



Gardiner Middle School

OREGON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Executive Summary

REIMAGINING THE MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The Power of Student Voice

The new Gardiner Middle School reimagines every aspect of the middle school experience, asserting that sixth, seventh, and eighth grade are more than just steppingstones along the path from elementary to high school.

It is a time to support students as they experience the mental, physical, and emotional changes as they navigate adolescence. A time to cultivate joy through learning and celebrate exploration and self-discovery. A time to center students and their voices in conversations around education and engagement.

An inclusive, student-centered process—guided by a *By Students, For Students* central theme—enabled students to champion dynamic design



ideas alongside District leaders, educators, and designers to imbue collaboration, wellness, and exploration in curriculum development, the education environment, and the physical.

From the Learning Neighborhoods to the central hub Timber Hall, Gardiner Middle School celebrates opportunities for students to grow as individuals, build relationships with their peers and their teachers, and flourish in community. It amplifies student autonomy and inspires a sense of belonging among learners, empowering them to be active co-creators of their middle school experience.

SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET

Gardiner Middle School has been a cornerstone for the surrounding community for more than sixty years. This comprehensive replacement of the existing single-story facility on the same site deepened and

expanded opportunity for community connections with a welcoming site and school environment aligned with contemporary school safety needs.

Grades Served

6 - 8

Building Area

150,000 Sq Ft

Student Capacity

1,000

Site Area

19.5 Acres

Occupancy Date

Summer 2021

Project Budget

\$79,000,000

School and Community Engagement

COMMUNITY

Unique Attributes and Contexts

Pioneering Spirit: Established in 1829 at the convergence of the Willamette and Clackamas Rivers, Oregon City is the oldest incorporated city west of the Rocky Mountains and has been hub of trade, politics, urban activity, and industrial innovation for nearly 200 years. This rich history is an ongoing source of community pride; residents steward multiple cultural centers and museums that preserve and celebrate Oregon City's pioneering spirit.

Nature's Bounty: From recreation to conservation, the community's proximity to rivers, mountains, and forests, has shaped Oregon City's identity as a prime example of the natural bounty of life in the Pacific Northwest.

Multilingual Population: Unique among schools in the District, Gardiner offers a Spanish-English bilingual program. Additionally, all signage in the school is provided in English, Spanish, and Russian, with attention given to ensuring that translations from English reflect the specific intent of naming conventions used in the school. For example, classrooms are intentionally called "project labs" and it was important to ensure this nuance carried through the translations.



Oregon City's connection to its pioneering history and its dynamic natural landscape continue to shape the community's shared identity and spirit of innovation.

Community Connections

Engaged and Committed: The District had not passed a bond since 2000 and was determined to change that in 2018. The District, along with countless volunteers in the community, worked tirelessly to think creatively and drive publicity to excite the community and convey the value of investing in these schools. The \$158 million bond was successfully passed with 60.8% of the vote.

Leveraging Continuous Learning:

To leverage the momentum of the extensive pre-bond community engagement initiatives, the District prioritized research, collaboration, and innovation. The Gardiner Design Committee made a concerted effort to learn firsthand from other districts who had implemented innovative academic programs and facility designs.

Community Resource: Outreach and engagement during bond planning and predesign revealed that Gardiner's community-facing amenity spaces were often used as a resource by community groups and athletic clubs. Maintaining and augmenting these spaces became a priority in Gardiner's program to uphold these connections.

STAKEHOLDERS

- Current and Future Gardiner Students
- Educators
- School and District Administrators
- Parents
- Community Groups and Athletic Clubs that Frequently make use of School Facilities
- The Oregon City Community at Large

CHALLENGES AND ASSETS

Challenges

Understanding current student experiences and anxieties:

In early “empathy interviews” with former, current, and future Gardiner students, students shared openly about their experiences with the existing school’s physical space and the anxieties created and exacerbated by it. These included anxieties related to crowding, the length of passing time between classes, difficulties navigating crowded corridors, a lack of supervision in certain areas—especially restrooms, and transitioning from one grade level to another. Ultimately, students expressed feeling physically and emotionally unsafe in their school.

Available Assets

Spirit of Innovation: The District was deeply committed to learning from others and building on those lessons learned, willing to push boundaries and try new models of curriculum development and educational design.

Team Continuity and Trust: The project team included the same architects and planners who led the District’s long-range planning, visioning, and bond initiatives. This long-standing relationship and mutual trust supported an unprecedented project management approach that prioritized a deeper engagement process to explore new ideas.

First-hand Research: The Design committee toured both local and national campuses to inform new approaches to teaching and learning and how physical spaces support them. From school to school, Committee members experienced learning environments that prioritized student needs, created a strong sense of belonging, responded to students’ anxieties, and drove engagement by creating environments that students wanted to be in. These tours proved that innovative ideas could succeed when District leaders and educators committed to putting student needs first.



COMMUNITY VALUE

Centering Student Experiences to Create a By Students, For Students Environment

Oregon City School District recognized that gaining an authentic, first-hand understanding of how students viewed their middle school experience would be the key to reimagining traditional middle school education.

Representation: The project's Design Committee included 12 middle school students, representing 44% of the committee. This significant presence empowered students to contribute fully to design discussions and share their perspectives as the ultimate building users.

Engagement: Students were directly engaged throughout the entirety of the design process, and the Design Committee ensured that student voices were weighted equally alongside those of the adults on the team.

Advocacy: Outside of committee sessions, students helped conduct “empathy interviews” with elementary and high school students to understand the elements of excitement and anxiety they felt before and after middle school, respectively. Through these interviews, the Design Committee's student members became advocates not only for themselves, but for future generations of Gardiner students.

“As a sixth grader, helping design something that was so huge that was going to be here for so many more generations, it was so cool to make such a big impact [while] being so young.”

GARDINER STUDENT



“We knew that we needed a strong student voice involved in our design process equal to the voices of the adults that were in the room.”

DESIGN TEAM LEADER

“When you start to put [ideas] on sticky notes, you don't know if it's a child or the superintendent who wrote that sticky note—they all create that same value. All those values came together and that really pushed our vision to make this happen.”

DESIGN COMMITTEE MEMBER



Educational Environment

Gardiner's educational environment fosters opportunities to grow individually, build relationships, and flourish in community.

