



CORGAN



Designing for Lift-Off: How Campus Thinking Transforms the Middle School Experience

APRIL 3, 2026

Introductions



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Designing for Lift-Off: How Campus Thinking Transforms the Middle School Experience

Session Description

This session explores how a middle school can become more than a standalone building by operating as an integrated learning ecosystem within a larger, multi-use campus. Through collaborative design strategies, Guilford County Schools' Kiser Middle School demonstrates how circulation, adjacencies, and spatial sequencing can reduce friction while increasing connection—between students, programs, and the broader community. Attendees will learn how flexible interiors, purposeful outdoor learning environments, and a clear architectural identity can support curiosity, creativity, and student ownership. The conversation reframes “good school design” as an experience that empowers students to move, gather, create, and belong with intention.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how campus-wide planning decisions directly influence daily student experience, safety, and clarity of movement in complex K-12 environments.
- Identify design strategies that support flexibility and student agency, including adaptable learning spaces, shared commons, and indoor-outdoor teaching environments.
- Evaluate how architectural form and spatial organization contribute to identity and belonging, particularly for middle school learners navigating a critical developmental stage.
- Apply ecosystem-based thinking to future school projects, shifting from isolated buildings toward connected environments that serve students, educators, and the surrounding community.



**The Need for a
New Approach:
Why Middle School
& Why Campus
Thinking**



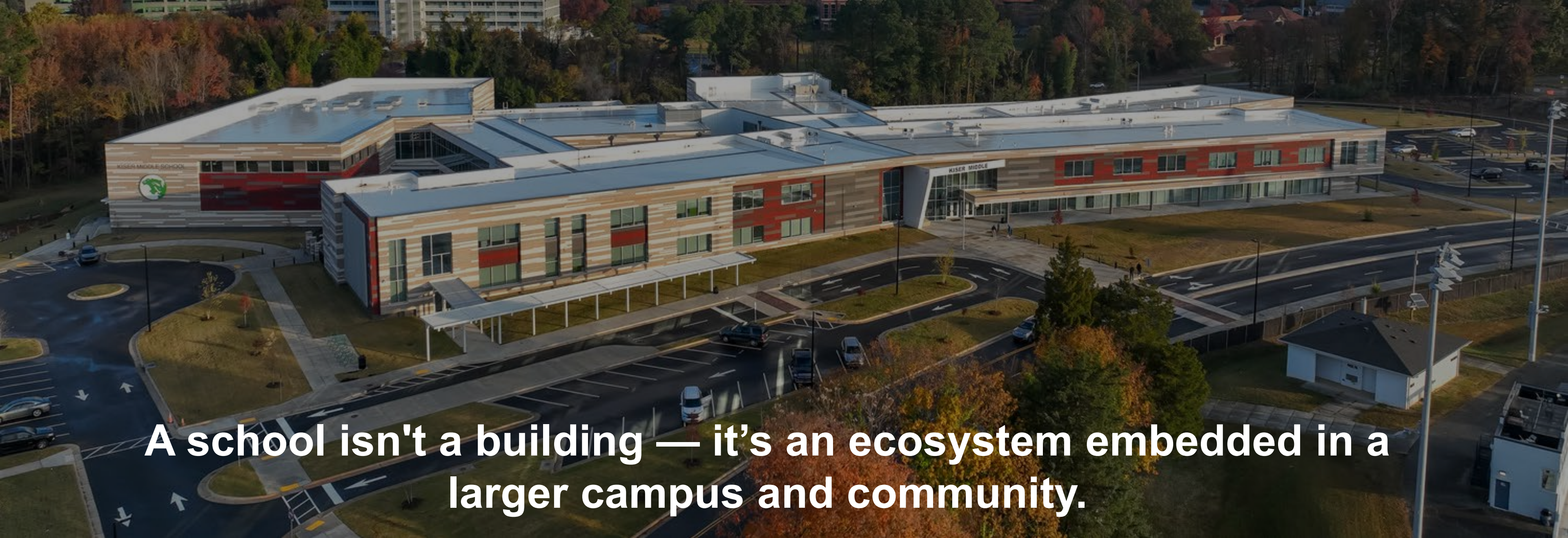
Guilford County Schools and its community envisioned a unified campus that could operate efficiently while remaining deeply human in scale and experience.





NEW KISER CAMPUS

OLD KISER CAMPUS



A school isn't a building — it's an ecosystem embedded in a larger campus and community.

Reduces Friction

Where movement is intuitive, support services are easy to reach, and the architecture anticipates anxiety points helping students navigate their day with clarity, confidence, and calm.

Increases Connection

Where collaboration zones, visible learning areas, and shared gathering spaces encourage students to interact, create, and build healthy social relationships within a safe and welcoming campus.

Nurtures Belonging

Where identity is reinforced through inclusive design, storytelling, and visual cues that celebrate students, honor the community, and help every child feel seen, valued, and at home.

Community Engagement

“I imagine that it’s going to serve as a gathering space in many ways for nearby Grimsley.”

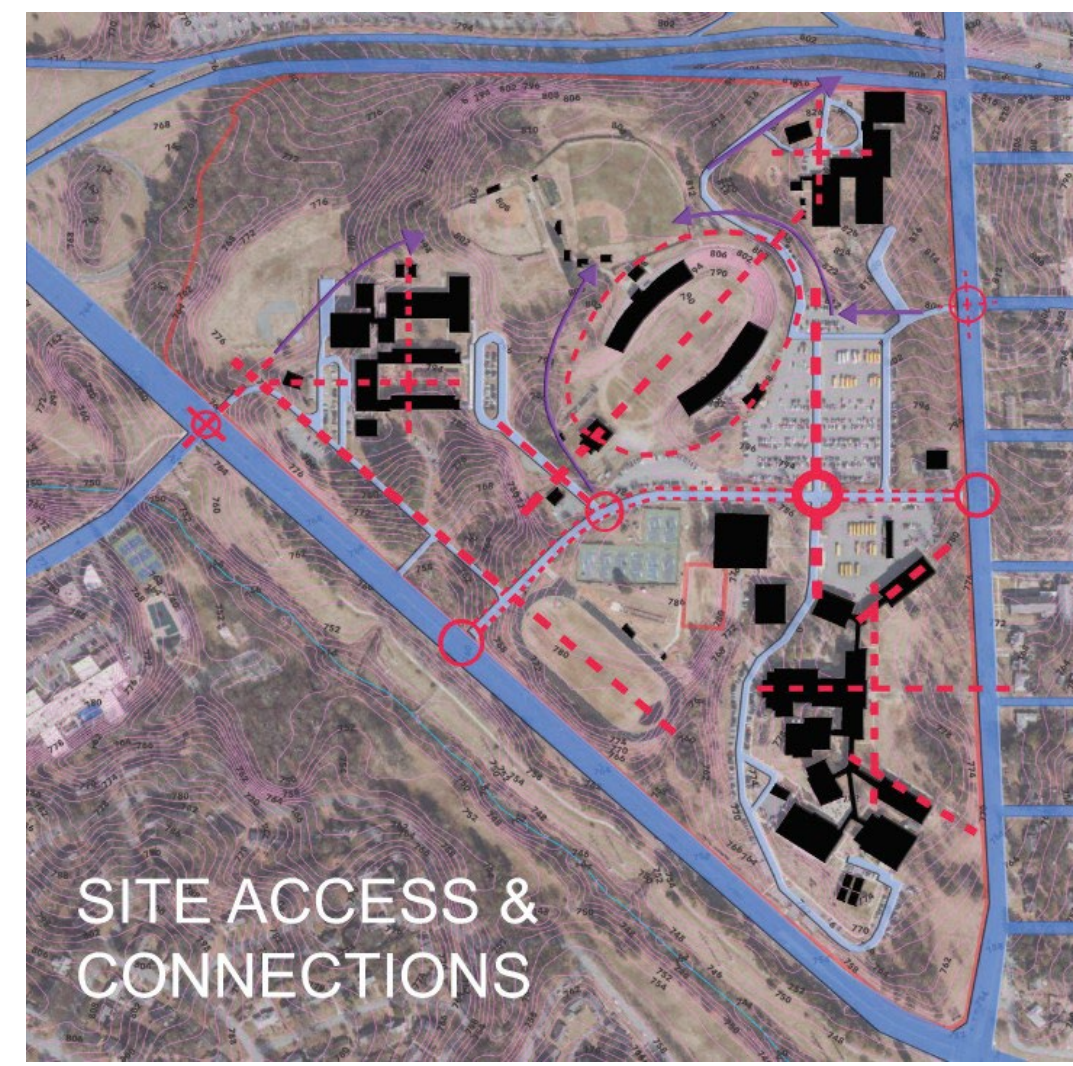
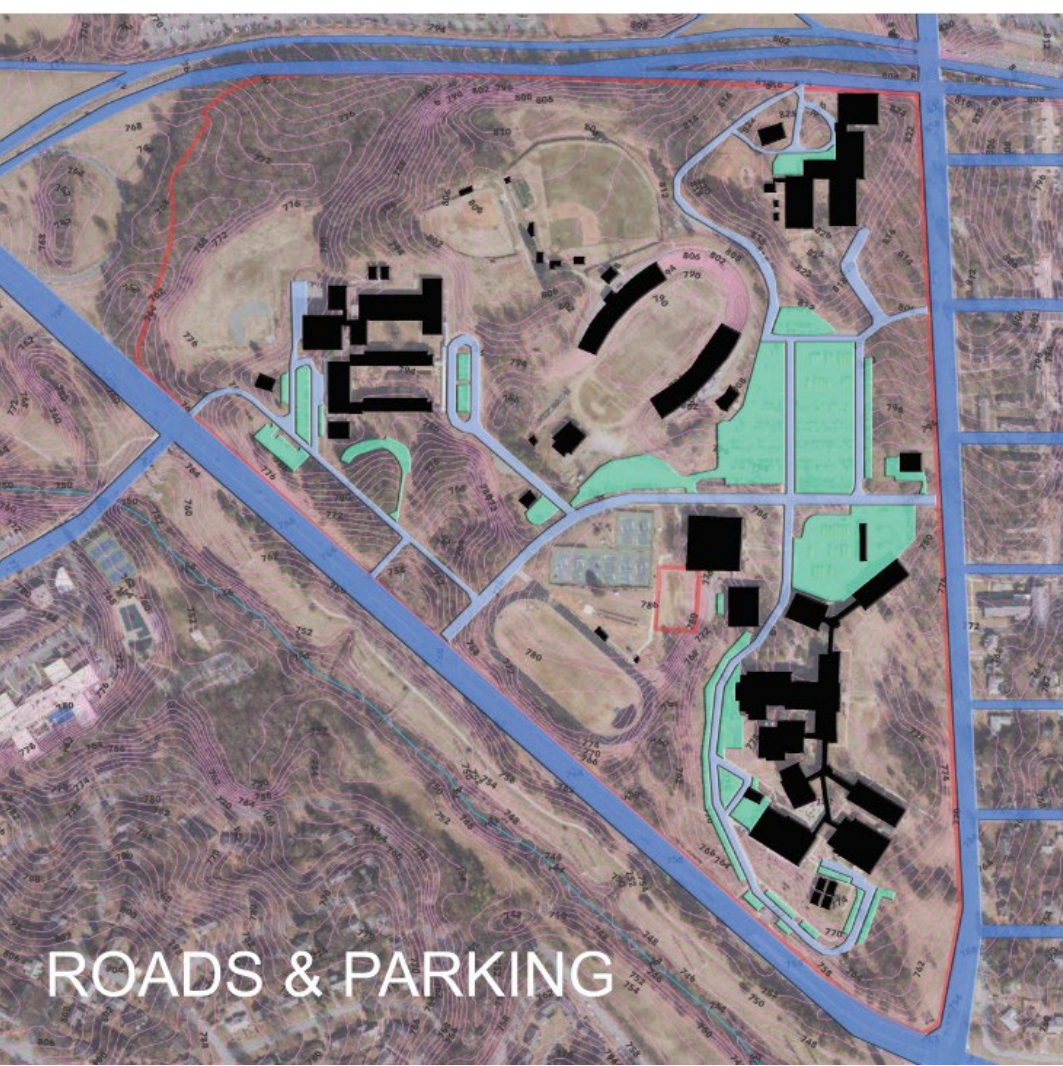
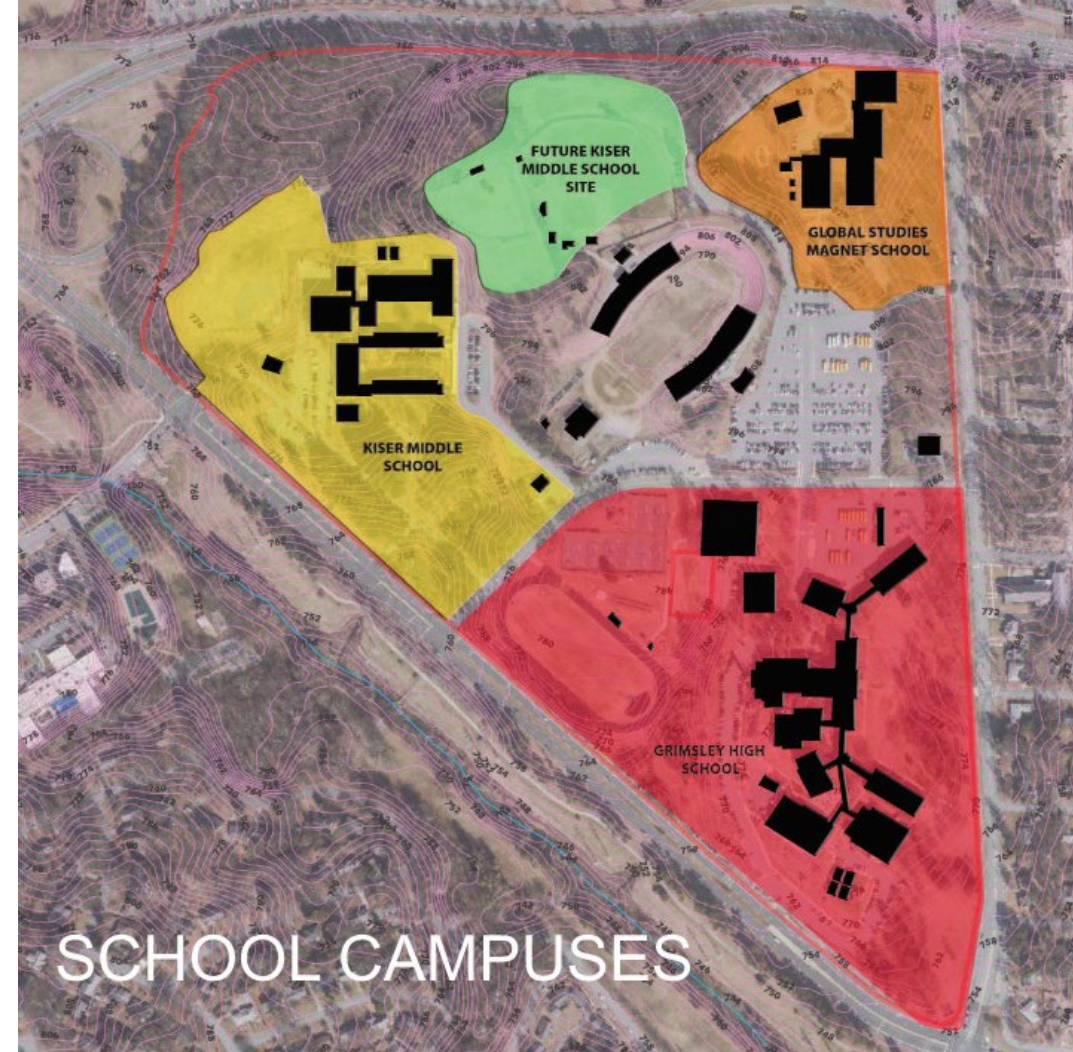
“Use of different color or materials per school area, ie grade level, to facilitate navigation.”

