seemed like a home. And that's why I love this place so much. It seems like a home, and they are welcoming and accepting and they just cherish every small detail for the benefit of the kids."

TRAVERSE CLASSROOM AIDE (PREVIOUS CCSD STUDENT)



STUDENT ART PROJECT
First year of program graduates

Value Alignment

What need inspired your innovation and how does it help students and the community?

In the fall of 2019 the Cherry Creek School District lost 7 students to suicide. Most had been waiting to get in to day treatment or had been in day treatment and released too soon due to insurance issues. This was a symptom of the collapse of mental health care for adolescents in Colorado. The Denver Metro area has seen a steady decline of mental health facilities for adolescents. At that time it had fallen from 77 to 36 viable facilities. As of today, there are only 13. The crisis is so bad that Children's Hospital houses suicidal adolescents in their emergency room because there is nowhere else for them to go. The Cherry Creek School District (CCSD) decided that something had to be done to help kids in crisis. Thus the idea for Traverse Academy was born. This helps students AND families who are in crisis because students finally have a viable therapeutic option.

What educational environment planning opportunities does your innovation address?

Traverse is both a school and a mental health facility, with equal attention played to both aspects. The large, bright, open classrooms have individual and group therapy rooms attached to them, as well as clinician and teacher offices connecting them. Students can get their educational AND therapeutic needs met, all in their safe home base classroom. There are also two innovation rooms, one with a pottery wheel and a kiln, as well as a half size gym with a two story climbing wall. Students who come to Traverse to get help in the darkest of times do not have to miss out on any of their education or the fun things a normal school has to offer. This is truly unique. Most day treatment facilities have one classroom and a few tutors.

What are the cost impacts of implementing the innovation?

Following the Behavioral Health Institute Guidelines, we categorized spaces according to risk levels, with ligature resistance being a top priority in areas where students have minimal supervision. Ligature-resistant construction, which is essential for preventing self-harm and ensuring student safety, is notably more expensive than standard construction. While the cost of implementing this facility with ligature-resistant construction at high risk areas was higher than that of traditional school facilities, the investment was crucial for ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable students.

How can costs be mitigated for underserved communities?

There are any number of ways to implement a program like Traverse. The first recommendation would be for the district to hire its own clinicians. This removes the need to engage in Medicaid or private insurance billing, a major obstacle in underserved communities. These professionals can often be hired through grants. As for the physical site, a new building isn't necessary. A current building can be remodeled, or a district could use a portion of an existing wing. The possibilities are endless. The important thing is that kids have access to treatment without insurance barriers.



Value Alignment

MOA will pursue Federal and State grants dedicated to mental health and educational infrastructure improvements. This includes considering the reuse of existing facilities of similar scale and retrofitting them to support innovative programs. Additionally, MOA will explore Public-Private Partnerships, Nonprofit Collaborations, and Philanthropic Contributions through Foundations and Trusts focused on mental health and suicide prevention. Another strategy is to form a consortium with other school districts to share costs and resources, and to seek collaborative grants. By combining these approaches, underserved communities can reduce the costs of implementing acute mental health facilities, ensuring that all students have access to the necessary resources and support for their well-being.

How have you shared and/or communicated your innovation and made it available to those who need it?

MOA/CCSD have presented this project at the National AIA conference in San Francisco in 2023 as a “Bridging the Gap” and also at A4LE in Chicago in 2023. The CCSD has promoted Traverse heavily in the media, highlighting it as an actual solution to the mental health crisis. Tours are always available to interested school districts or agencies. Last fall, when Traverse opened, the Assistant Superintendent essentially became a full-time tour guide. The Cherry Creek School District (CCSD) wants to help other school districts and communities, emphasizing that the mental health crisis won’t resolve itself without collective effort. Traverse consistently had a waiting list of at least 50 students throughout the year, highlighting the significant need in our communities.

How have you balanced personal and professional goals with implementation of the innovation?

The personal and professional goals were the same: “Do something to decrease adolescent suicides and provide a much needed mental health resource for kids!” In this, Traverse was wildly successful in its first year.

Who benefits from your innovation and how do you define and measure that impact?