EDUCATIONAL VISION AND GOALS

Empowering Future-Ready Learners

The District engaged in a "Portrait of a Graduate" visioning exercise, an effort happening at school districts throughout the country that focuses on defining aspirational goals for the K-12 experience by identifying the 21st century skills that every student should develop during their K-12 educational journey that will support success in their future after high school.

The District's vision acknowledged that the early adolescent middle school years are an extremely important time in a child's development. It is a time marked by transition. At times overwhelming because of the mental, physical, and emotional changes students experience as they embrace their young adulthood, the District recognized the potential for joyful self-discovery to be part of this journey, too.



This future vision helped define the desired educational experience for Gardiner, which transitions to a new way of learning that focuses on helping students be future-ready rather than test-ready and brings focus to individual students in ways that inspire them and help them fully develop their potential.

With Gardiner, they desired to create spaces where students could courageously become whoever they're going to be, feel a deep sense of belonging, collaborate and think critically, work on projects with real-world significance, reflect upon their mistakes and use that learning to improve their work, and learn to care for themselves, for others, and for their community and the world around them.



The educational experience and environment are based on a universal design learning (UDL) framework, leveraging the premise of UDL to reduce barriers, provide choice, and enable students to work with content that is relevant, that requires critical thinking, and forms culturally relevant connections between what students learn in school and their background knowledge, life experiences, and culture.

The goal was also to incorporate design thinking and problem-based learning that allows students to engage with their community, think about real-life issues, and use empathy and engagement to solve real problems.

SUPPORTING CURRICULUM

The catalyst at the center of Gardiner's design was the District's implementation of a collaborative, project-based approach to middle school education. Not only would this innovative curriculum begin to shift how students interacted with each other throughout the day, but it would also transform the typical teacher-student dynamic to reflect a more equitable, relationally driven partnership.

Learning Neighborhoods: Gardiner's six Learning Neighborhoods features a broad collection of flexible, adaptable, and versatile solutions that empower students to grow their sense of agency and choose how they want to experience their learning environments, while enabling educators to tailor their lessons. Break out labs off the open collaboration spaces as well as mobile furniture serve as tools through which students can strengthen their sense of independence. Various scales of gathering spaces promote team teaching and allow teachers the flexibility to break free of typical 1:30 teacher-student ratios.

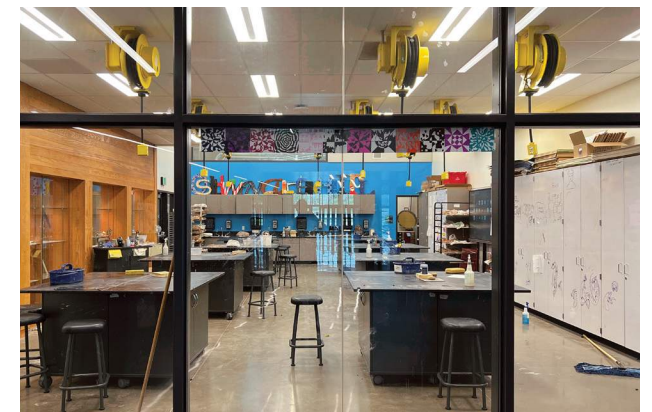
From one-on-one instruction to entire grade-level meetings, the educational environment accommodates the various scales in which students and teachers gather in this new, inherently collaborative approach to teaching and learning.



Active Learning Space: From its name and location to the spaces and features inside, students played a major role in shaping all aspects of the Active Learning Center. This dynamic library and collaboration space allows students to engage with peers and trusted adults as well as work independently while remaining connected to the larger Gardiner community.

It features large group instructional areas with full-height teaching boards comprised of tack surface, markerboard, and video monitors, project labs, studios, and collaboration zones of various sizes, counter-height seating area overlooking Timber Hall designated for individual study, and a dedicated club room for student-owned groups. Students were eager to implement tools that would allow them to engage with their lessons on a tactile level.

Maker Suite: The iterative nature of learning and design is celebrated in the Maker Suite through fluid connections between design, documentation, making, and refinement. During the design process, students adamantly expressed their desire to showcase completed work alongside in-progress projects in active display cases. The Maker Suite's proximity to the Welcome Center allows students to showcase their project-based learning opportunities.



SUPPORTING A VARIETY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING STYLES

Fostering Community in Learning Neighborhoods Gardiner's Learning Neighborhoods are dynamic spaces shaped collaboratively by students and their teachers. They support the District's deeper learning philosophy and encompass a variety of spaces to accommodate different education and social needs. By removing typical sources of anxiety, Learning Neighborhoods empower students to take ownership of their learning.

Environmental Graphics Each Learning Neighborhood has its own unique color palette and environmental graphic. Beyond aesthetics, these design components serve as placemaking tools that foster a sense of identity and belonging.

Gender-Neutral Restroom Facilities All of Gardiner's Learning Neighborhoods have their own gender-neutral restroom facilities. In addition to convenience, accessible restrooms serve to reduce anxiety and help students feel more comfortable by meeting their needs within their learning communities.

Centralized and Integrated Design The Learning Neighborhoods support the District's new project-based teaching and learning approach and empower students to take ownership of their learning spaces by removing typical sources of middle school anxiety.



Student-Centered Spaces Learning Neighborhoods are student-centered. Unlike traditional classrooms where teachers "own" the space and students move from room to room, Learning Neighborhoods were designed for teachers and students to negotiate spatial needs, matching needs to the appropriate space. This intentional shift in emphasis amplifies each students' sense of belonging.

Storage Cubbies Insight from the Design Committee's Empathy Interviews revealed that traditional lockers were a major stress point for students – especially for elementary students preparing to transition into middle school. Gardiner's use of cubbies ensures that students can safely store their belongings within their learning spaces, effectively strengthening their belief that their Learning Neighborhood is their home base.

Flexible Spaces Learning Neighborhoods foster opportunities for individual study as well as small- to mid-size group collaboration, and are designed to comfortably accommodate grade level-specific team meetings. Learning neighborhoods can also accommodate brief assemblies comprised of the entire grade level. In other words, for a short period of time, the entire sixth grade could meet in a single Learning Neighborhood.