“If the cafeteria had an outdoor patio that would be a dream. The kids are eating in classrooms now.”

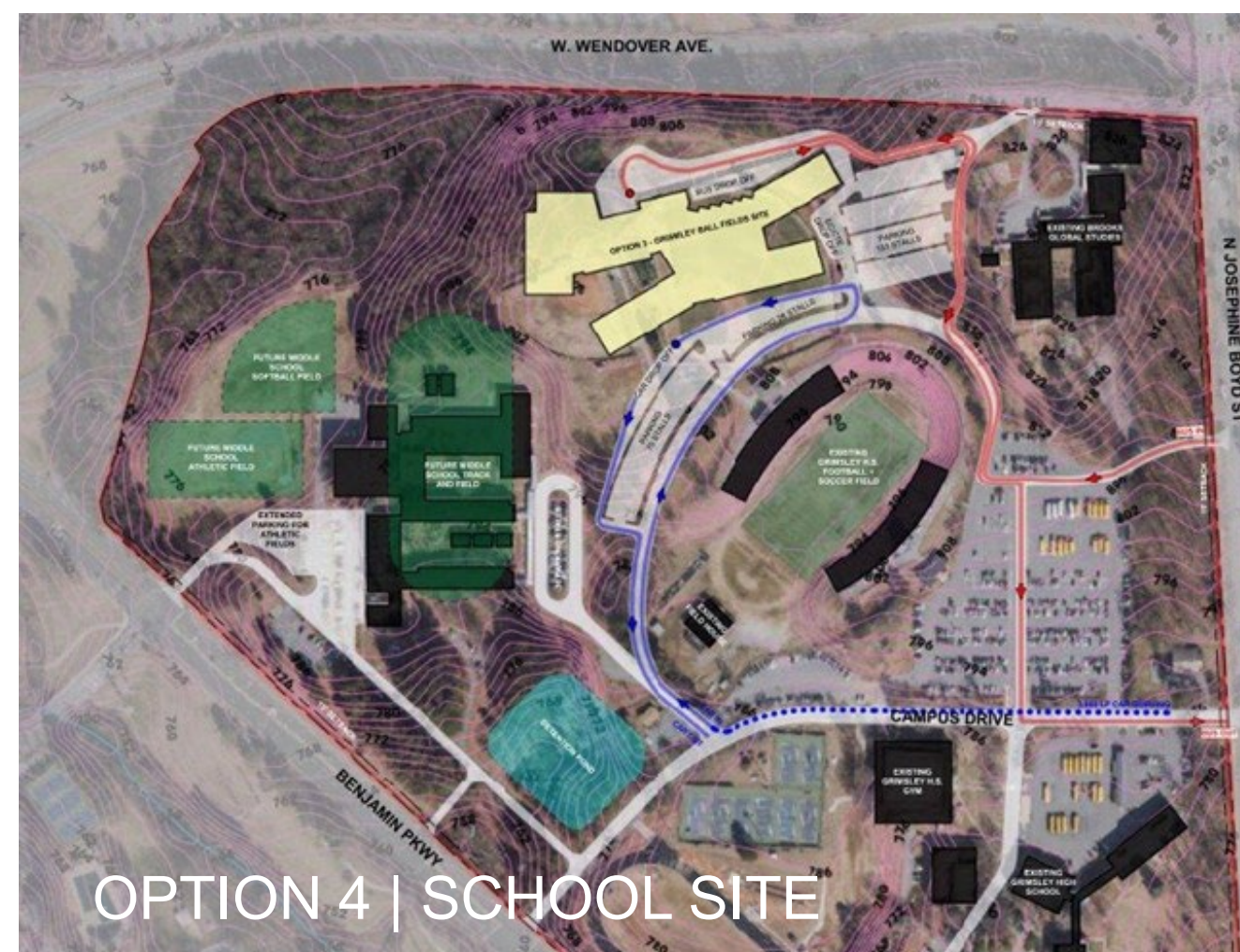
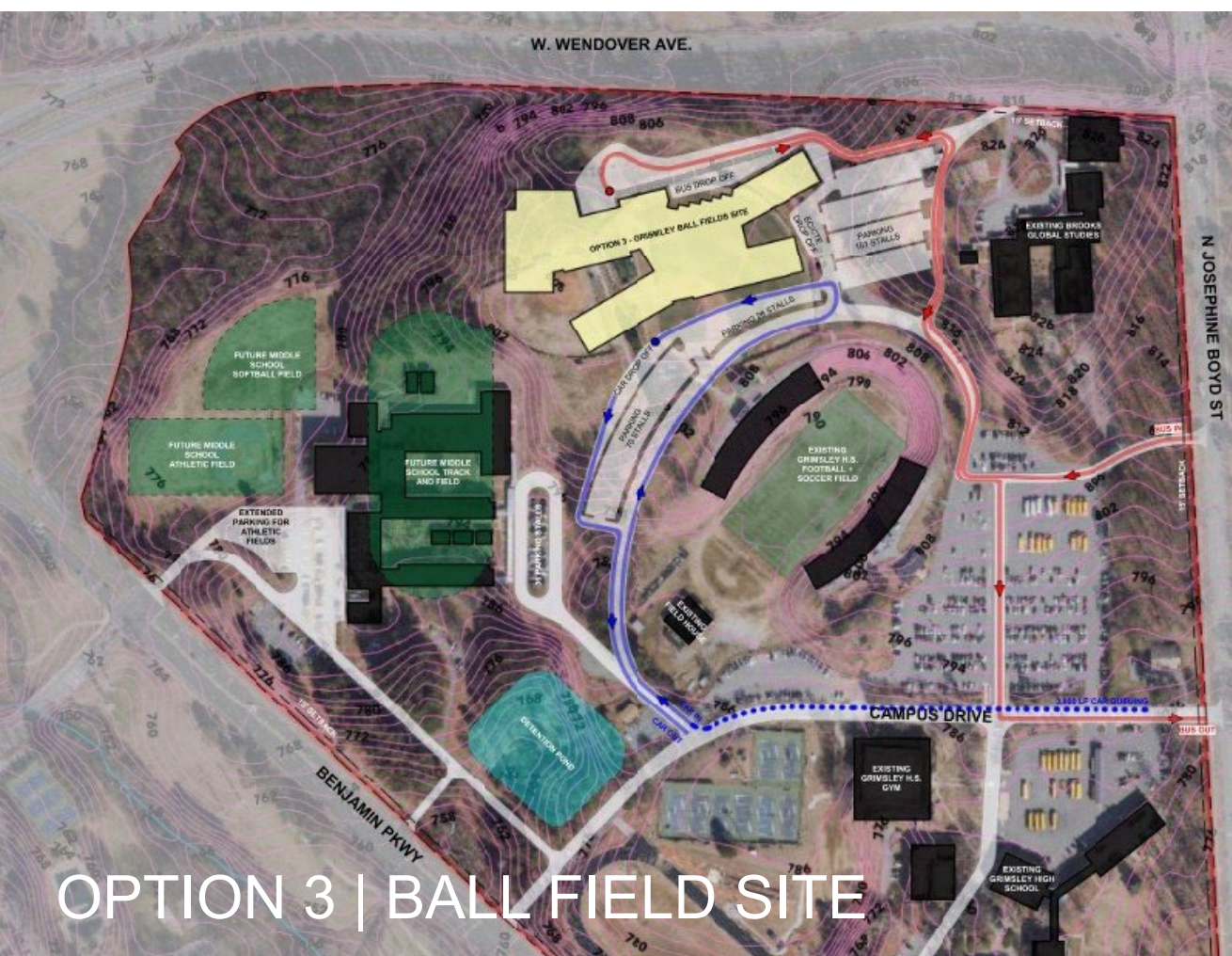
“What is the best design for keeping students, administrators, and staff safe?”