Students and their families greatly benefit from Traverse because it provides a crucial treatment option when a student is in deep crisis. Our families have expressed immense gratitude and excitement for having access to this unique resource, the first of its kind in the country. We measure success by tracking how many students successfully complete the program, monitoring recidivism rates, and conducting regular follow-up check-ins with students and families after they complete treatment. During a tour of the building, one student was moved to tears, saying, “I never imagined I’d get to go to school in a place this nice.”

What success has your innovation achieved?

After opening in mid-October of 2023, 50 students completed the therapeutic program at Traverse by the time school got out in May of 2024. Think about that for a minute – that is 50 lives saved. That is success. The students and parents both report that the treatment and the skills they learned have had a strong and lasting impact. We are looking forward to year 2!

What is the realistic potential for expanding its impact?

Traverse, or a similar program, is highly replicable and should be expanded. Programs like this are needed across Colorado and in many other states as well. The media often highlights the “Youth Mental Health Crisis,” emphasizing the urgent need for solutions. Traverse is one such solution. While it will take more than just Traverse to fully address this crisis, it is a remarkable beginning and an excellent model for others to follow.



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OUTDOOR HEALING COURTYARD



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STUDENT DROP OFF



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CAFÉ



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READING NOOKS



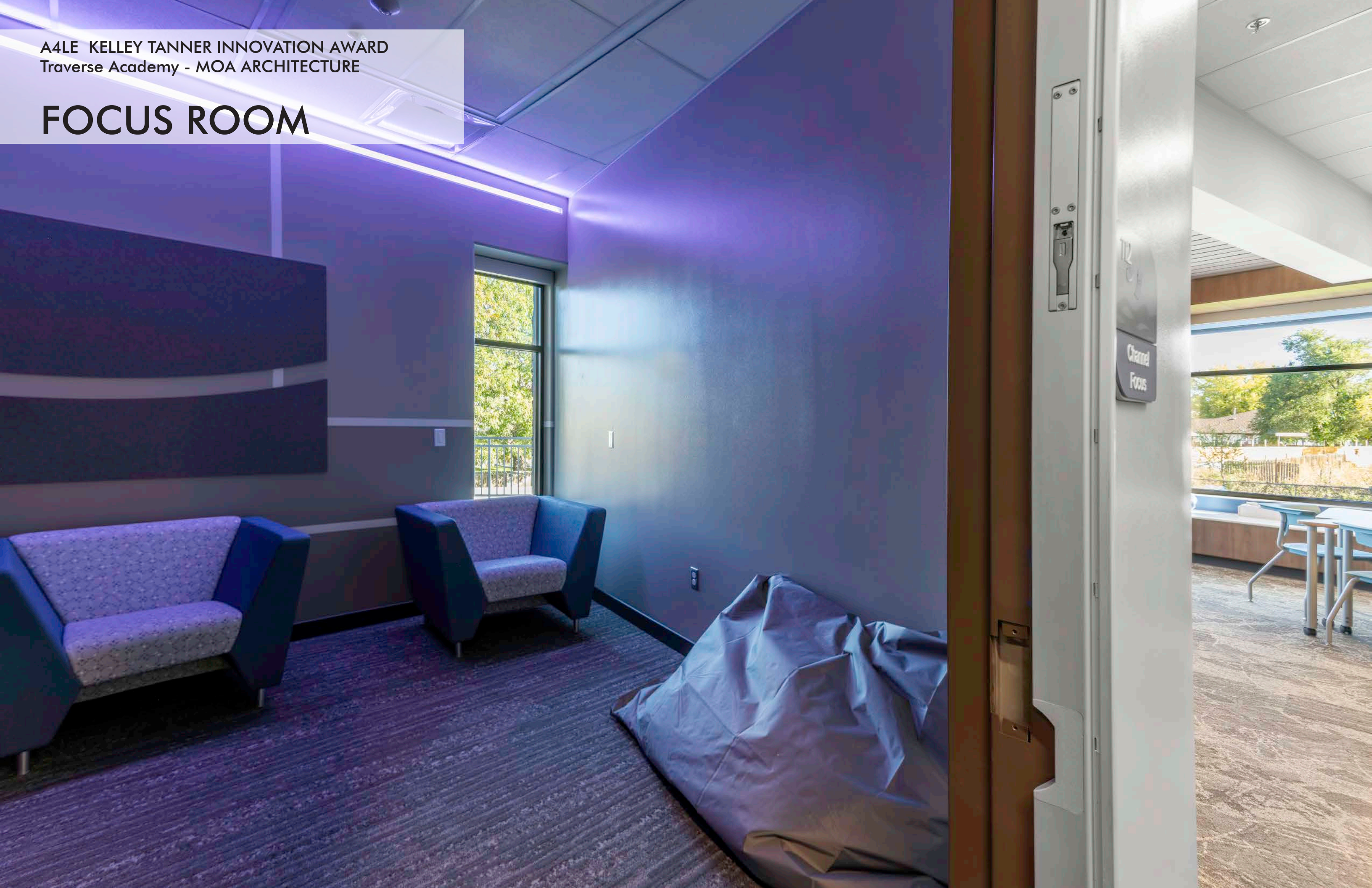
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HOMEBASE



