



**A4LE JOHN SHAW AWARD
WALDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL**

MARCH 31, 2021



WALDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL

A sense of place and pride is the first impression visitors experience upon arrival at Walden Middle School. The wedge-shaped grand entry pulls guests in while connecting with the natural environment and offering a welcoming community entrance. Exterior signage can be illuminated with interchangeable colors to celebrate special occasions or exude school pride. The space was designed and built to give students access to outside daylight, while also ensuring safety and security as well as durability of the building. The strategically selected site was naturally populated with a stream meandering along the back near the courtyard. Students can be found studying, thinking, socializing or reading while relaxing on the built-in steps or stone seating, all while gazing at the lush foliage.

Transparent connectivity creates a safe, comfortable environment for students of each grade through the concept of “superteams,” the idea that a whole grade level can gather in one of the flexible collaboration areas, but there are also numerous different ways that the space can adjust to accommodate groups of any size. This feeling of openness and connectivity has attributed to a lack of bullying, according to the building principal. Lockdown features also can be activated at the push of a button, quickly securing over 75 percent of the building. A tall, clerestory secure entry ensures that students are safe to freely navigate the building throughout the school day, but also brings in natural light and serves as the main reception site for guests.

Walden is a community-centric building designed to impact generations of children for years to come. On the interior, inspirational words protrude along a natural stone wall leading students up a grand staircase over the school’s display case hosting trophies or artwork. These carefully chosen words remind students every day they are a small part of something larger, connecting them to their community. The central commons, designed to eliminate the wasted space of a typical corridor, serves as a hallway-less solution that is able to host a multitude of events, including food service, community forums, performances, pre-function events and more.

Seeking LEED v4 certification, the new building demonstrates how design played a critical role in extending the building’s life cycle. The entire campus is a reflection of the district’s prioritization of sustainable features, building occupant comfort, student success and staff retention.

Note: All photos were taken during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, leading to a lack of students in photos.



EDUCATIONAL VISION

As a community-centric building serving students for years to come, Walden Middle School's final design addressed several main priorities of the community and district. The security of all students while maintaining a connection to the outdoors was key, finding a balance of transparency and safety. The seamless integration of real-world learning opportunities into design was a challenge but led to innovative solutions for core learning spaces. The final result is an open, collaborative environment encouraging learning on display.

PLANNING PROCESS

A reciprocal educational process informed the design team of the district's priorities from early on. Through recognizing the district as the educational expert and the design team as the architectural expert, egos were left at the door to come to a common understanding and achieve the best possible learning environment. The design team led visioning meetings with students, teachers and district representatives through our coined Co-Create process, and community updates were held to understand community values while gathering feedback. Through truly connecting and collaborating with valued members, Walden was designed to feel personalized to the success of each individual student.

DESIGN SOLUTIONS

In an effort to maximize existing vegetation and lessen site work, the design team collaborated with the previous developer to prevent further site damage and minimize site costs for the new middle school. Master-planning and integrated design permitted views towards the site populated with trees and vegetation rather than the neighborhood side, leading to an outdoor courtyard flanked by academic wings. Vertical garage doors on several classrooms open up to the courtyard and a natural stream, encouraging the integration of ecology studies into curriculum. Students have a safe outdoor environment to study, socialize or spread out during individual learning time.

CHALLENGES/SOLUTIONS

Challenged with ensuring the physical and emotional safety of the younger students who would occupy the building, through conversations with district staff, the design team developed the idea of “superteams.” Each academic wing is able to split into two separate collaboration areas, divided by an operable wall, with visibility down the entire corridor. Sixth-graders have their own environment to develop and flourish but also have the opportunity to learn from their older peers in the central commons space.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

Sustainability and achieving LEED v4 certification were priorities for the district, so the design team identified areas where the standards could be pushed while ensuring cost-efficient savings. Daylighting reduces energy usage while maintaining energy efficiency through tinted windows, supplemented by LED lighting throughout the building. On sunny days, several classrooms can open up their operable garage doors to the outdoors for a cooling breeze. Selection of a previously disturbed site minimized district costs and disruption to the natural environment. A two-story building design also lessened the overall site impact.

INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The designed flow of the building from the main entry, flowing through the flexible collaboration areas and into the courtyard encourages cross-curriculum studies and transparency from one learning environment to the next. Classrooms are not the sole learning spaces; every corridor, stairwell and gathering area offers visibility into classrooms or views of nature. This integration encourages lifelong learning, as students will make connections from subject to subject from a young age, transitioning seamlessly into other branches of their studies. Every space is a learning space, designed to support a variety of functions. Flexibility is key in supporting the staff and students for whatever the task might be.

SUSTAINABLE FEATURES

Situated on a site surrounded by nature, trees and neighborhoods, opportunities for exploration are endless. The theme of a connection to nature is carried throughout the building with views to the outdoors from every angle as students navigate to their next course. Soft daylighting fills every corner, providing a serene setting for learning. As a building seeking LEED v4 certification, sustainable features were prioritized to extend the building's life cycle, reduce the carbon footprint and increase staff and students' wellbeing.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

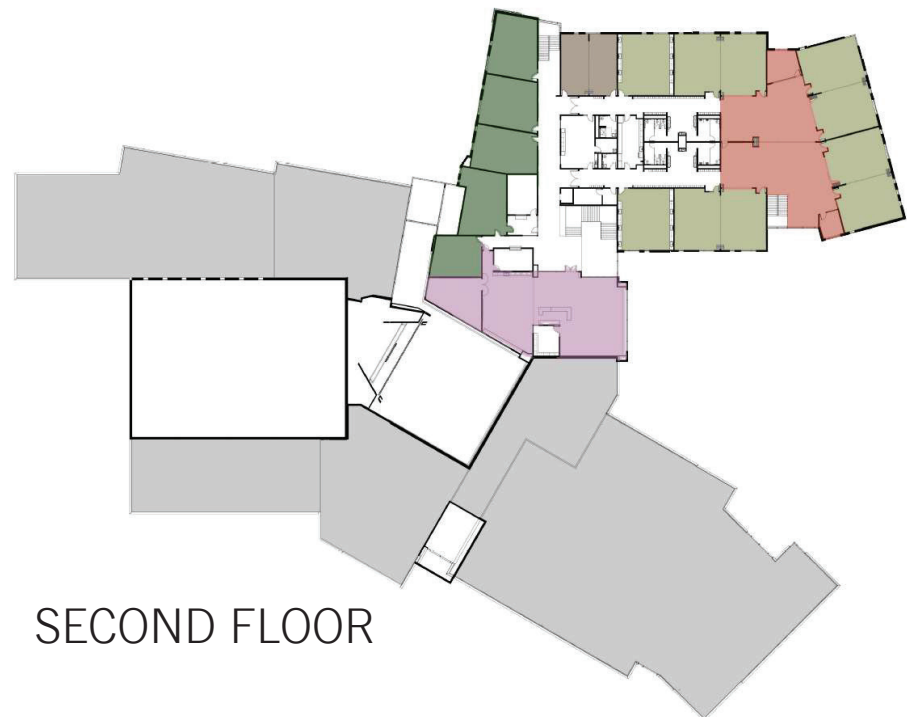
After making the decision to restructure their sixth-grade centers and junior highs into middle school environments hosting sixth, seventh and eighth graders, Walden became the first middle school for the district. Born out of a long-range planning effort, the Park Hill School District had to consider how K-12 education would be delivered in the future, bringing big ideas and high expectations to the table. The process of soliciting feedback from students, staff, community members and administrators began through collaboration with the design team and identifying the main goals of the new environment. Tours of other schools, community forums, survey efforts and more gathered valuable feedback. The community loved having all sixth-grade students in the same building for one year to connect and develop together, but the added transition and overcrowding of a single building housing over 1,000 sixth-grade students caused them to restructure. Dissolving the sixth-grade center and consolidating junior highs into four separate middle schools ultimately provided the best educational experience for all students involved.