“Ensuring access for disabled students to move freely and access all spaces.”

“Accommodating the pedestrian traffic that comes from various directions and safety for them.”



Site Analysis | Site Strategies



Site Analysis | Site Strategies

The Challenges We Faced

Design for Lift-off, Low-Floor, and High-Tech: The Challenges to a More Inclusive School Experience

Supporting Middle School Identity Formation

- Students needed spaces that eased anxiety and clarified movement.
- Social and learning connections needed to be more visible and accessible.
- The environment needed to foster belonging for a diverse student body.

A Complex, High-Demand Campus

- Heavy community and multi-school use required clear, flexible shared spaces.
- The campus needed to stay unified and easy to navigate for all users.
- Shared facilities and steady community presence required coordinated planning and open, visible design that built safety and trust.

Rapidly Evolving Program & Growing Enrollment

- Programs and student numbers were changing throughout design.
- Dining and shared spaces needed to support distributed, flexible use.
- Spaces had to serve multiple schools and community partners seamlessly.

A Mandate for Innovation

- Leadership expected a future-ready, student-centered model.
- Traditional planning patterns no longer met district goals.
- Innovation in circulation, collaboration, and program distribution was essential.

Balancing Efficiency with Human Experience

- The campus needed to operate efficiently at scale.
- Yet still provide comfort, visibility, and safety at the individual level.
- The challenge: make a large, multi-use campus feel intuitive and personal.

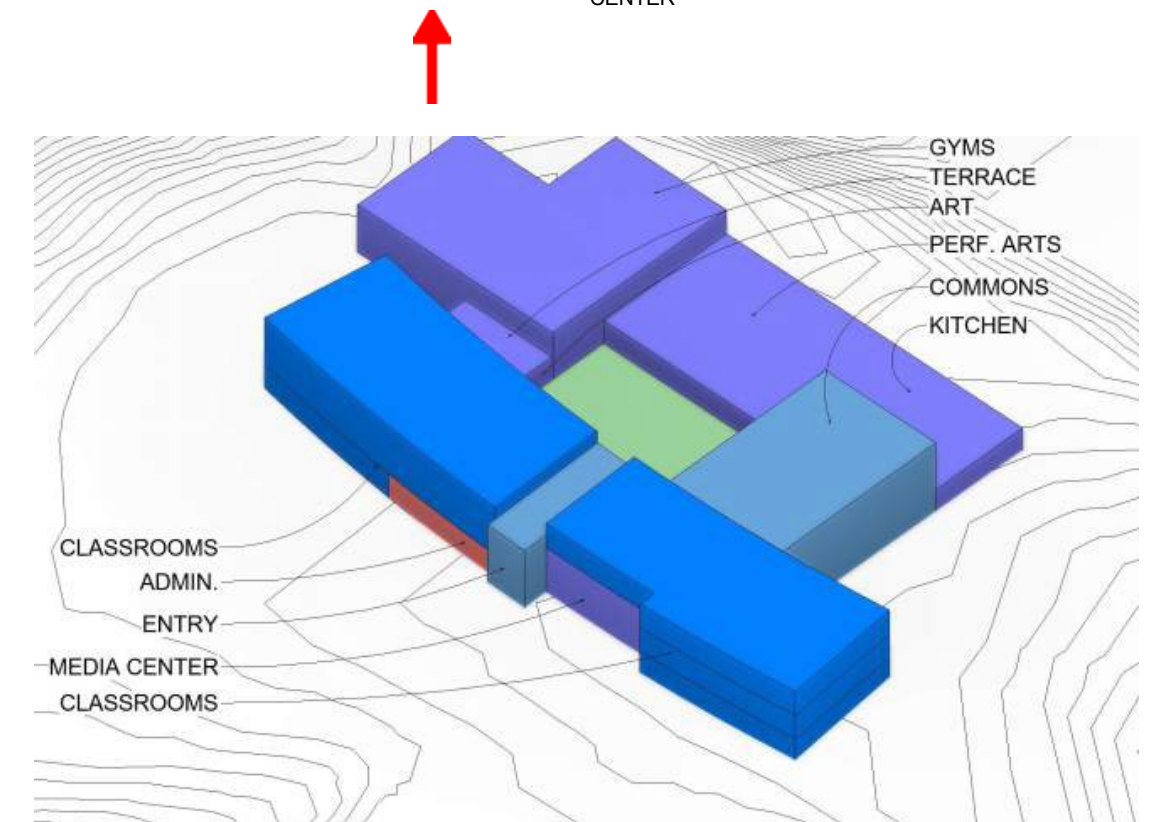
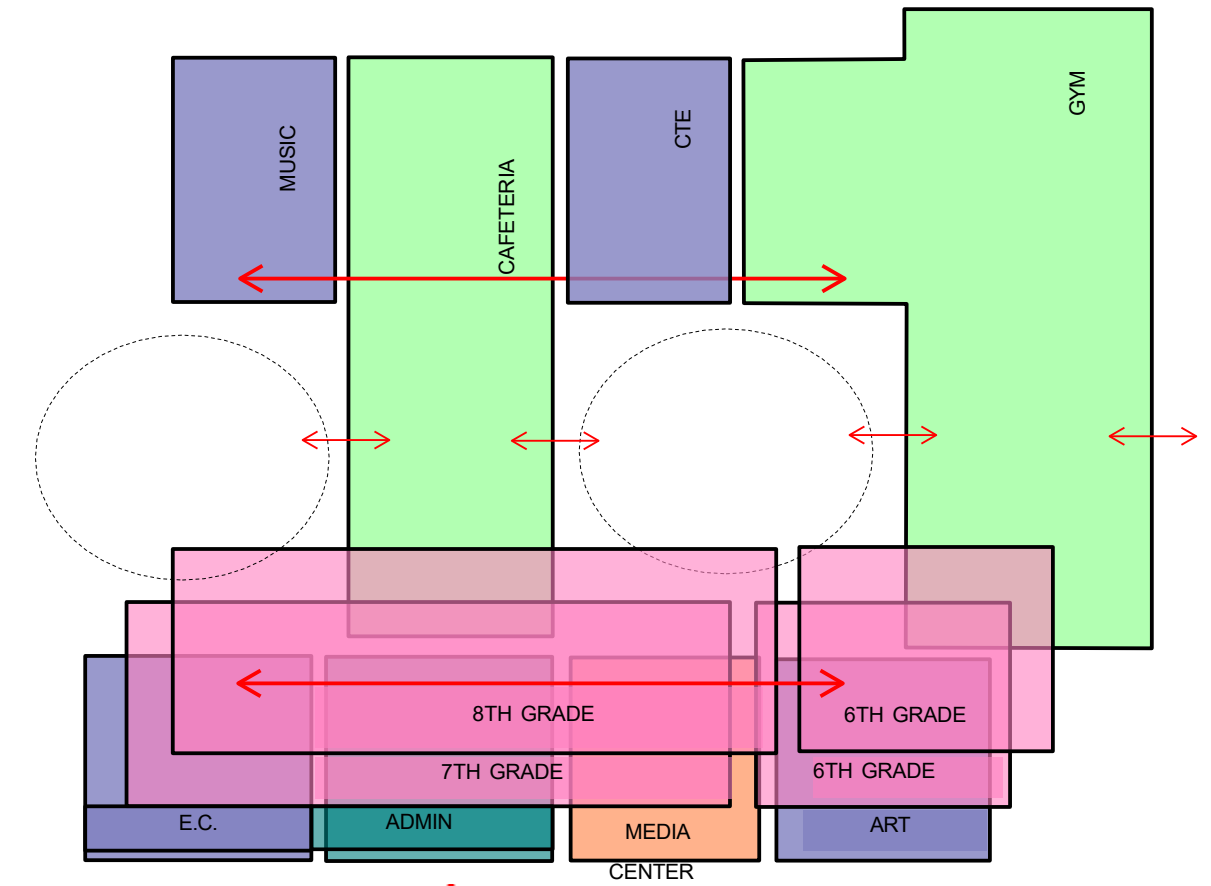
Scheme A: Courtyard

PROS

- Strong presence on site, from the stadium, and from some roads.
- Courtyard gives more program access to a secure outdoor space.
- A multi-story option reduces school footprint, allowing for circulation to move around the entire school.
- A large commons space can connect students to multiple floors and several outdoor spaces.

CONS

- This scheme has separated academics from large gathering spaces, if distribution of other program with academics is a goal.
- This option does not connect with the surrounding site and with nature.



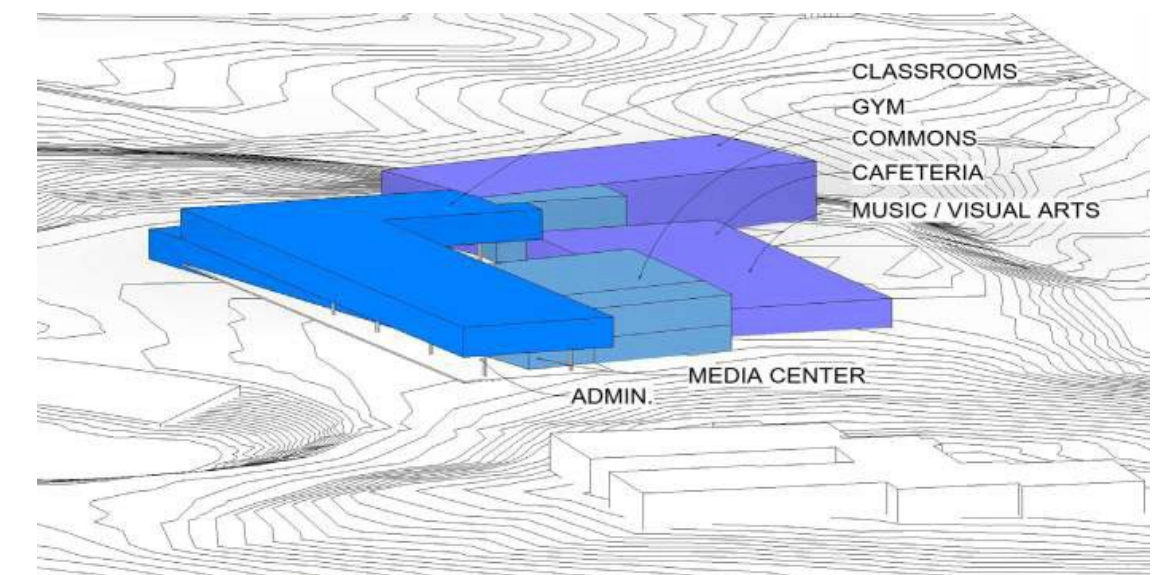
Scheme B: Plaza

PROS

- Unique architectural presence on site, from the stadium, and from some roads.
- Courtyard gives more program opportunity, shelter with the bridge, and offers access for the school and community to gather.
- A multi-story option reduces school footprint, allowing for circulation to move around the entire school, while creating clear program wings.
- A large commons space can connect students to multiple floors and to the outdoors.