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FOCUS ROOM



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GROUP THERAPY



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HOMEBASE TEACHING WALL



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INNOVATION LAB

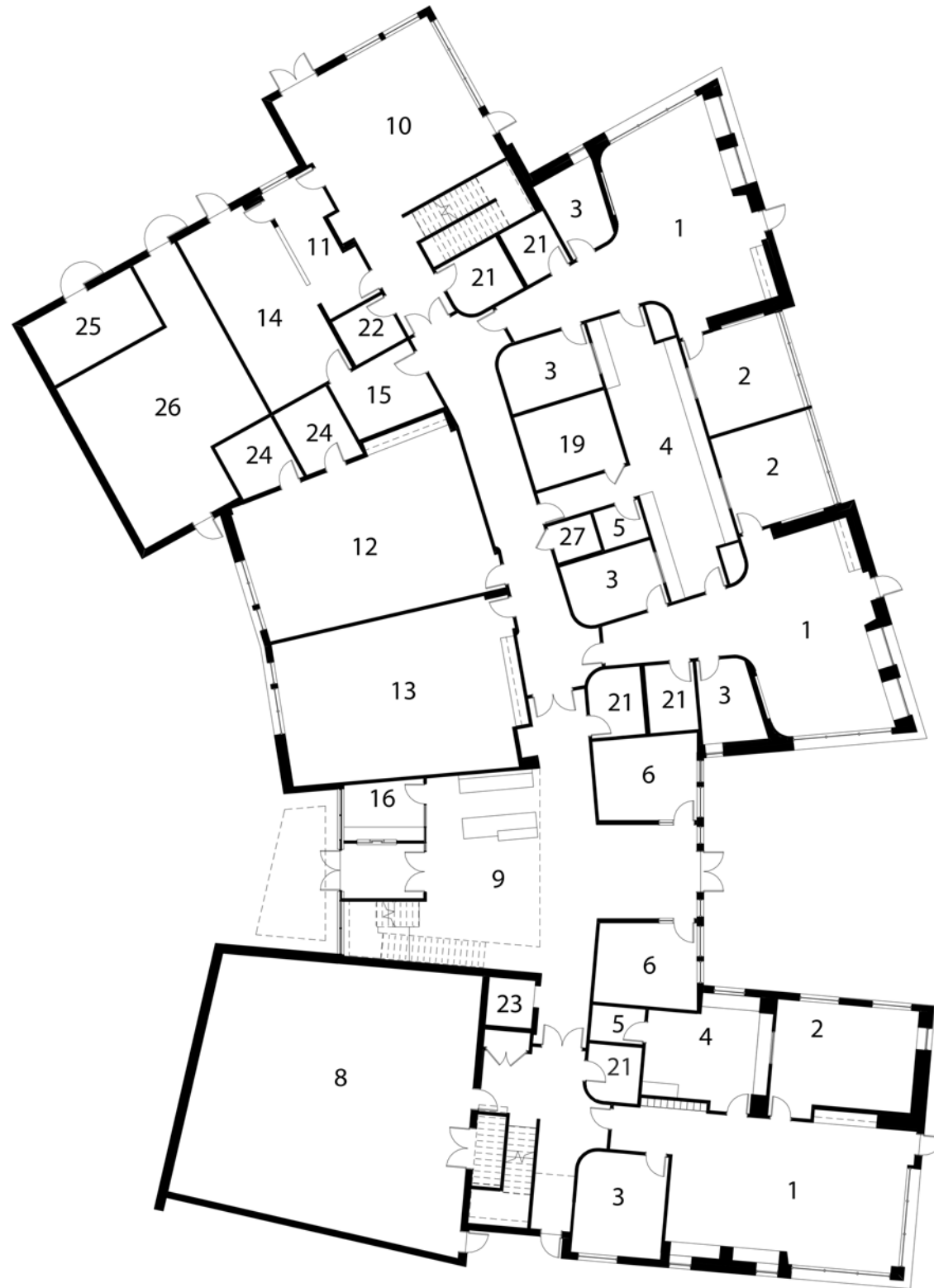


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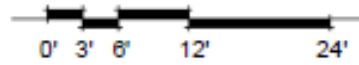
MULTIPURPOSE ROOM



LEVEL 1



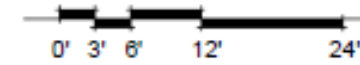
- 1. HOME BASE
- 2. GROUP
- 3. FOCUS
- 4. WORKROOM
- 5. QUIET
- 6. FAMILY
- 7. CLASSROOM
- 8. MULTIPURPOSE
- 9. CAFE
- 10. DINING HALL
- 11. SERVERY
- 12. INNOVATION MESSY
- 13. INNOVATION CLEAN
- 14. KITCHEN
- 15. CART WASH
- 16. OFFICE
- 17. RECEPTION
- 18. CONFERENCE
- 19. NURSE
- 20. STAFF LOUNGE
- 21. TOILET
- 22. STAFF TOILET
- 23. ELEVATOR
- 24. STORAGE
- 25. ELECTRICAL
- 26. MECHANICAL
- 27. JANITOR
- 28. TELECOM



LEVEL 2



- 1. HOME BASE
- 2. GROUP
- 3. FOCUS
- 4. WORKROOM
- 5. QUIET
- 6. FAMILY
- 7. FLEX CLASSROOM
- 8. MULTIPURPOSE
- 9. CAFE
- 10. DINING HALL
- 11. SERVERY
- 12. INNOVATION MESSY
- 13. INNOVATION CLEAN
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- 26. MECHANICAL
- 27. JANITOR
- 28. TELECOM



SITE DESIGN:

Traverse Academy integrates outdoor spaces into its therapeutic approach for students in acute mental health crises, offering both a calming refuge and an active setting to break negative thought patterns through engagement with nature. The academy's outdoor areas—including a garden, a continuous trail loop, and landscaped fields—provide natural escapes that help reduce anxiety and stress. Strategically placed outdoor classrooms and secluded seating areas create safe, supportive environments where students can engage in therapeutic practices that leverage nature's calming effects to interrupt and re-frame negative thought cycles.

Students are encouraged to use these outdoor spaces independently or with a counselor to practice mindfulness, grounding techniques, and other coping strategies. The sensory experiences of the outdoors—like the sound of rustling leaves, the feel of grass, or the sight of a clear sky—help shift focus away from distressing thoughts and anchor students in the present moment.

In addition to natural spaces, Traverse Academy features recreational elements like a basketball hoop and a bouldering wall, which are integral to the therapeutic landscape. These amenities provide opportunities for physical activity, a powerful tool in managing stress and improving mood. Whether shooting hoops alone to clear their mind or playing a casual game with peers, students can engage in physical exercise that supports both their mental and physical well-being. Bouldering offers a unique challenge, allowing students to focus on the present moment, build confidence, and experience a sense of accomplishment.

Whether participating in a counseling session, taking a mindful walk with a counselor, reflecting in the garden, or shooting hoops, Traverse Academy empowers students to harness the healing power of nature as a tool to disrupt negative mental patterns and build emotional resilience.