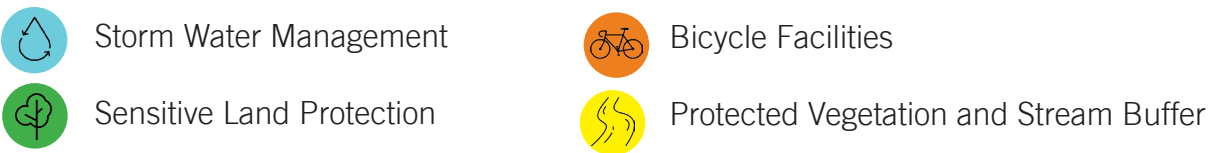


LEGEND

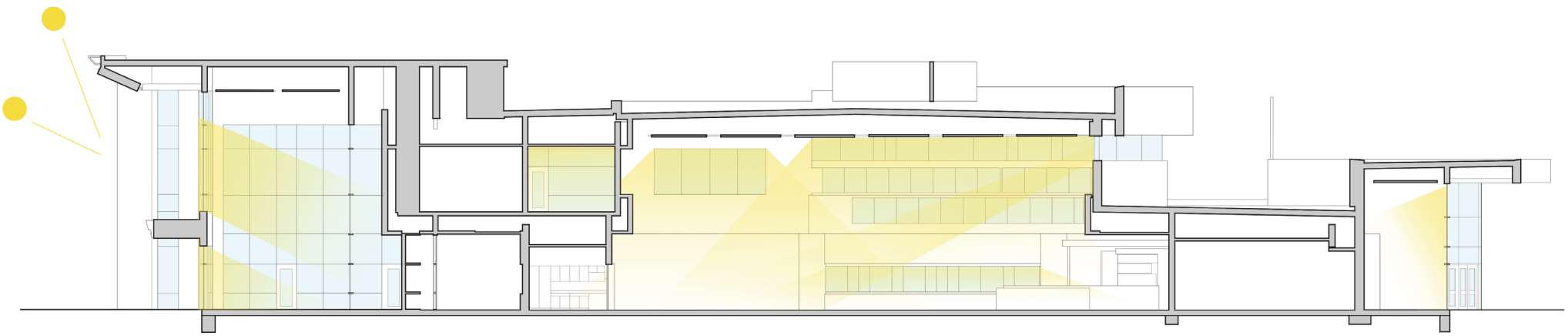
- Classrooms
- Special Ed
- Administration
- FACS/Cooking
- Gymnasium
- Art/Maker
- Commons/Cafeteria
- Kitchen
- Collaboration Space
- Discovery Rooms
- Media Center