CONS

- This scheme offers outside terraces and courtyard for learning, but doesn't offer specific garden space.
- This option integrates multiple grade levels together, if clear separation of grades is desired.



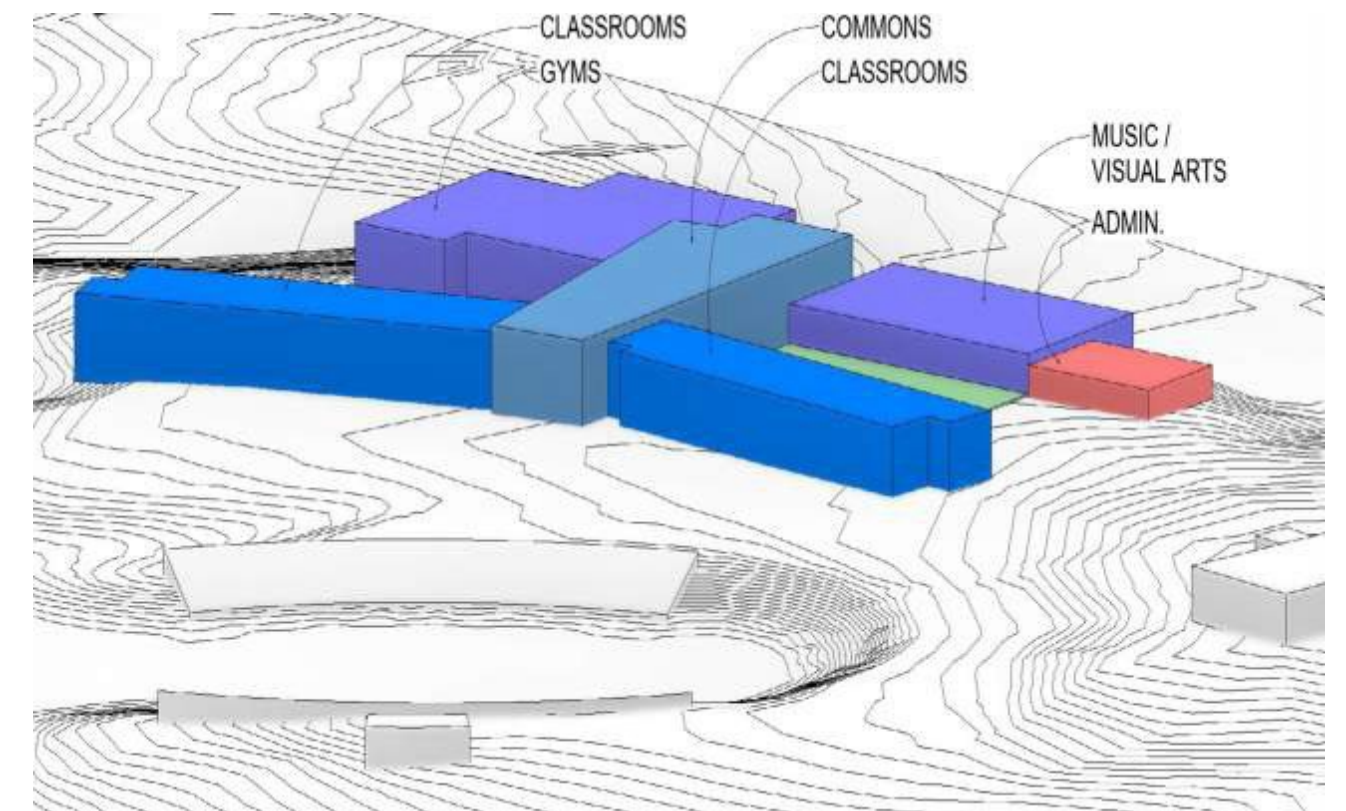
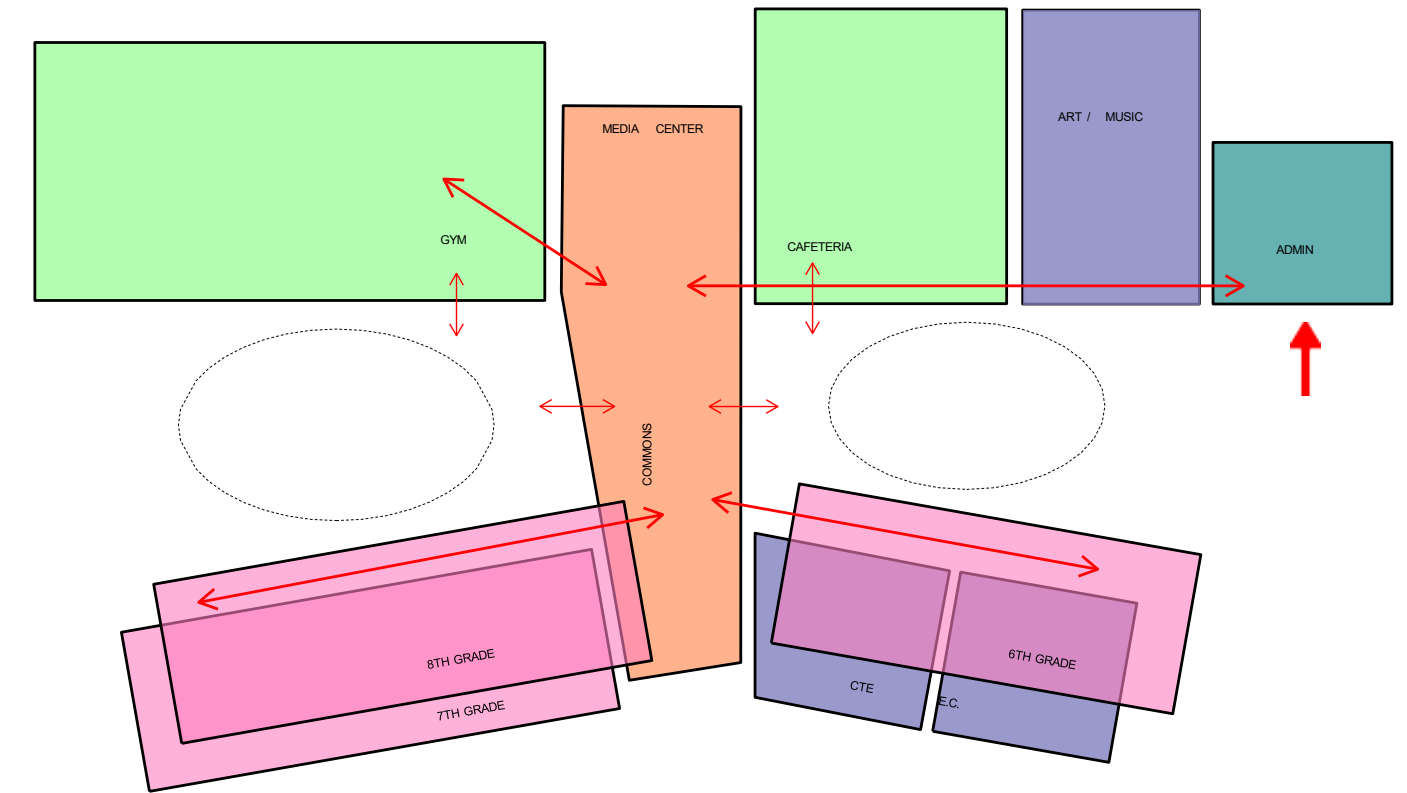
Scheme C: Bent Bar

PROS

- A strong architectural presence on site, from the stadium, and from some roads.
- Plazas gives opportunity for nature and other program to be utilized and form right outside of the school.
- The spine scheme offers a student commons, creating multiple layers and a strong centralized hub between all programs in the school.
- A large commons space can connect students to multiple floors and visually to the outdoors.

CONS

- Administrative entry is not centrally located in the building.
- Bus drop-off is at front of classroom wing instead of at gym or cafeteria.
- This option doesn't offer secure outdoor space.



