



**A4LE JAMES MACCONNELL AWARD
WALDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL**

JULY 24, 2021



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Park Hill School District made the decision to restructure its sixth-grade centers and junior highs into middle school environments hosting sixth, seventh and eighth graders, leading to the necessity of a new building. As the first middle school for the district, big ideas and high expectations were brought 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. The security of all students while maintaining a connection to the outdoors was key and heavily influenced design of the final learning environment.

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.

As the first LEED v4 certified middle school in the region, 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.

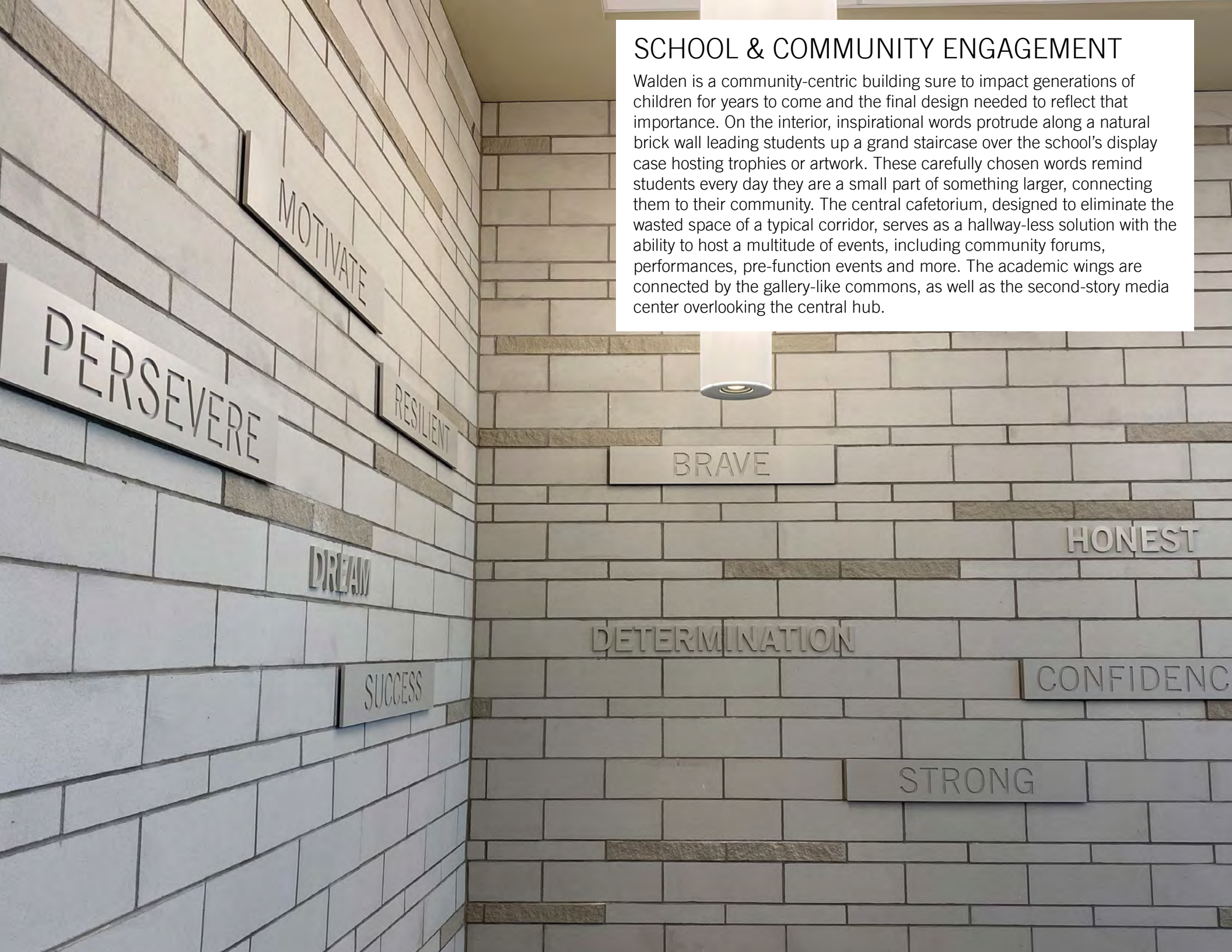
Note: All photos were taken during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, leading to a lack of students in photos.



Square Footage: 114,500
Budget: \$34.4 Million

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Walden is a community-centric building sure to impact generations of children for years to come and the final design needed to reflect that importance. On the interior, inspirational words protrude along a natural brick 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 cafetorium, designed to eliminate the wasted space of a typical corridor, serves as a hallway-less solution with the ability to host a multitude of events, including community forums, performances, pre-function events and more. The academic wings are connected by the gallery-like commons, as well as the second-story media center overlooking the central hub.



SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

After making the decision to restructure its 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.





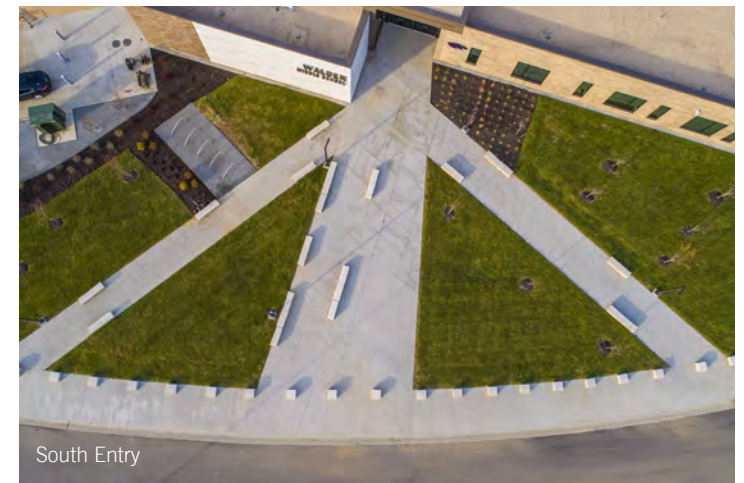
SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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 three other metro-area middle 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.