FLOOR PLANS





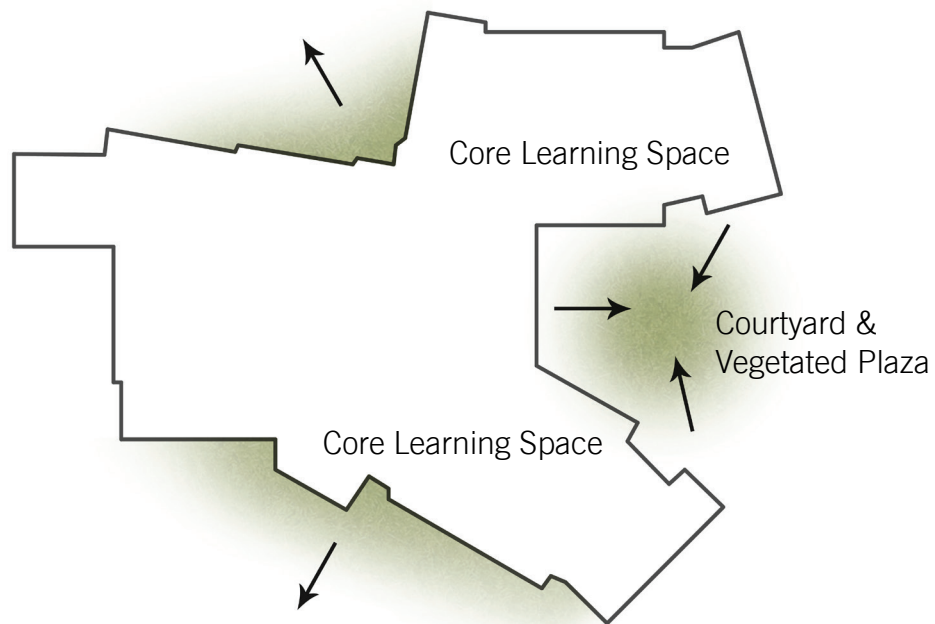
SITING CUES



DAYLIGHTING

Every corner of the new learning environment is intentionally exposed to natural daylighting and connected to nature, whether it be through floor-to-ceiling windows or operable garage doors. Each classroom has direct access to daylight and outdoor views. The second-story media center overlooks lush foliage as students read or study, clerestory windows provide light streaming into the commons all day long and the art and maker rooms open up into the courtyard, naturally merging learning spaces and inspiring students to create.



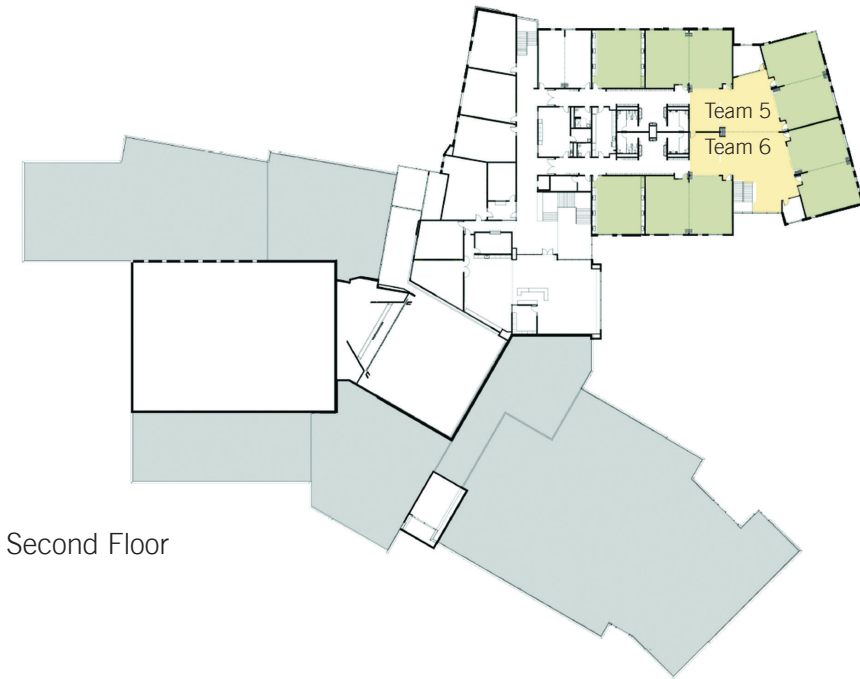


CONNECTIONS TO NATURE

The courtyard, flanked on both sides by core learning spaces, provides a secure location for students to explore. Unlike previous buildings that were enclosed and dimly lit, all corners of Walden Middle School are filled with natural lighting and offer panoramic views of the treetops surrounding the building. Strategic site maximization encouraged the growth of natural vegetation and the preservation of a meandering stream, both of which can be integrated into curriculum.