ADAPTABLE AND FLEXIBLE ENVIRONMENTS

Timber Hall - Gardiner's Heart

Students on the Design Committee dreamt about a central space that would enable the whole school community to come together; a space that would offer adaptable environments that can flex to diverse student needs. Timber Hall, which was named by students, is a dynamic social and community hub, with gathering spaces, a performance venue, and extended education spaces.

Located prominently near the main entrance, Timber Hall allows students to embrace a sense of agency as they navigate the diverse spaces and utilize the areas that suit their changing needs, from gathering and socialization to decompression and quiet study. Students members of the Design Committee and their peers championed several flexible design features:

The Vista: Gardiner's performing arts stage was designed to support student gathering. Pivoting walls secure performance apparatus, enabling the space to be used on a daily basis for dining and gathering. variety of soft seating options on the stage provide students with additional choices for gathering and eating during the lunch period.

The Pass: The Pass is a walkway that crosses over the back of the stage. It typically connects Learning Neighborhoods to the Active Learning Center. For performances, it becomes a mezzanine over the stage and can be incorporated into set designs and productions.

Food Service and Dining: Students can explore food options in a food court style servery, with strategically located food stations along with "grab-and-go" options that promote student choice and reduce bottlenecks that limit timely food delivery. Multiple indoor and outdoor eating areas with tables of various sizes, plus the Learning Stair, allow students to choose how and where they'd like to gather and eat. Easy tray return locations are provided on both the upper and lower floors.

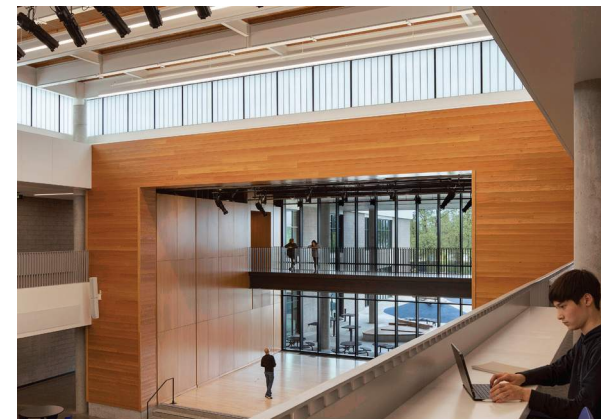
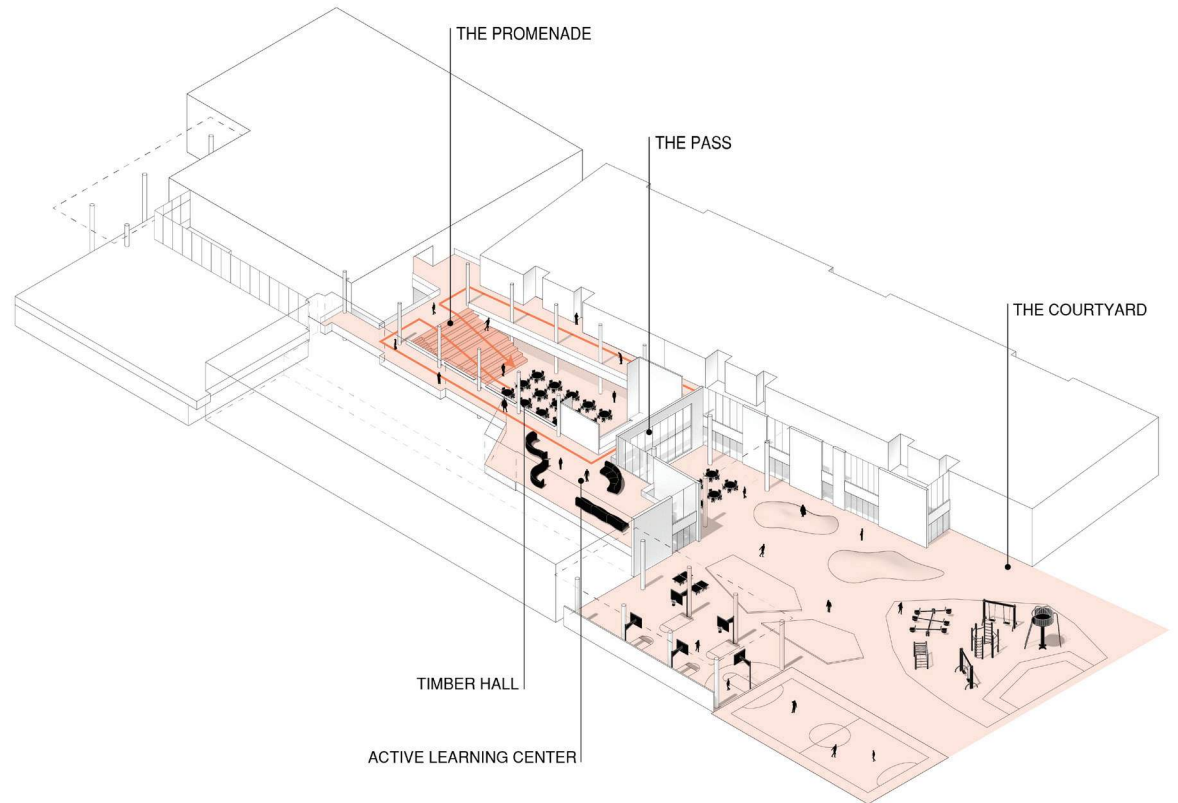
Courtyard: The Courtyard responds to the fact that interests vary greatly between sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. While younger students typically gravitate toward the play structures, older students may utilize areas designated for hanging out with friends.

Supporting Educators in Student-Centered Spaces

As the Design Committee championed a student-driven design process that would ultimately yield a student-centered middle school, one of the biggest concerns was whether or not this approach would come as a detriment to teachers' success. Would they get left behind?