STUDENT SELF HARM RISK ASSESSMENT



LEVEL 1

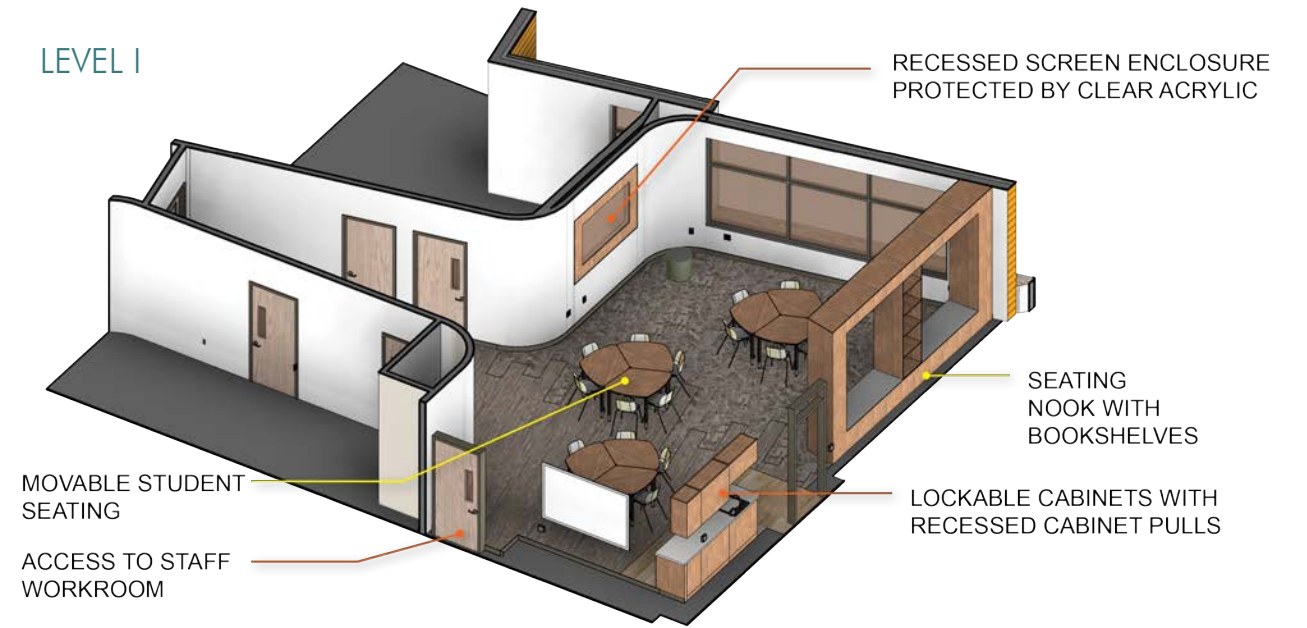


LEVEL 2

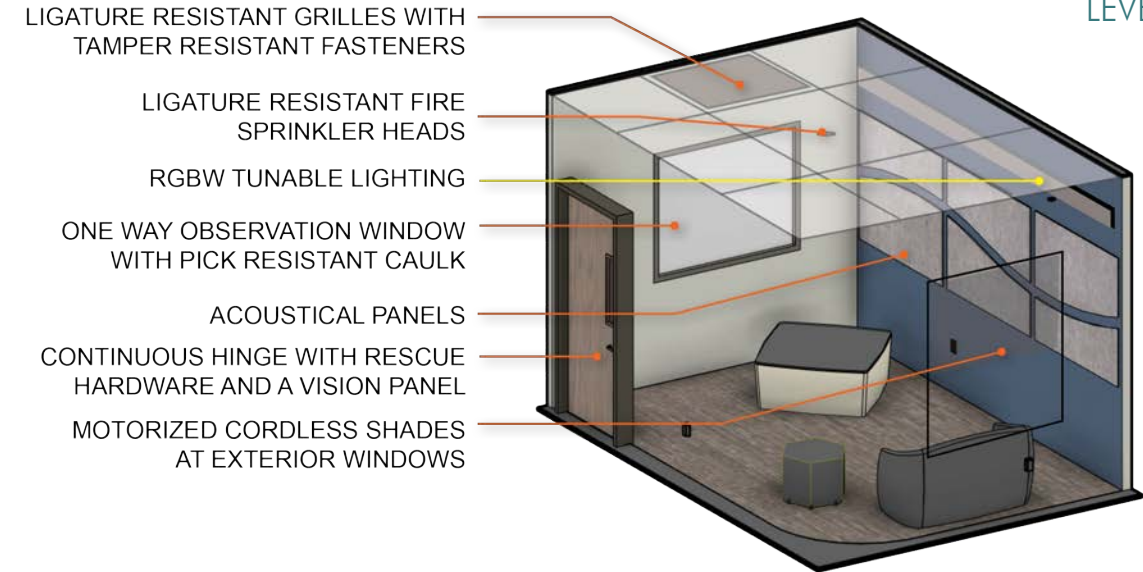
RISK CATEGORY LEVELS



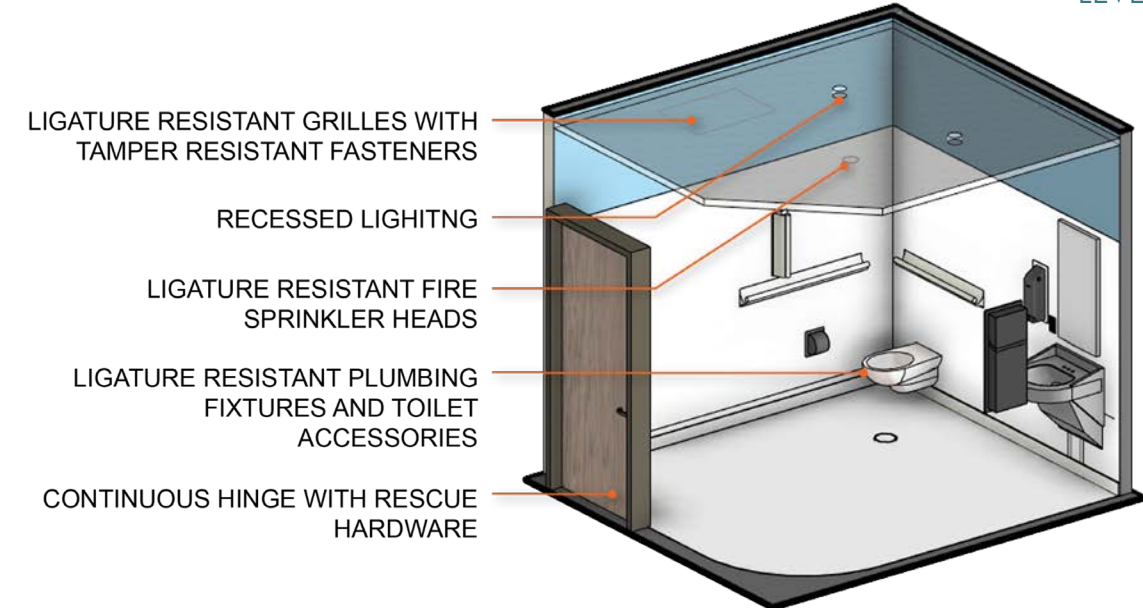
LEVEL I



LEVEL II



LEVEL III





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NEXT WITH KYLE CLARK

A school district takes students' mental health into their own hands

The Cherry Creek School District was searching for answers to help their students experiencing mental health crises, so they decided to build their own solution.



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LOCAL NEWS

First-of-its-kind school in Colorado is dedicated to mental health, helps students transition into traditional classroom

By Kelly Werthmann
November 29, 2023 / 11:05 PM MST / CBS Colorado



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STUDENT WELL-BEING

After a Rash of Student Suicides, This School District Stepped Up

By Denisa R. Superville — November 23, 2022 13 min read



[Scan or click this link for the article](#)



MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS DIVERSITY & EQUITY SPECIAL EDUCATION

Traverse Academy, first-of-its-kind facility for students in mental health crisis, set to open soon

By Melanie Asmar | September 19, 2023, 4:56pm MDT | Updated: September 19, 2023, 7:47pm MDT



POLITICS MONEY ARTS JUSTICE ENVIRONMENT NEWSLETTER SUPPORT

New school in Aurora combines education and mental health treatment for struggling students

By Jenny Brundin · Sep. 20, 2023, 4:00 am



First-of-its-kind mental health care facility set to open in the fall for Cherry Creek Schools students

Traverse Academy is designed to look more like a school than a hospital and aims to make sure young patients don't miss out on any of their studies or fun activities while they receive treatment



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ENDORSEMENTS

"Thank you for everything you have done to help us through a dark time. You helped my son find some hope. You helped salvage his schooling, and you helped us find a path forward as we leave Traverse. What you do is so important and needed. You do hard work and you do it well."

TRAVERSE PARENT

"Thank you so much Traverse! All of you have been amazing and I have really been able to flourish here. I don't think I can express enough how much you have helped and how much I love this program. All I can do is thank you, so thank you. This has meant the world to me."

TRAVERSE STUDENT