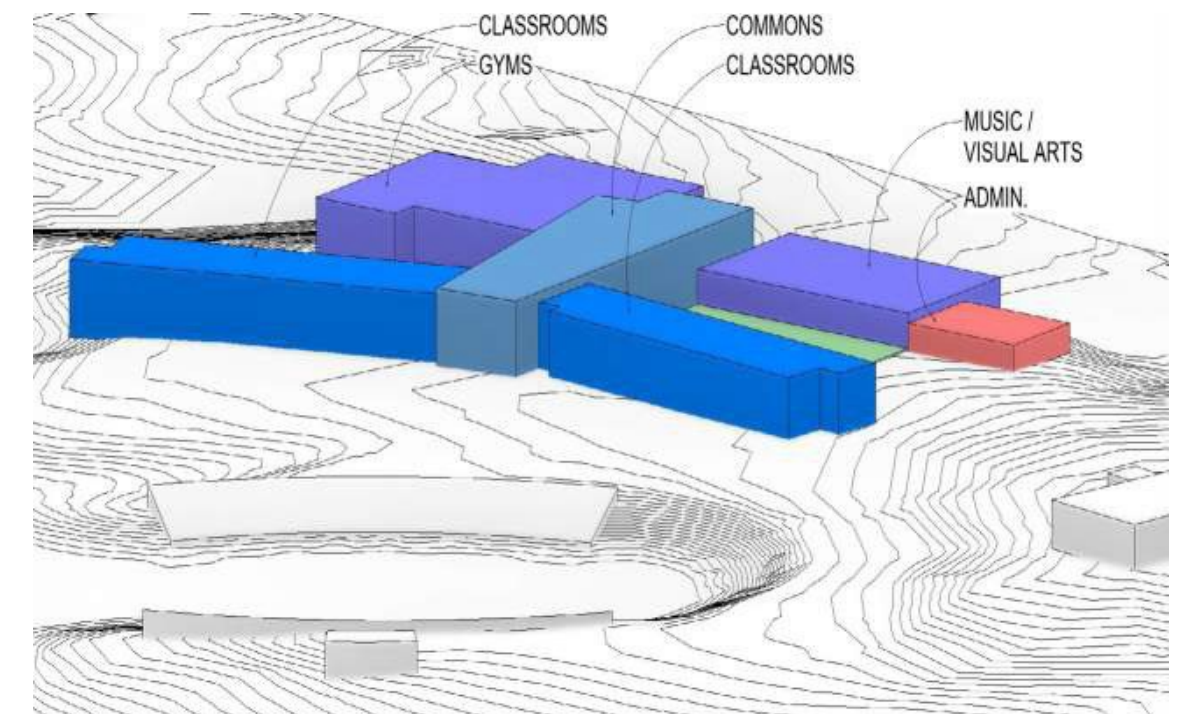
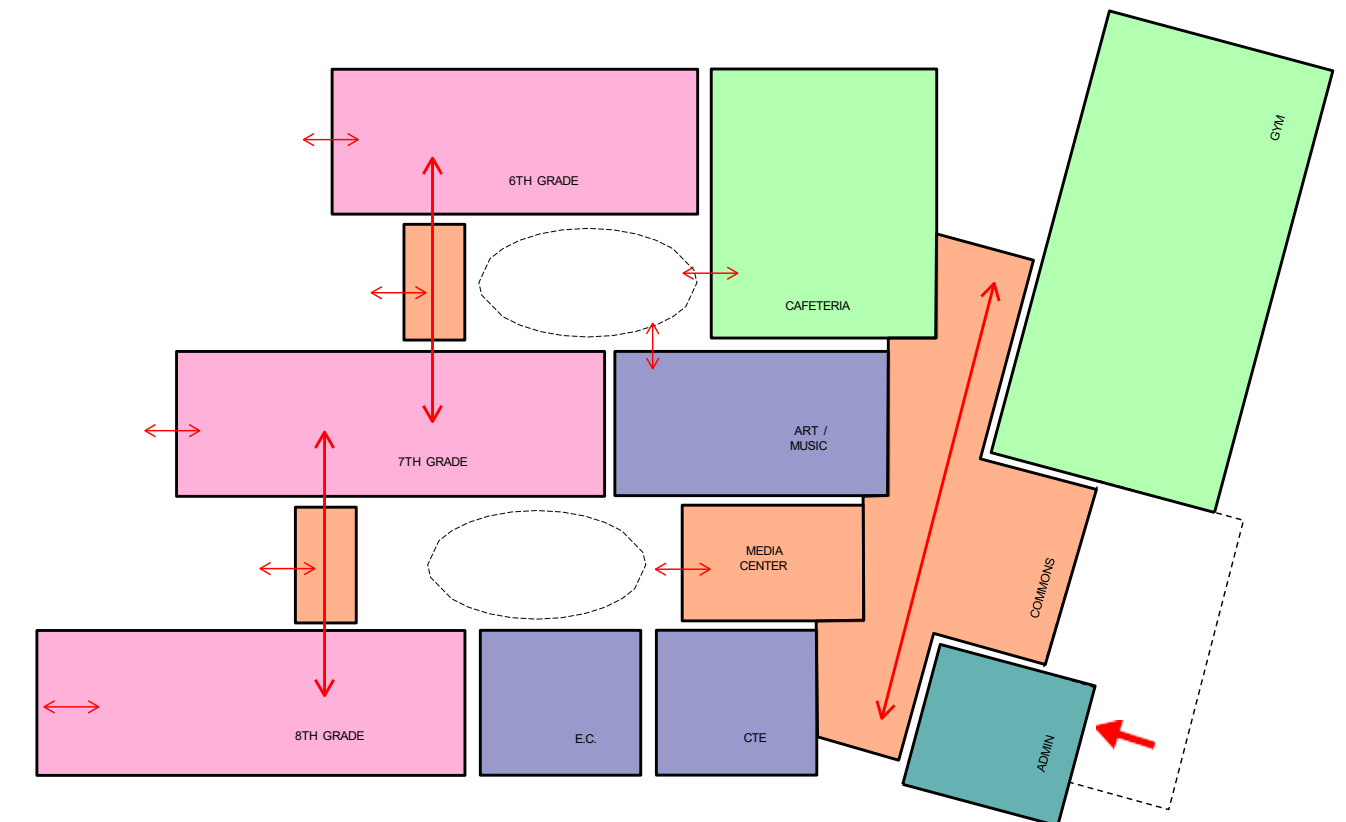
Scheme D: Gardens

PROS

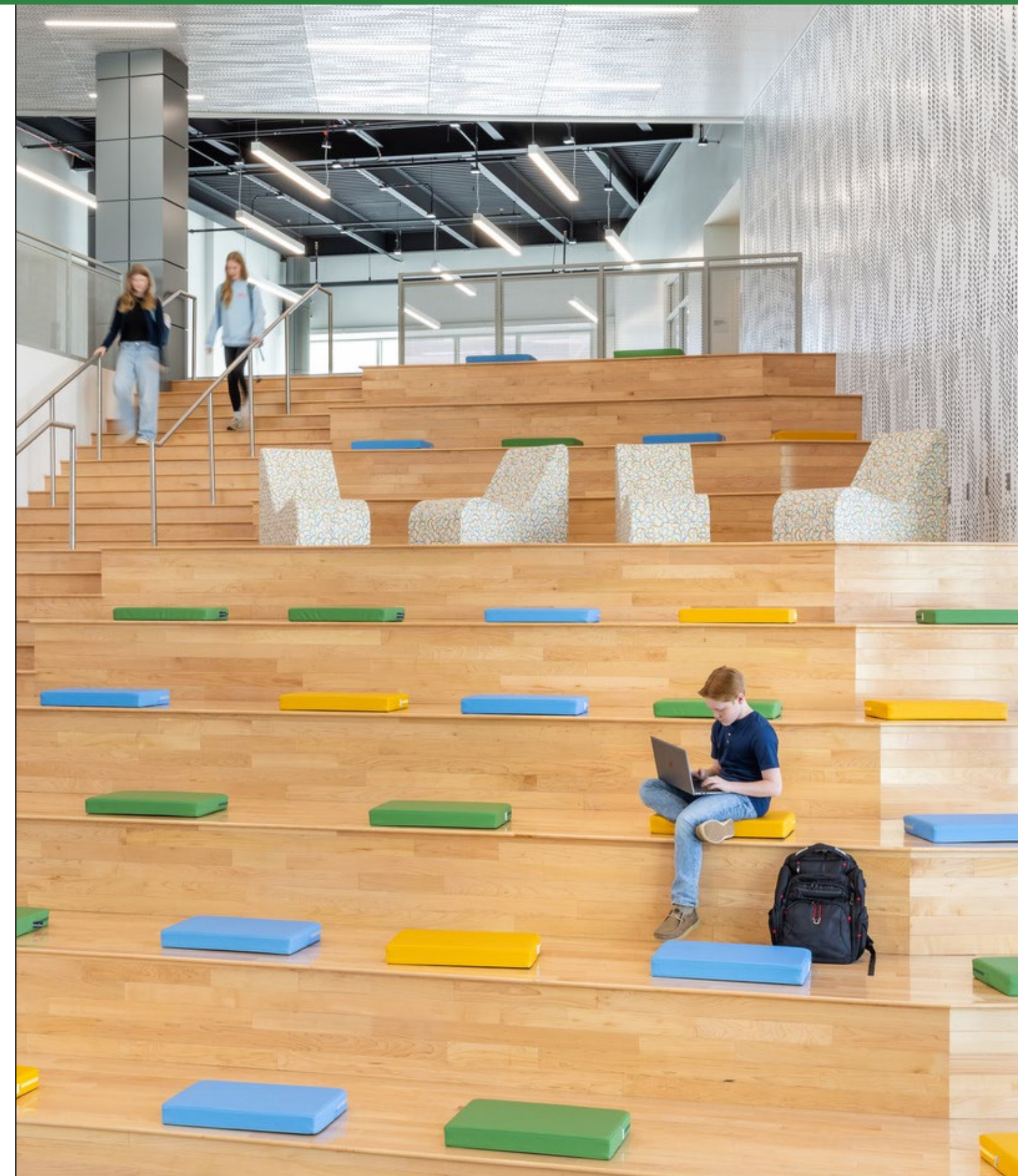
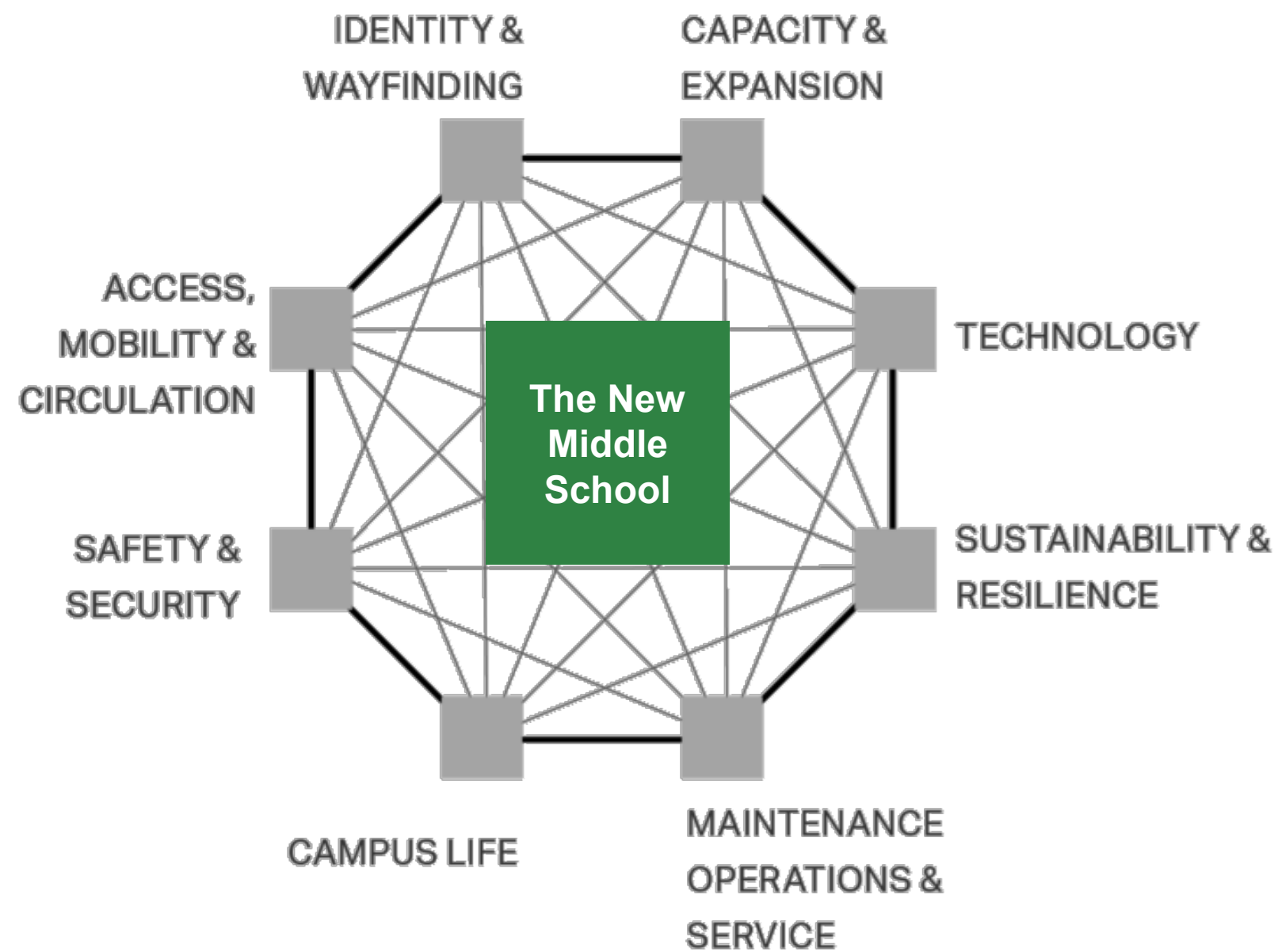
- Strong flow from a shared multi-use commons into major gathering spaces and adjacent learning gardens.
- Connected grade-level bars with shared break-out and flexible learning spaces extending into the tree canopy.
- Gallery bridges offer collaboration zones and potential micro-dining overlooking the forest site.
- Prioritizes connection to site and program over monumentality.