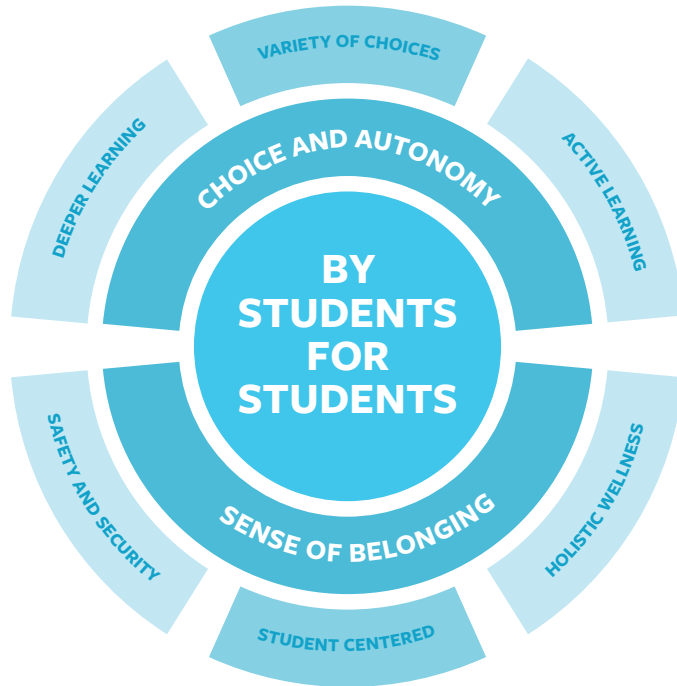
District leaders were quick to assure stakeholders that Gardiner's design would indeed promote productivity, wellness, and connection among the school's educators.

Gardiner's Learning Neighborhoods feature dedicated Teacher Collaboration Spaces that are designed to support preparation and planning near, yet away from, regular instructional spaces. Beyond the Learning Neighborhoods, teachers have access to a lounge on the second floor near Timber Hall and the student game room. While the lounge's amenities ensure teachers have the resources they need to recharge throughout the day, its proximity to student spaces promotes teacher-student connections outside of their immediate learning environments.



Physical Environment

Gardiner's physical environment amplifies its educational goals by providing students choice and autonomy while creating a sense of belonging. It authentically redefines what student-centered spaces can be—spaces truly By Students, For Students.



PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

By Students, For Students

A well-defined set of six values—largely inspired by the Design Committee's student members and the belief statements they developed—shaped Gardiner's design toward spaces of various purpose and scale that promote access to choice as well as a sense of belonging. Enabling students to navigate the school and its resources in a way that is authentic to their individual needs and grow community in a variety of different ways provides tangible solutions to the stressors, anxiety triggers, and challenges the Design Committee identified at the outset of the project.

Student Belief Statements

We believe in **CONNECTING TO NATURE** and the **WORLD AROUND US**

Outside spaces encourage us to relax, feel healthy, and understand how our actions impact not only our community but the world as well. Spaces inside our school should bring the outside in, with beautiful natural views and light, so that when we are learning, we are reflecting and being productive.

We believe our environments should represent all students in developing

ACTIVE BODIES, MINDS, AND SOULS

Spaces should allow us to be still, to move, and help us to be engaged and actively learning. Spaces need to support all our needs with flexible seating and common spaces. School spaces should feel like student spaces and should accommodate our social needs and reflect our interests and work. We want opportunities to share who we are and connect with those that we love. We should feel safe and secure in our community with open sight lines, secure entrances, safe areas, and the ability to transition without stress.

We believe that our programs and areas of study should promote an **UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD**

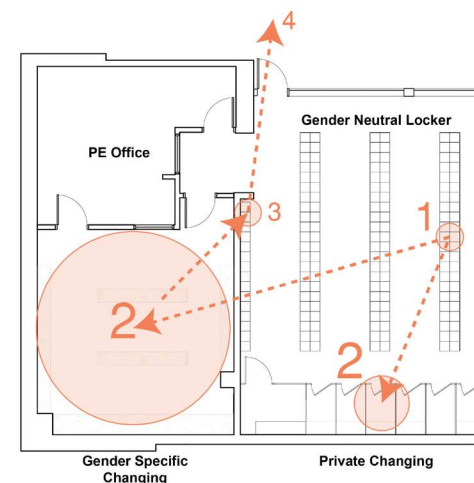
We want to **TAKE CONTROL** of our own learning through real-world experiences. We need to connect with mentors and trusted adult advisors that share their passions and assist us both in pursuing our interests and developing our future goals.

Affirming Identities, Relationships, and Community

Strategic space layouts and thoughtful adjacencies promote acceptance and belonging as well as integrated safety and security, allowing teachers to ensure that students are making safe, responsible choices without undermining their autonomy.

Student Support: This suite was located to destigmatize the process of seeking mental health support and encourage students to feel comfortable engaging their counselors. It features high visibility and accessibility with its large glass entry and its proximity to both Timber Hall and the Learning Neighborhoods. Once inside, acoustically isolated offices provide privacy to promote safe, authentic conversations.

Special Education (SPED): Gardiner's SPED wing was intentionally located near the Welcome Center and is a prominent part of the school's circulation. Its proximity to the entry serves to reinforce Gardiner's belief that every student deserves to experience a sense of belonging, regardless of their needs and abilities. In addition to accessibility and visibility, the SPED wing features the same design language and lab-type spaces as all the other learning environments in the school, effectively affirming the SPED community's relationship to the larger Gardiner community.



1. Students enter the Athletic Prep space and retrieve their PE clothes from their individual, gender-neutral lockers.
2. Students can choose to use the private, gender-neutral changing stalls or the gender-specific changing rooms to get ready.
3. After they've changed for class, students store their street clothes in a larger locker.
4. Prepared for class, students exit the Athletic Prep space.

Athletic Prep: Located on the first floor across from the Wellness Center, the Athletic Prep empowers students to get ready for fitness classes in ways that affirm their identities and align with their personal comfort levels. The full-height glass wall at the front of Athletic Prep enables supervision of the locker storage area, establishing a sense of safety and managing privacy expectations in this gender-neutral area. Similarly, a gender-specific staff office is connected to each of the gender-specific changing rooms, allowing trusted adults to supervise these spaces.