First Floor



Second Floor

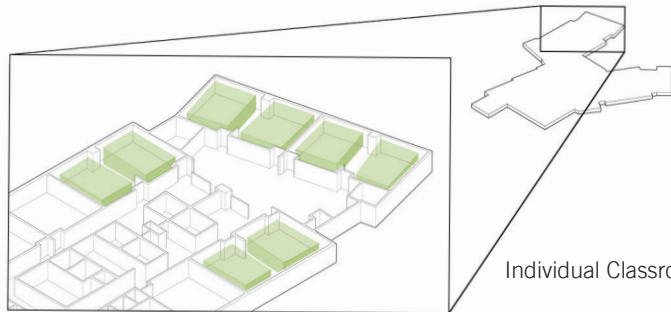


SUPERTEAMS

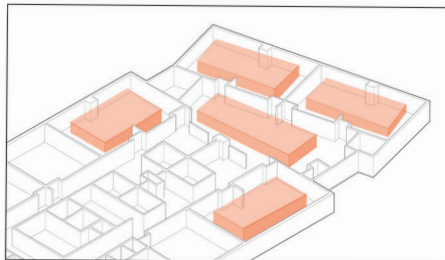
The design team developed a unique solution, called “Superteams,” to provide each grade level a space to call their own, where students can interact and gather comfortably. Each neighborhood needed to be home to a certain number of classrooms while at the same time eliminating the wasted space of a typical corridor.

SUPERTEAMS

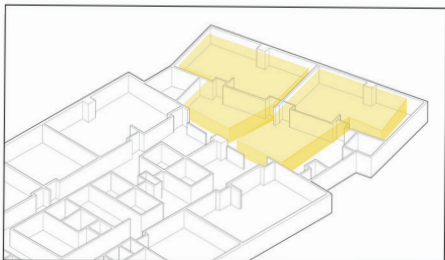
Collaboration areas in each grade-level neighborhood can host up to 250 students in various flexible formats, and classrooms circling the collaboration area can host 30 students each. Sliding glass doors can open up classrooms to spill into flex spaces, which can in turn be divided in half by folding walls that also serve as dry-erase boards. The flexible academic gathering areas have endless options for students and teachers to utilize, whether it be individuals, small groups of two to three students or a presentation to the whole grade-level.



Individual Classrooms



Dual Shared Spaces



Collaboration Space



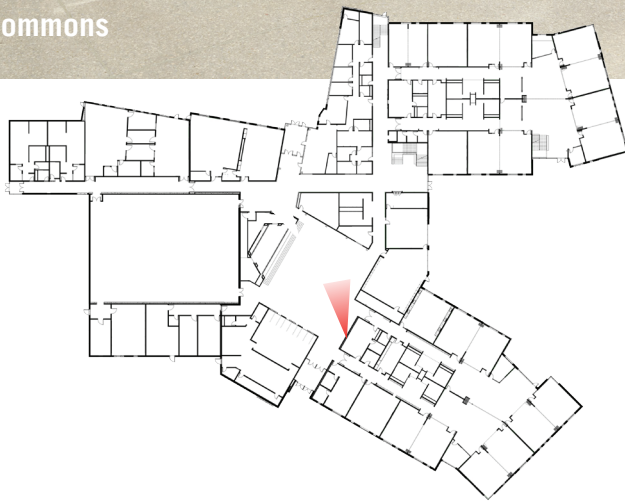
Neighborhood Collaboration Area

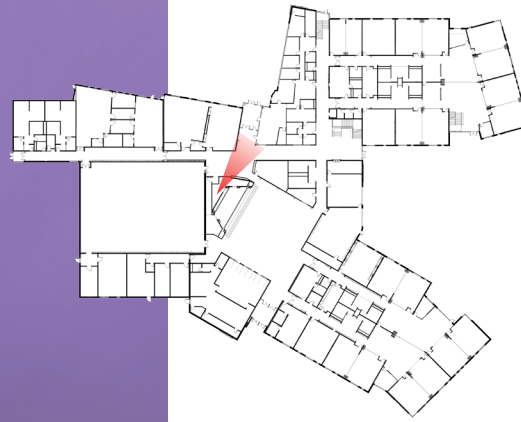


FLEXIBILITY

Walden's commons are not the typical combination of a lunchroom and meeting space in one. As a hallway-less solution with the ability to adapt for a multitude of events, the core cluster space boasts varied seating, a pre-function area, a stage and flexible event set-up options. Designed to eliminate the wasted space of a usual corridor, the commons serve as both a functional and aesthetic solution to a variety of program needs. Visually connected to the courtyard and second-story media center overlooking the common area, the flexible commons is the bustling hub of the building.