CONS

- Single story scheme, larger footprint.
- Classroom wings project off of topography with structural columns, increase construction costs.
- No opportunity for grand staircase
- Possible site work complications with school placement on site.



Navigating Interlocking Demands





SHARED SPACES

Catalysts for collaboration spaces



DISTRIBUTED FUNCTIONS

Improved flexibility



INDOOR AND OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

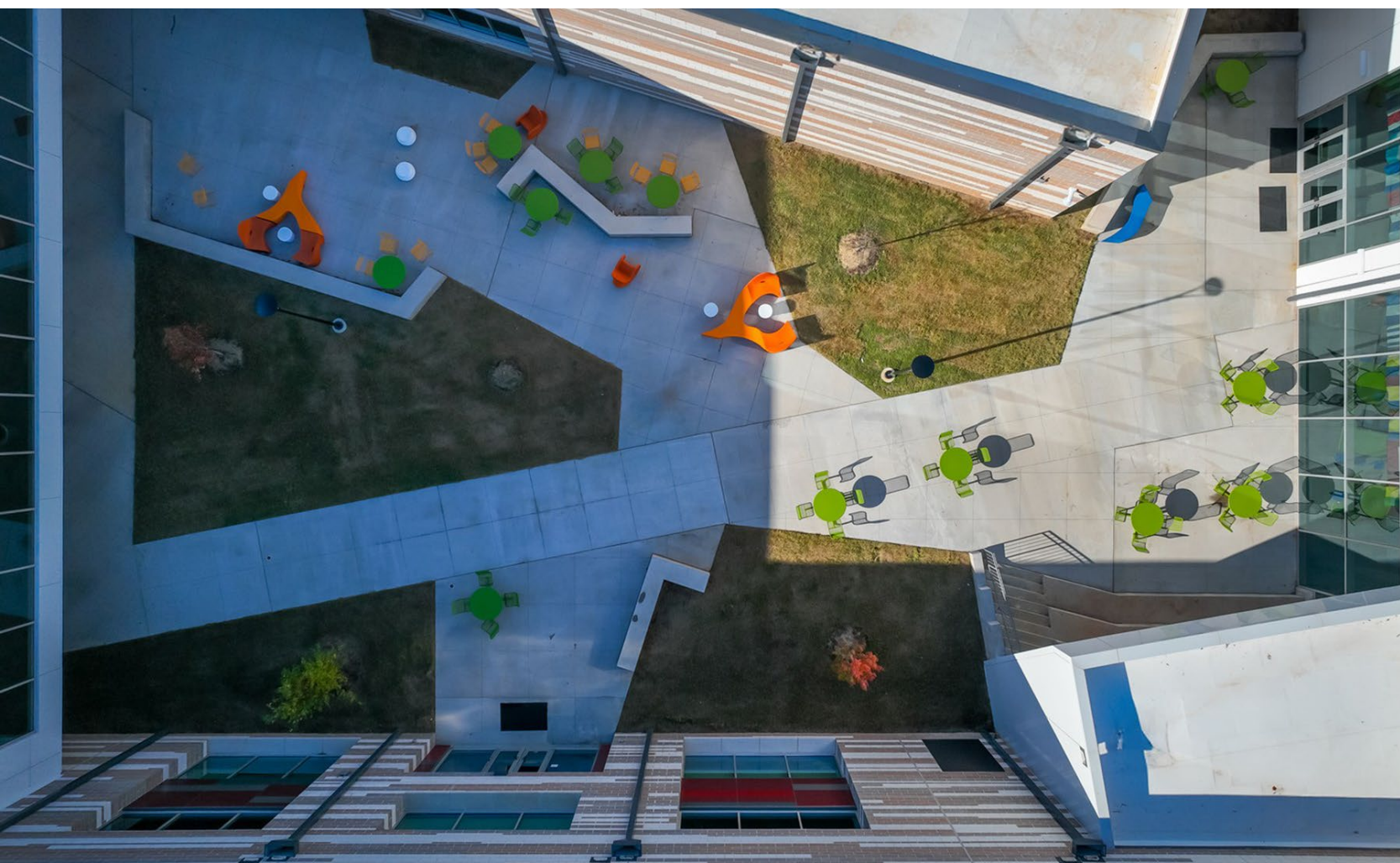
Unified into a cohesive learning landscape

Understanding the Connection Between the Built and Natural Environment





Transparency turns the building into a safety network and a learning showcase — students feel seen, supported, and connected.



Safe and secure outdoor
learning environment



Community Amphitheater
—
Athletics and Performing Arts





Indoor and Outdoor Learning Spaces



Outdoor access supports wellbeing & choice.



Designing for Flexibility, Agency & Inclusivity



Why These Principals Matter

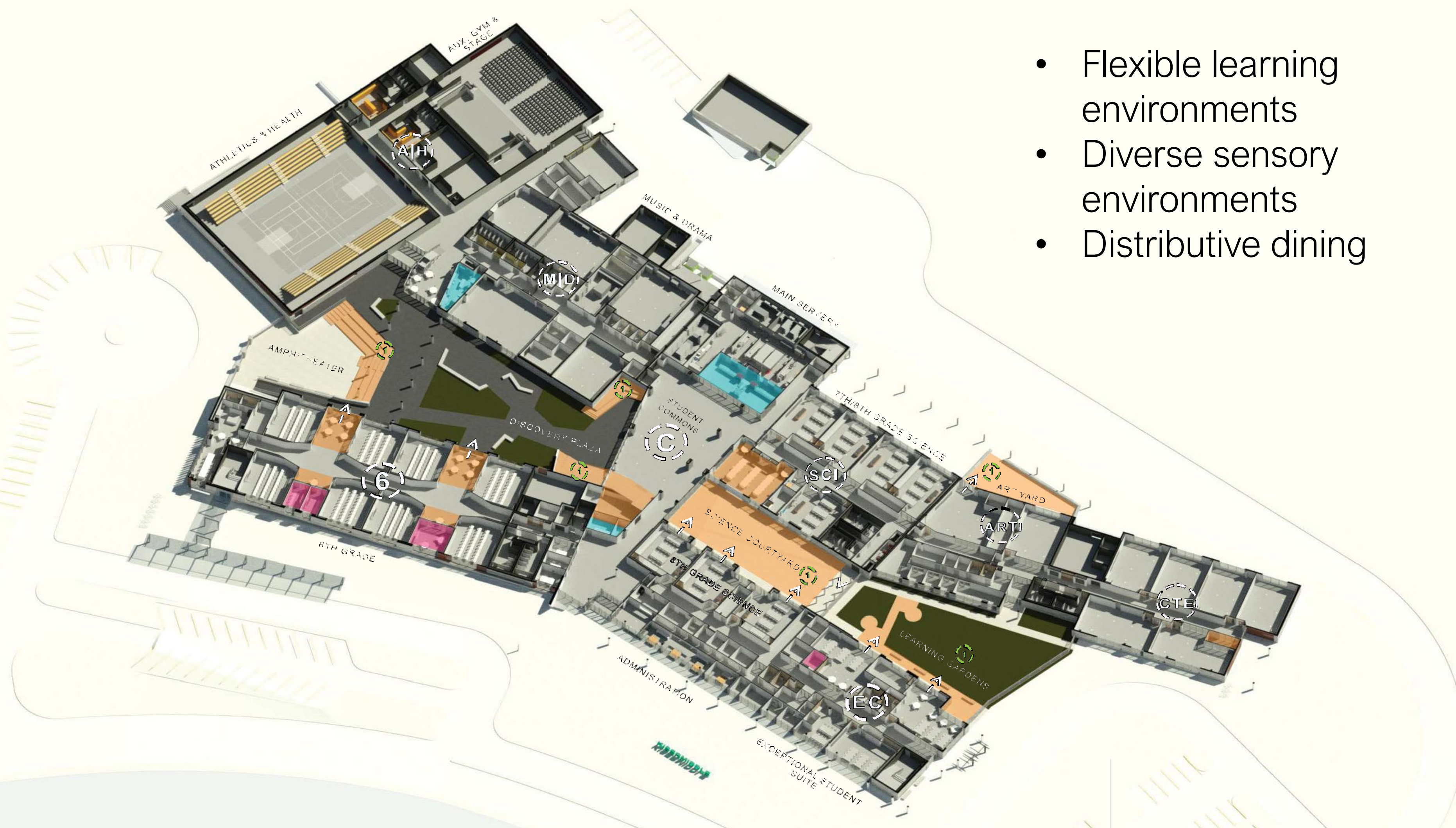
Flexibility ■ Agency ■ Inclusivity

- 1 Middle schoolers are seeking identity, independence, and connection
- 2 Design must reduce friction, provide choice, and support emotional wellbeing
- 3 Flexibility + belonging = confidence & agency



Spaces that adapt to students, not the other way around.





- Flexible learning environments
- Diverse sensory environments
- Distributive dining