Open Environment, Passive Supervision:

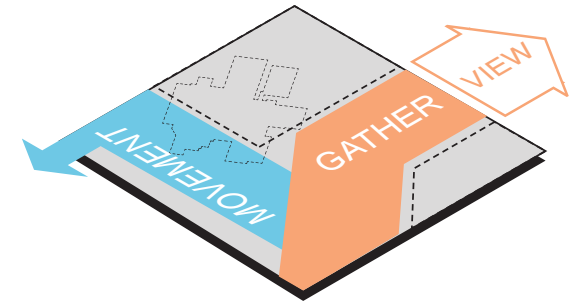
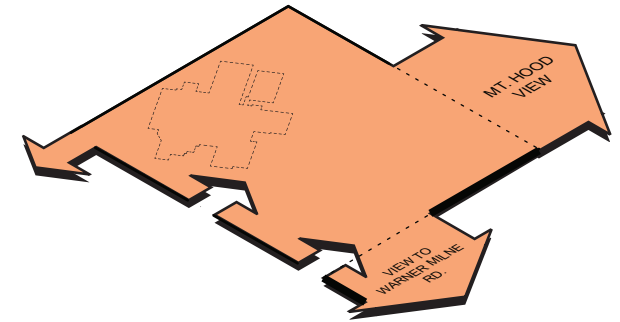
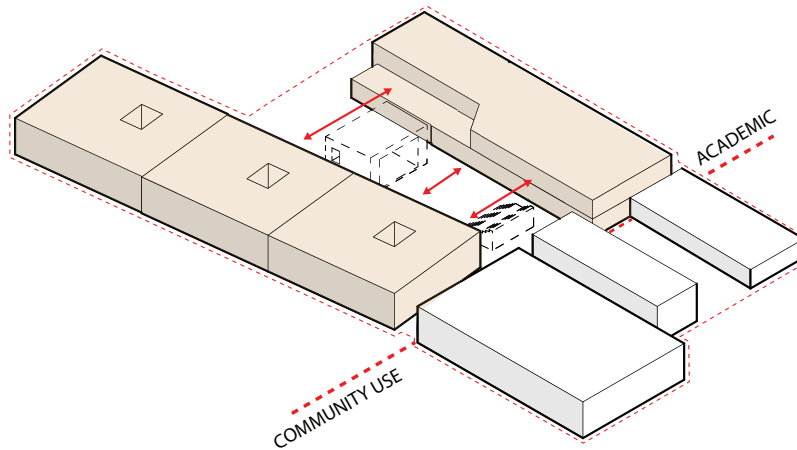
The design team sought student input about their anxieties in the school environment, with the goal being to identify and implement safety and security measures that could reduce these anxieties and help students feel safe. Students shared anxieties related to transitions between spaces, around lockers, and in restrooms. Prioritizing lines of sight and passive supervision along with more open circulation pathways resulted in solutions that removed or reduced these situations from common environments.

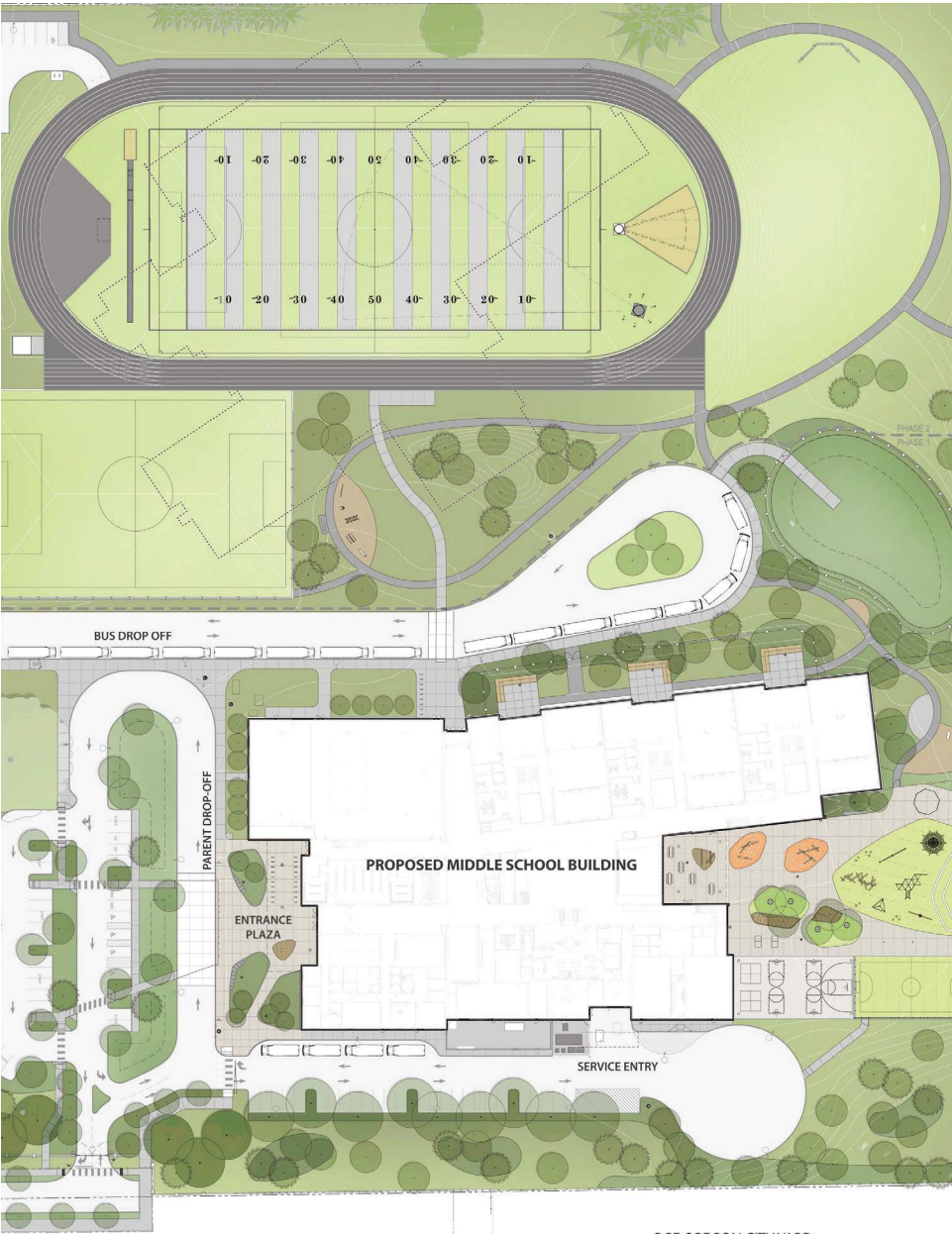
COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Welcome Center: The school's Welcome Center entryway is designed as an outward community-focused space rather than an inwardly-oriented administrative hub. It features many elements that invite users into the thematic environment of the school, with natural lighting from clerestory windows, bright colors, and environmental graphics. There are small, medium, and large meeting spaces where families can meet with administrators, fill out forms, etc., rather than private administrative offices. Safety and security features are subtly integrated into the environment so that they are unobtrusive and don't detract from the educational experience and the character of the space. Students and visitors enter through a secure vestibule that unobtrusively incorporates standard District technologies, such as video intercoms and card swipe access systems.