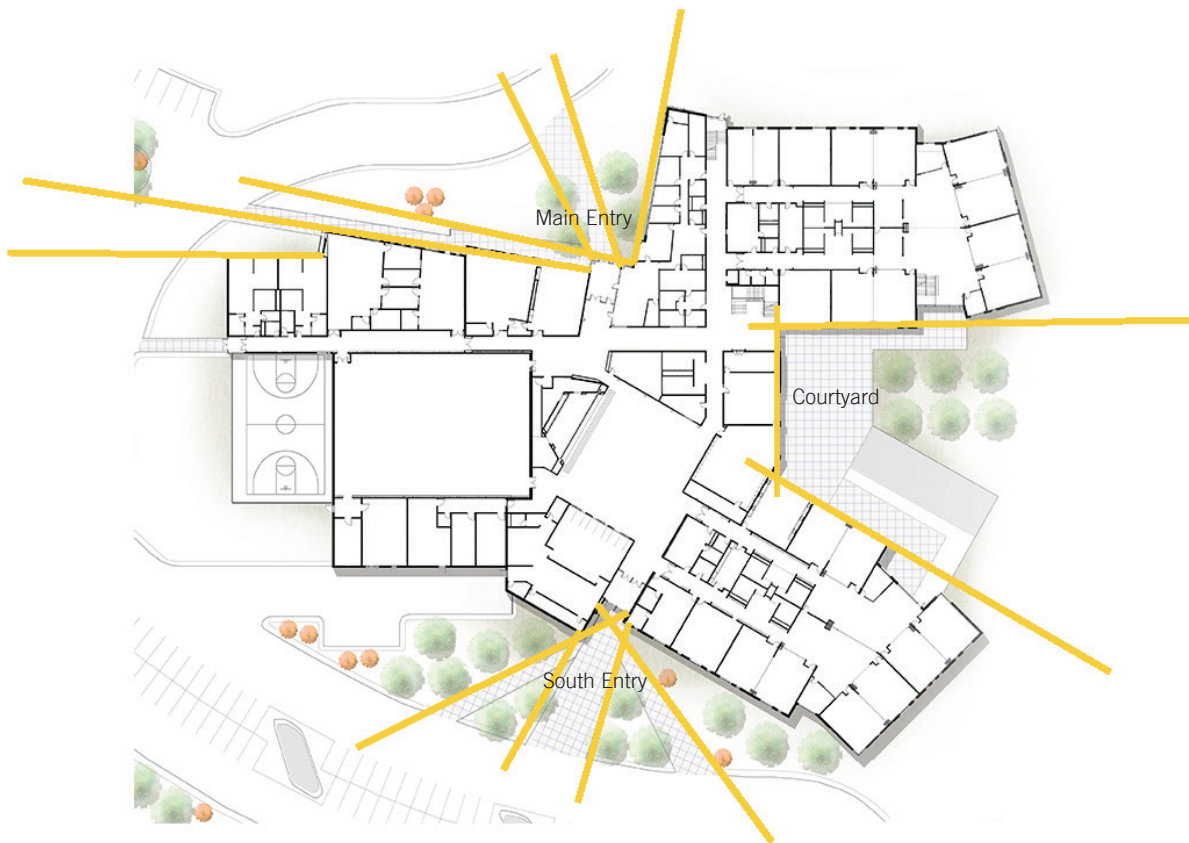
Commons





SECURE ENTRY

While a sense of transparency and openness was at the forefront of design, a more prevalent priority was ensuring the safety of all staff and students. A tall clerestory greets guests at the secure entrance where they are vetted before entering the building. At the push of a button, lockdown procedures can swiftly be instituted, securing over 75 percent of the building in minutes. The operable garage doors and windows found in classrooms can quickly secure the areas but offer flexibility on normal days for students to spill out into the academic shared spaces.



CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY

Visitors immediately feel a sense of arrival while approaching the front entrance. The wedge-shaped entry draws students, parents and community members in, welcoming them with open arms. The courtyard and posterior entrance mimic the same wedge concept, offering multiple connection points for visitors and students.