Student Commons



Teacher Support Suites

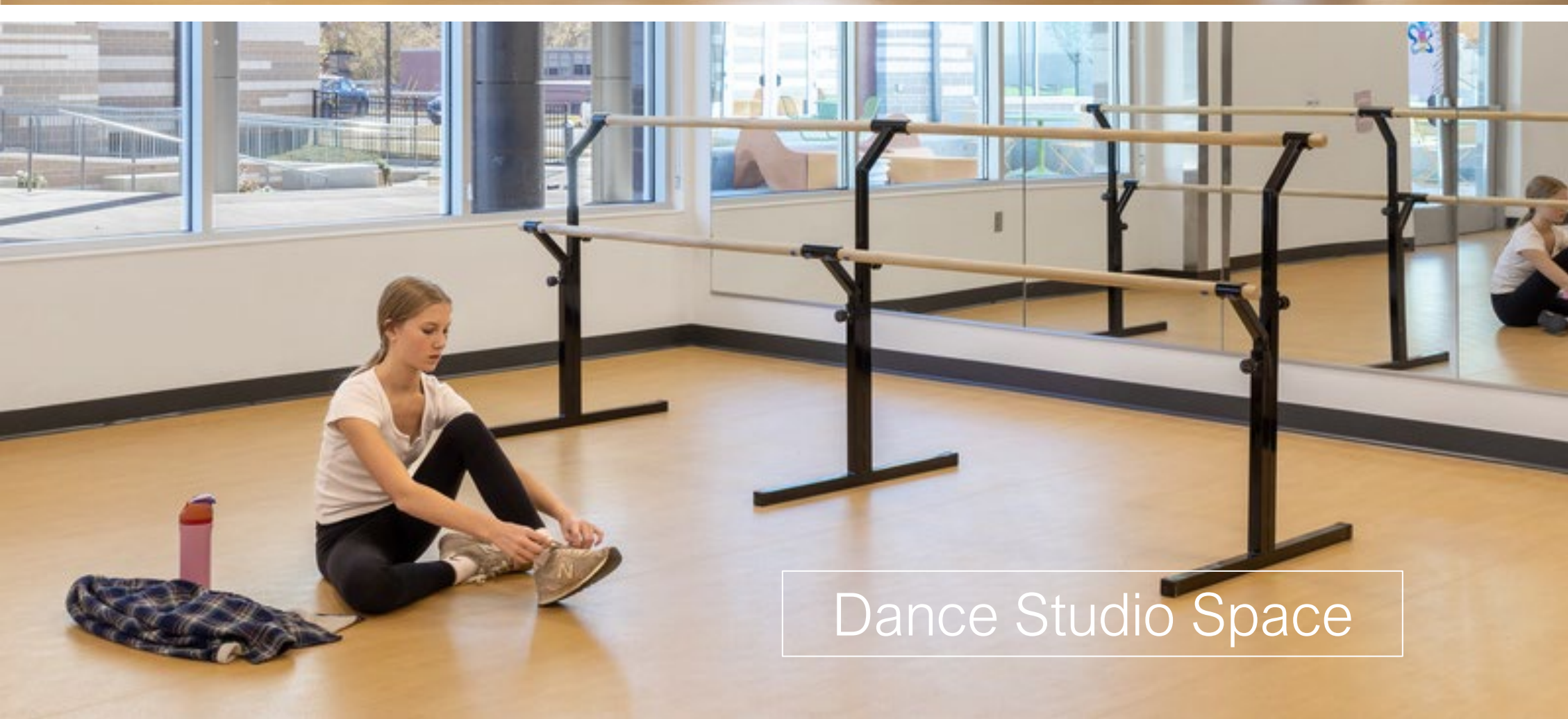
Sports & Performing Arts Space



Band Practice Space



Dance Studio Space





- Flexible learning environments
- Diverse sensory environments
- Distributive dining



Engaged Circulation
Space



Media Center

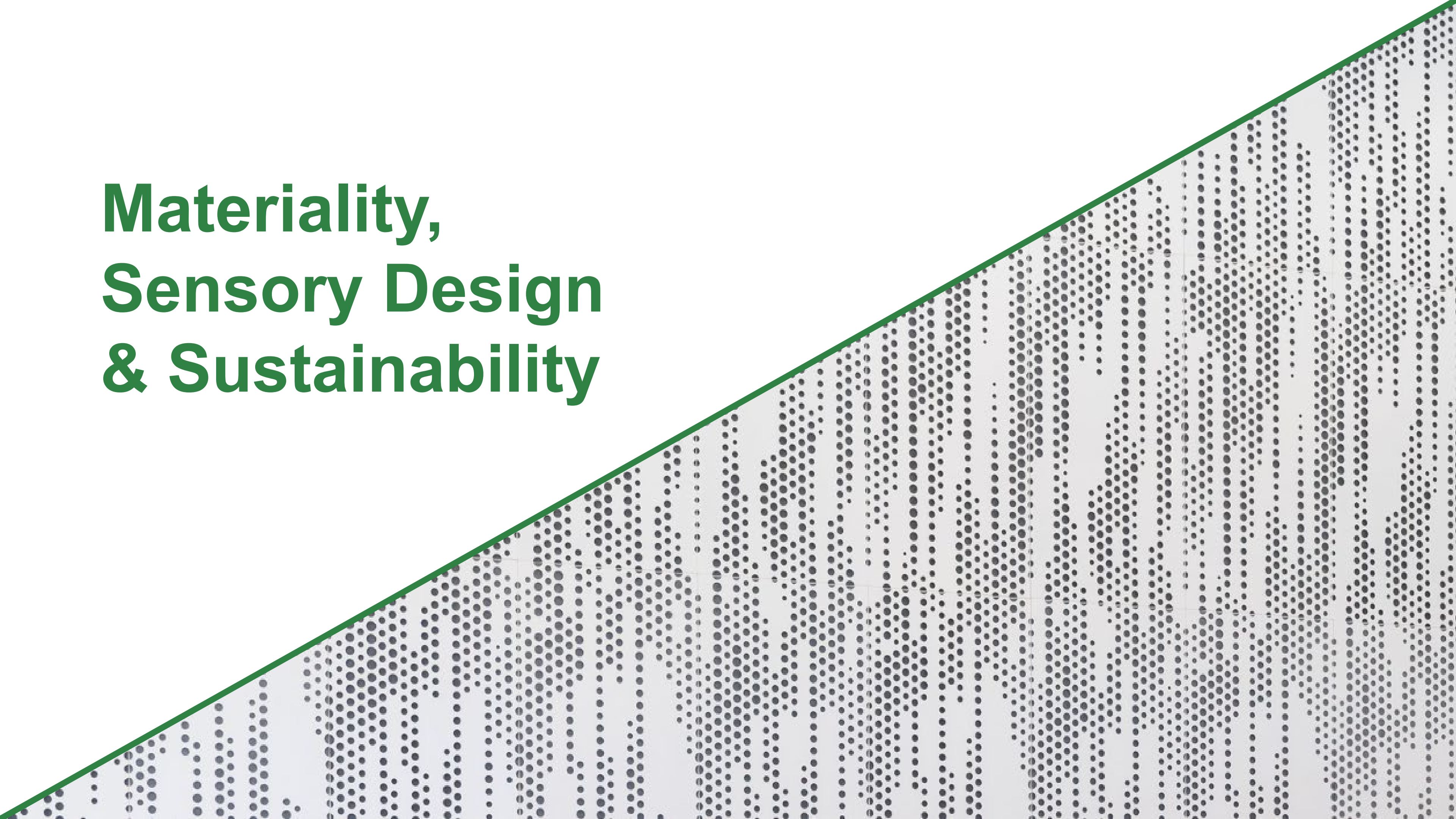


Extended Learning
Space



Open Corridor

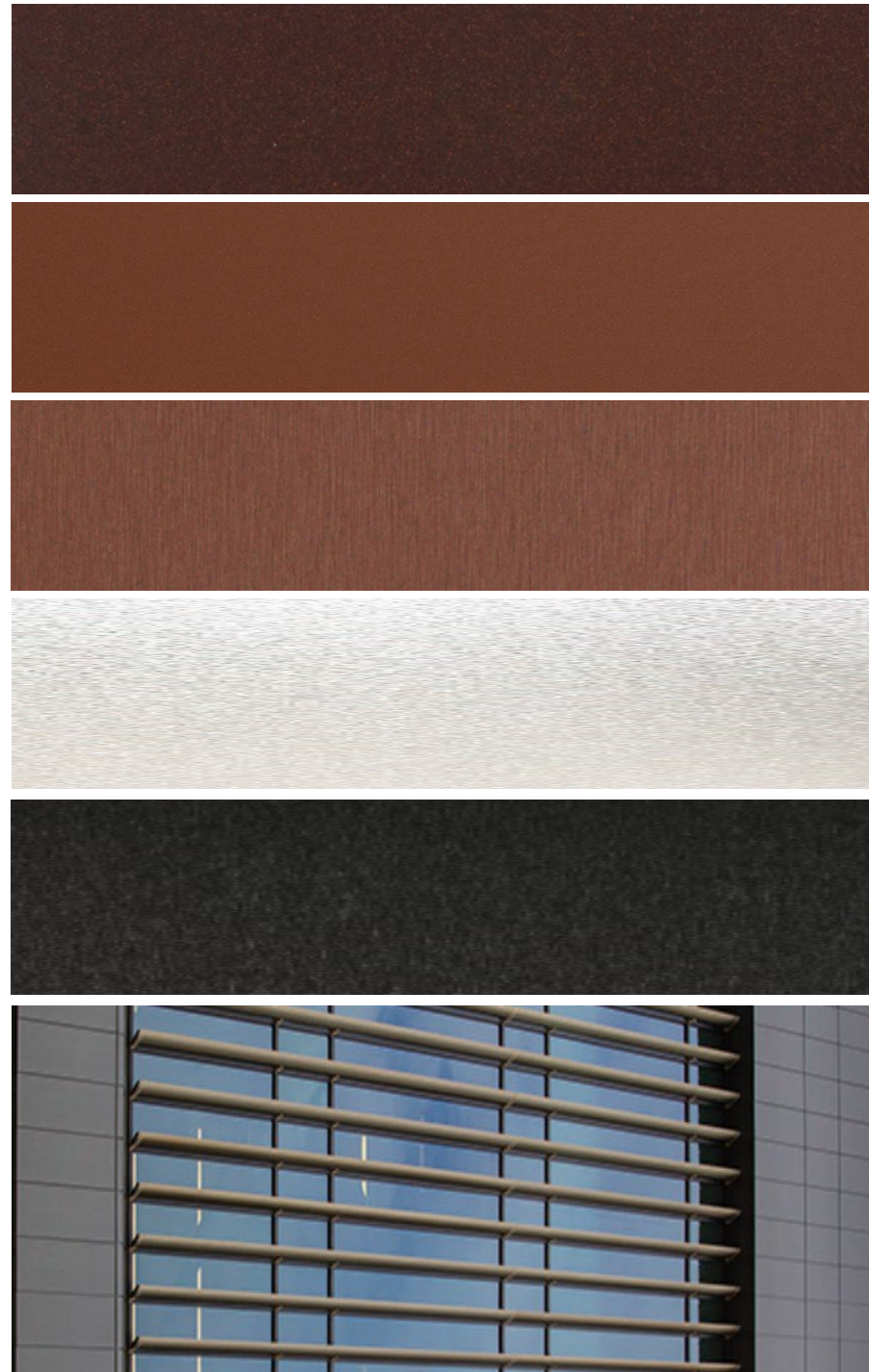
Materiality, Sensory Design & Sustainability