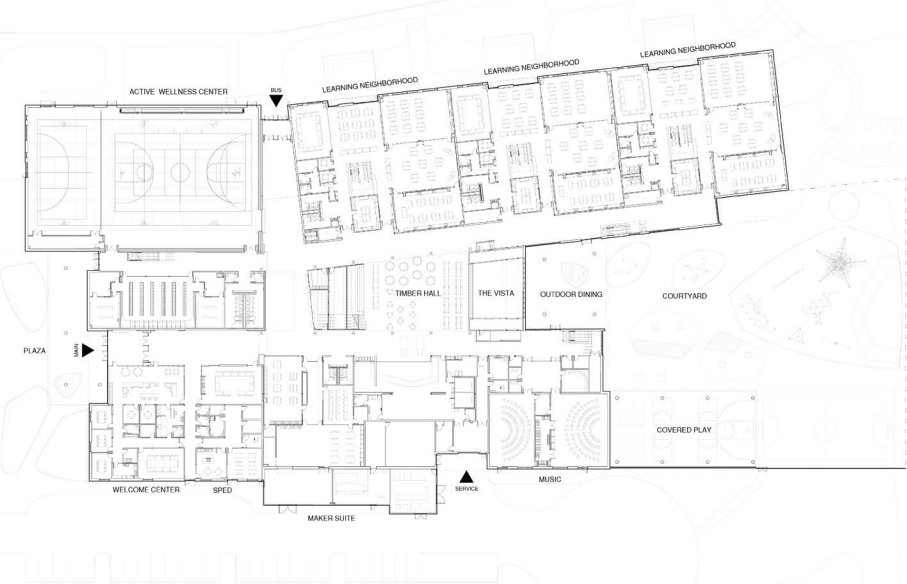
Community Room: Adjacent to the Welcome Center is a community room space that supports appropriate community use of school facilities while maintaining a secure school environment. The rentable space features a separate entrance as well as amenities and resources that support a variety of community uses.

The Neighborhood's Backyard: The school site creates a balanced connection with the surrounding neighborhood that promotes intentional community usage. The school is set back and scaled to respect nearby homes while school grounds are open and available for community use after school hours. Gardiner feels like a private and safe space, but also one that is welcoming and inclusive. This balance creates a space much like an extended backyard for neighbors and the community.

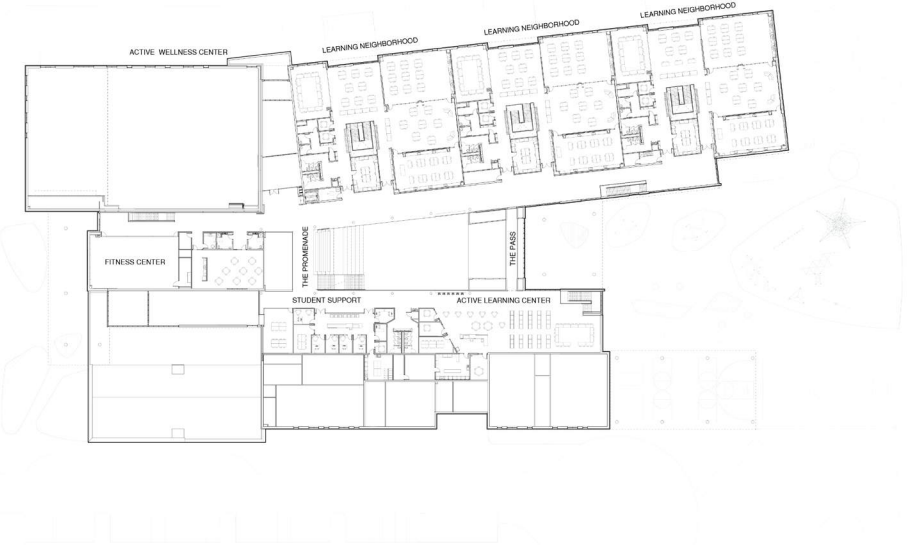




FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



INSPIRATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

Recovering the “Forgotten Years”:

Early on, the Design Committee committed to entirely rethinking the middle school experience, motivated by the premise that middle school students could and should be more engaged in their education than anyone assumed possible. Recovering these “forgotten years” and maximizing the potential of this time in students’ lives drove the Design Committee’s thinking at every stage.

Inspiration through Observation:

School tours helped District leaders and the Design Committee find inspiration for integrating a project-based learning model at the new school and finding ideas for how the physical environment would support this educational experience.

Choice, Autonomy, and Belonging:

Driven by the *By Students, For Students* concept, the new school environment is designed around motivating choice and autonomy and a sense of belonging for students, inspiring them to be active and present in all aspects of their middle school experience by giving them options around how they learn, how they engage, and how they develop into healthy, well-adjusted young adults.

Creating a Home Base and the Rhythm of Returning:

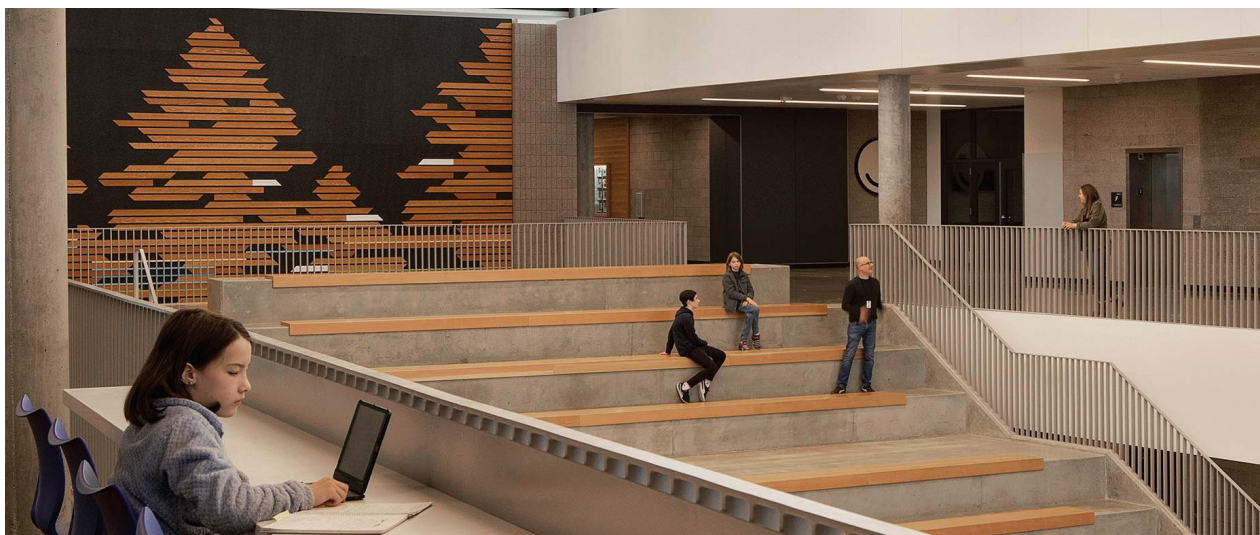
Gardiner’s Learning Neighborhoods were created to feel like a home base for its students. Despite their dynamic and versatile nature, the Learning Neighborhoods maintain a sense of safety, comfort, and familiarity—almost everything that students and teachers need are housed within each Learning Neighborhood, and students are empowered to seek out other spaces within the school that support additional needs and activities.

This continuous rhythm of leaning into, leaving, and then returning to the Learning Neighborhood is unique to the Gardiner experience. It promotes critical thinking and exploration as students and teachers work together to identify the learning spaces and resources that best suit their objectives.

Back to Nature: Environmental graphics, materials, and views support placemaking and exploration of the Pacific Northwest’s natural beauty. In Timer Hall, the Vista’s name was inspired by the rear glass wall that acts as a viewfinder, framing views to the courtyard and Mt. Hood.

A massive tree graphic stands boldly at the top of the Learning Stairs, culminating the forest and tree themes featured throughout the building. Students loved this motif for its ability to promote curiosity and discovery and highlight connections to the natural world.

Wood is a featured material used strategically and meaningfully throughout the building to convey a sense of importance and help users understand the building.



Results of the Process and Project

Gardiner epitomizes the transformative value of leveraging lessons learned and celebrating the journey of discovery.

ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL AND DISTRICT GOALS

The District's 2018 bond set out to improve safety and security, upgrade and update schools, and reduce overcrowding. Replacing Gardiner Middle School was a signature effort in the bond promise, and the project was delivered on budget, on schedule, and exceeding sustainability goals with a path to Net Zero. Educationally, the District's goal was implementing a project-based, student-centered curriculum and learning approach, embodied at Gardiner in the multi-faceted and collaborative Learning Neighborhoods and Maker Suite, and the multi-functional Timber Hall. Experientially, decreasing student anxiety and stress was a priority, addressed through measures such as eliminating lockers, creating more open spaces, and supporting passive supervision measures.

Feedback solicited in December 2022 from Gardiner leaders and educators revealed that:

- Student anxieties have decreased
- Attendance and tardiness issues have decreased
- Discipline referrals have decreased
- Regressive actions are about half to a third of what Gardiner leaders have experienced at other middle schools
- Collaboration has increased between students, between students and adults, and between teachers
- Teacher collaboration has accelerated teacher learning
- Collaboration opportunities where all students in a grade level can engage concurrently are now possible
- Teacher reading and research has increased

"The Learning Neighborhoods are the biggest impact. It's truly a community, and students feel that. They promote positive interactions between students and students, students with adults, and between teachers."

GARDINER LEADER

"Teachers are doing extra reading, trying to find other ways to teach something. Teachers are seeing the effects of it and how much kids are enjoying it. They are seeing kids have fun, and that makes it fun for us."

GARDINER LEADER



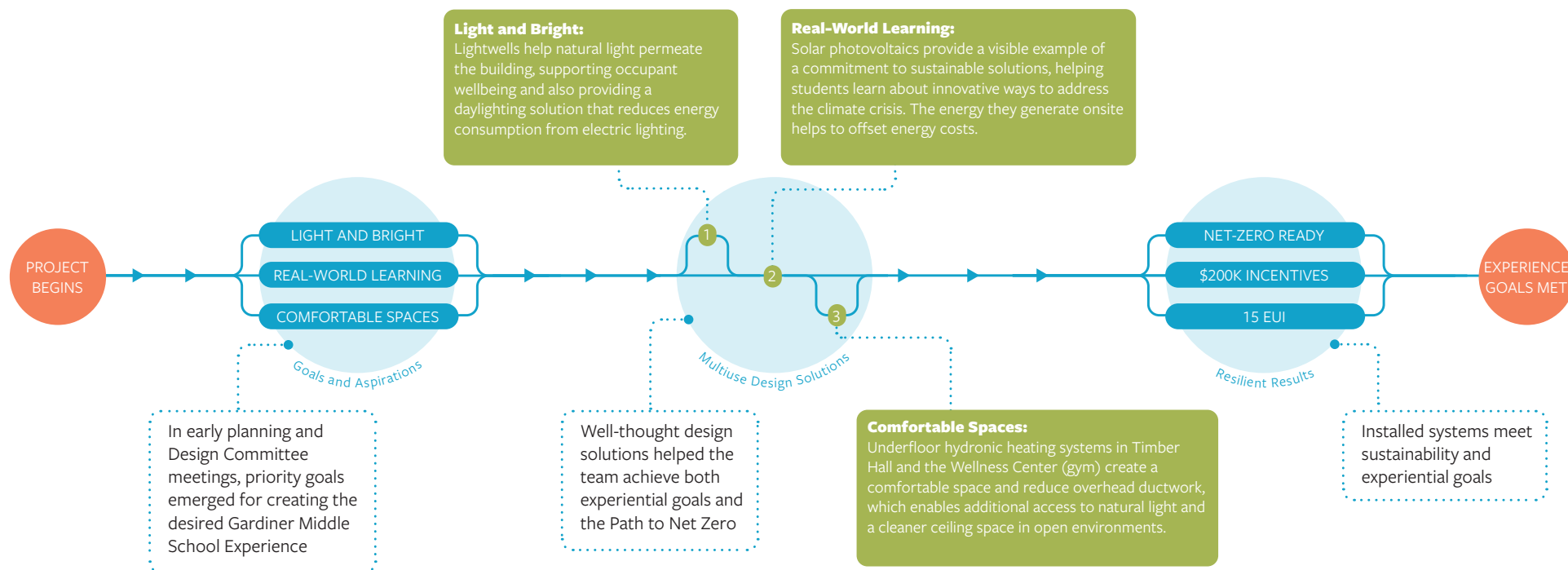
"In a traditional school, you'd never see another teacher doing something cool; you're each locked in your own spaces. Being able to see each other's classrooms and see each other teach is invaluable."