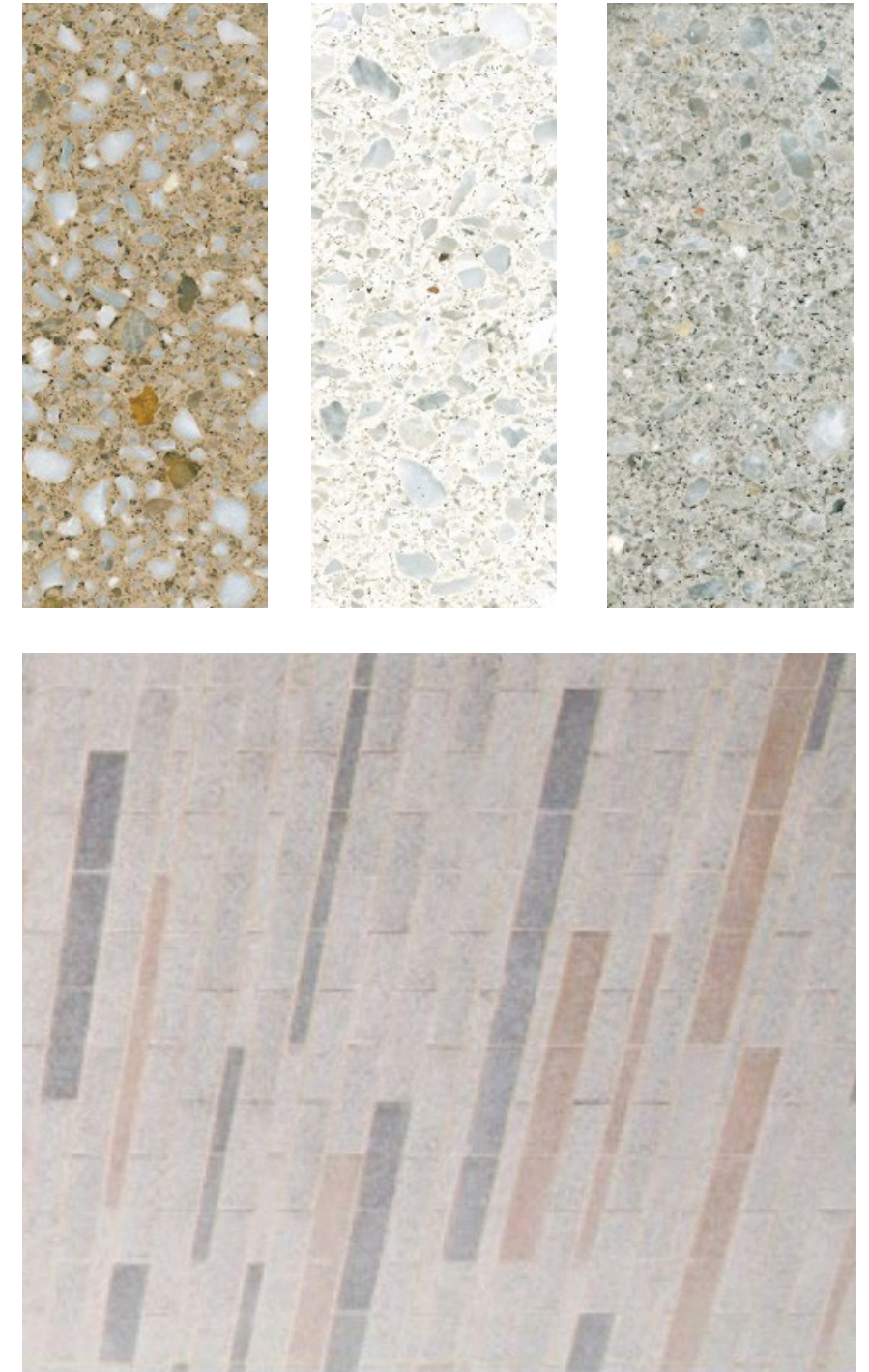
Material Selections

- 1 Comfort
- 2 Performance
- 3 Long-term sustainability

EXTERIOR FINISHES | METAL PANELS



EXTERIOR FINISHES | MASONRY BLOCK



Material Selections

ADMIN AND CTE



SIXTH GRADE



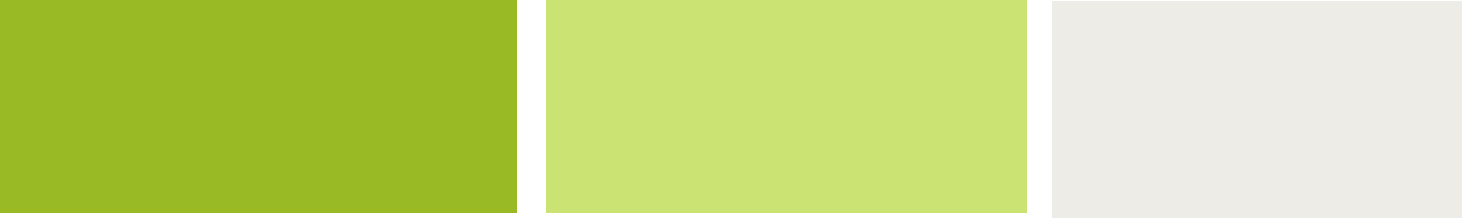
SEVENTH GRADE



EIGHTH GRADE



SCIENCE LABS



INTERIOR FINISHES | WALLS

ACOUSTICS | LIGHTING, CEILINGS, & WALL PANELS



ACOUSTIC WALL PANELS



ACOUSTIC CEILINGS



ACOUSTIC BAFFLELIGHT



Wayfinding



Acoustic Wall Panel



Acoustic Ceiling Baffles



CTE Teaching Garden

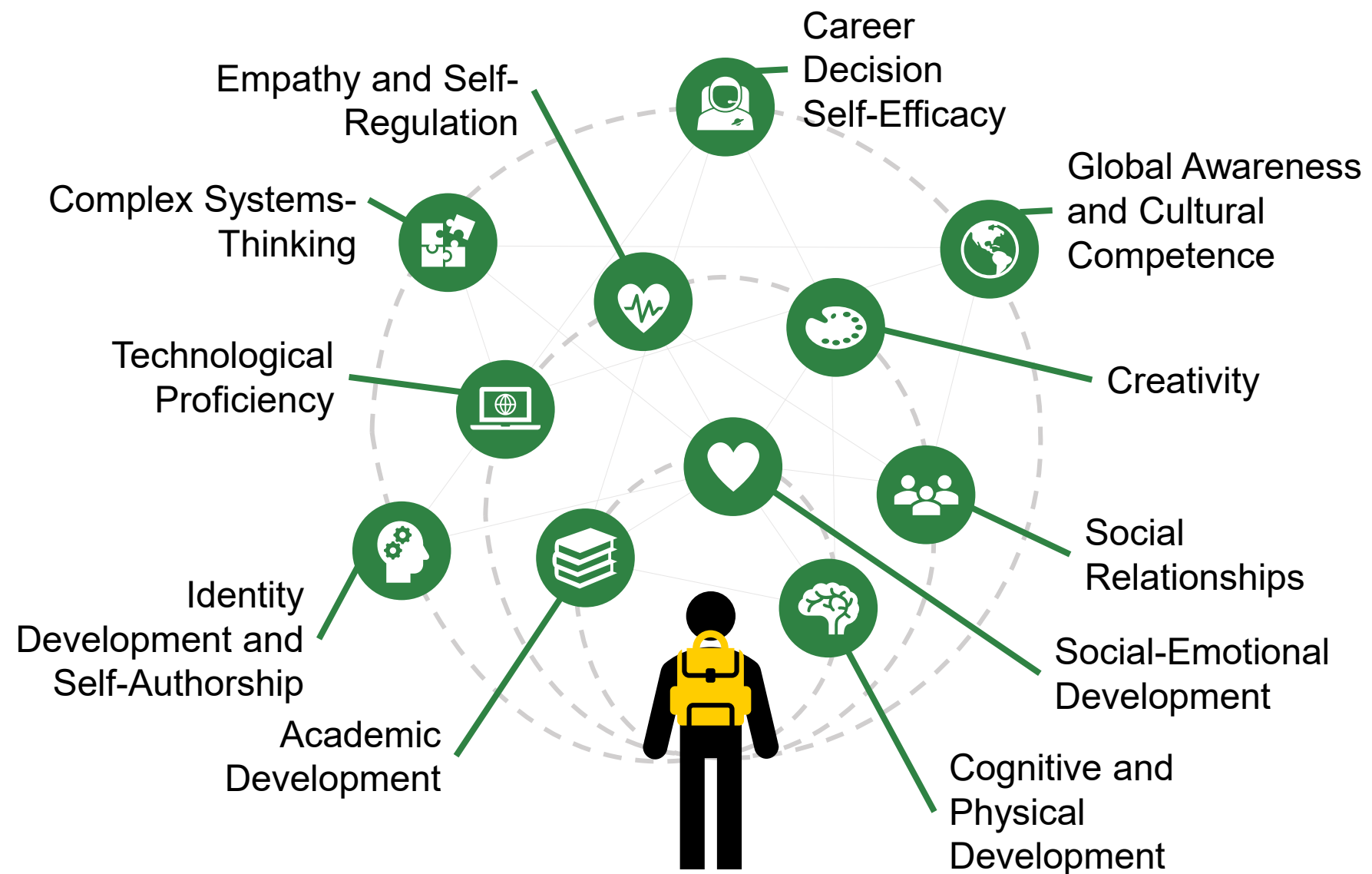


Green Campus

Lessons from Delivery & What Others Can Apply



Design for Well-Being



Holistic Student Support

Kiser Middle School fosters emotional, physical, and social health supporting the whole child's well-being.

Choice and Agency in Learning

Students choose learning spaces that match their needs, empowering ownership and confidence.

Integration of Nature and Wellness

Natural light and outdoor spaces promote wellness and reduce anxiety throughout the campus.

Welcoming Community Environment

The school fosters belonging, inclusivity, and resilience, creating a joyful, supportive ecosystem.

Design for Discovery



Visible and Active Learning Spaces

Learning is integrated throughout the campus, transforming shared areas into active environments for discovery and collaboration.

Grade-level Portals and Wayfinding

Clearly defined portals provide intuitive wayfinding and foster a sense of identity and belonging among students.

Extended Learning Zones

Corridor-integrated zones encourage informal collaboration, reflection, and peer engagement beyond traditional classrooms.

Engaging Outdoor and Maker Spaces

Courtyards, terraces, and maker spaces connect students to nature and community while promoting hands-on learning.

Design for Change



Flexible Learning Spaces

Classrooms and common areas are designed for seamless transition among lectures, group work, projects, and independent study.

Scalable Infrastructure

Infrastructure anticipates technological growth, allowing easy upgrades with minimal disruption to school activities.

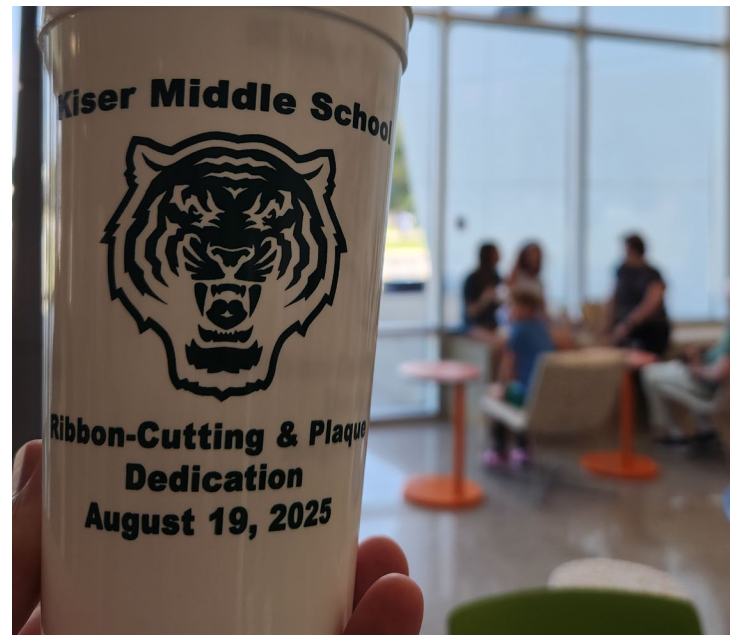
Multipurpose Shared Spaces

Shared areas support fluctuating enrollment, community partnerships, and diverse programming over time.

Adaptable Outdoor Environments

Outdoor learning areas support evolving curricula and wellness strategies, enhancing student engagement.

Ribbon Cutting Ceremony



THANK YOU!



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