GARDINER EDUCATOR

"We have been able to do exciting things with project-based learning and deeper learning....We can celebrate the whole child, not only their math growth, for example, but all the things that make them who they are... We're trying to let this place be their place, not just a place for adults where they have great classrooms and technology, but something kids feel like they own, where they see themselves in all the spaces of the building."

GARDINER PRINCIPAL

Achieving Sustainability Aspirations: A Path to Net Zero



FINDING THE PATH

At the outset of the project, the design team gathered with District leaders and stakeholders to identify all of Gardiner's key objectives. From pedagogy to efficiency and the student experience, capturing the District's priorities allowed the team to effectively build a process around what they valued.

Achieving Net Zero at Gardiner wasn't the District's top priority, but potentially achieving it while also achieving higher priority targets was always a key factor in decision-making.

DEVELOPING A DIRECTION

While achieving a Net-Zero energy building was not an explicit District priority, the design team used the Energy Trust of Oregon's Path to Net Zero program as a guide. This gave designers and engineers a contextual lens to identify sustainable design solutions that aligned with other project objectives, where implementing these ideas would enable the project to achieve experiential and sustainability goals simultaneously.

The design team was always cognizant of how design decisions could achieve multiple goals, and intentionally sought out further opportunities that supported them.

INVESTING IN SUCCESS

Designers and engineers collaborated closely to implement solutions that maximized the value of the District's investment in renewable energy and high-efficiency systems, mandated to be at least 1.5% of the budget. The resulting design included many systems that supported energy efficiency and resilience.

The project also earned \$200,000 in incentives from the Energy Trust for including energy efficient solutions. Gardiner successfully achieved Net Zero readiness as well as its education and physical environmental experience goals.

ACHIEVING COMMUNITY GOALS

The ***By Students, For Students*** concept was a guiding factor in the development process. Fully integrating and honoring student involvement in the Design Committee enabled students to contribute fully and see the results of their input at every stage of design and in the final product.

“At first it was like, we’re just sixth, seventh, eighth graders; we don’t even know who we are ourselves. To give input on something that’s going to affect the whole population of this school was a big thing.”

GARDINER STUDENT



“My main things that I wanted to contribute to the conversation were natural lighting and active space. I think both of those have been achieved in a great way.”

GARDINER STUDENT

“We need natural light because we didn’t have a lot of it [before]. It’s just nice to see and it provides an environment that isn’t necessarily just school and bricks and lockers, you know?”

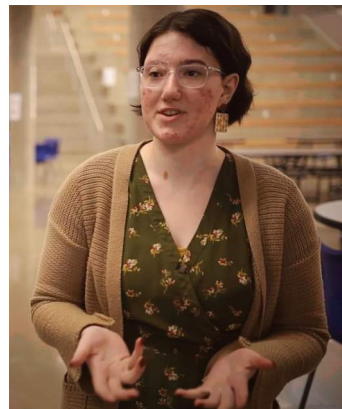
GARDINER STUDENT

“I really like how open the spaces are and it’s not as confined.”

GARDINER STUDENT



Though the students who participated in the Design Committee would graduate from Gardiner before the new school opened, and would never directly experience the end results of their input, each student showed a remarkable care, empathy, and engagement, thinking deeply about what they desired for the students who would come after them and experience the Gardiner that they envisioned.



“With this, we felt like we got to contribute. We got to be a part of something. I think future students coming here, knowing that students got the opportunity to provide input, will really boost themselves and be like, ***Hey I can have a difference, too.***”

GARDINER STUDENT

UNINTENDED RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Embracing a New Way of Thinking to Prioritize Engagement

Early on, the Design Committee determined that Gardiner needed to be unlike any other existing school environment in order to support the fully reimagined educational experience that the Design Committee aspired to create.

The key factor in this approach was buying as much time as possible for a deeper engagement process with students and other stakeholders to explore new ideas, gather input, and reach consensus around the implications of the school's team-based approach to teaching and learning.

At times, this created points of discomfort and uncertainty, especially for the design and construction teams bound by schedule and budget requirements.

Through clear communication and mutual trust, the team was collectively able to make the time needed to explore a new way of thinking about educational experiences, and in turn demonstrate a new way of thinking about what it means to be trusted project partners.

PROVEN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Including students in the design process is critical to creating environments that reflect student interests, inspire meaningful engagement, and create a sense of belonging. The Design Committee positioned students to contribute in profound and impactful ways, then leveraged their ideas in tangible design solutions. The project team's flexible approach enabled this deep engagement to take priority.

- 1 There is strength in numbers**
Include a significant number of students in decision making groups. Students gain confidence when their peers and friends are at the table.
- 2 Remove participation barriers**
Hold design committee meetings during the school day. Provide transportation for students and invest in substitute teachers to ensure educators, mentors, and administrators can participate fully.
- 3 Facilitate tours and research**
Help expand students' perspectives and knowledge. Access to diverse models and visual examples allow them to imagine what could be. In-person tours are especially valuable.
- 4 Prepare students to engage**
Preview meeting materials with students before committee meetings, giving them time to reflect.
- 5 Trust their voice**
Middle school students are insightful and eager to work for the benefit of students who will come after them.
- 6 Position adult advocates**
Help adults understand that their role is to make space for student voice rather than speak for students.
- 7 Re-structure Interactions**
Ensure engagement strategies empower students to contribute. Implement multiple communication methods to neutralize existing power dynamics between students and adults.
- 8 Create forums for reflection**
Make space for students to engage peers in problem-defining activities and interviews. Dedicated time for them to reflect and digest feedback.





Photography throughout by Josh Partee and Jeremy Bitterman