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.





Walden Middle School's stakeholders include students, staff, community members, district administration and more. Community members were invested in the project from the beginning, as the school's site is situated near a neighborhood and would impact many surrounding members, regardless if they had students who would attend the middle school.

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.

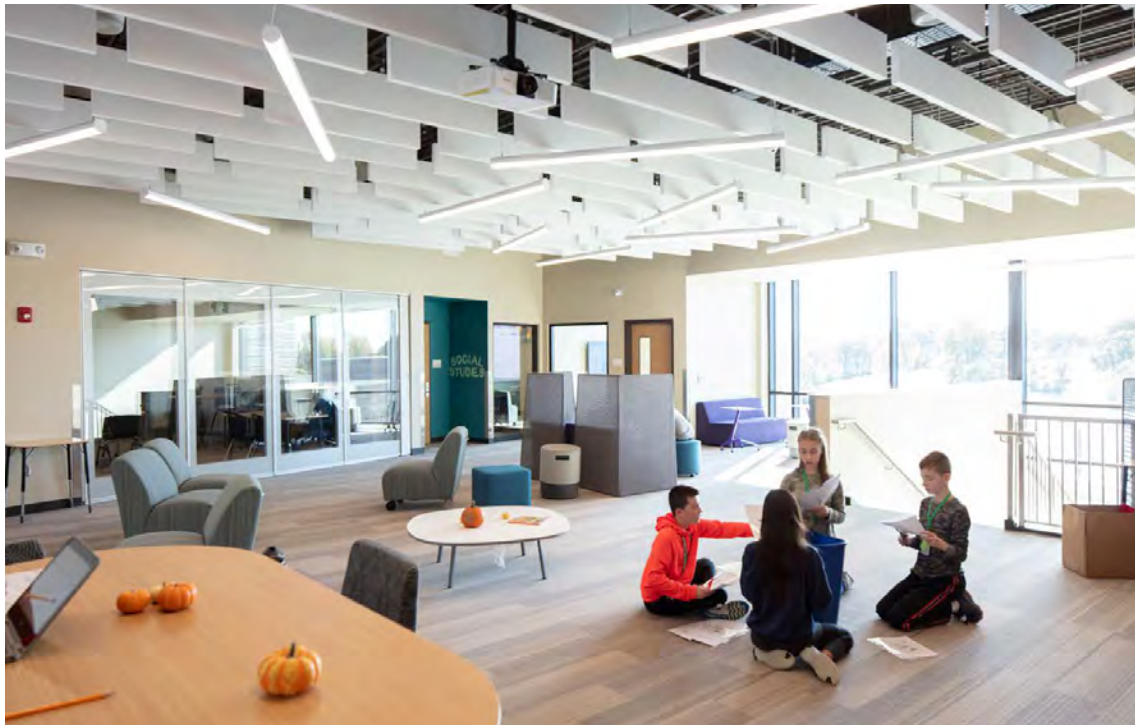
Discussions with staff, students and community members were invaluable to the project, bringing to light several major design features. Superteams, connections to nature, security and transparency were over-arching guides for design, impacting the final learning environment and instilling a sense of ownership in all involved.

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.

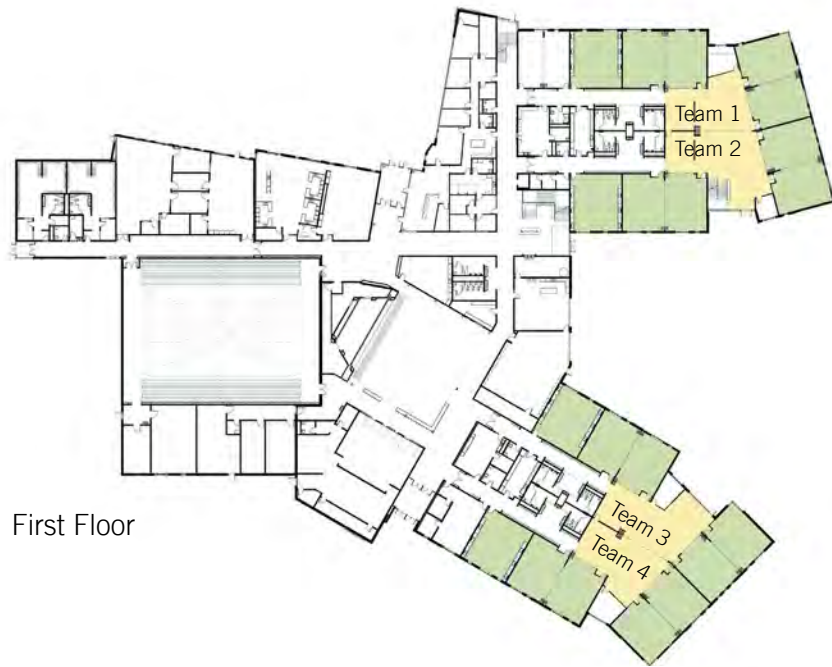


EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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.



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.



First Floor



Second Floor

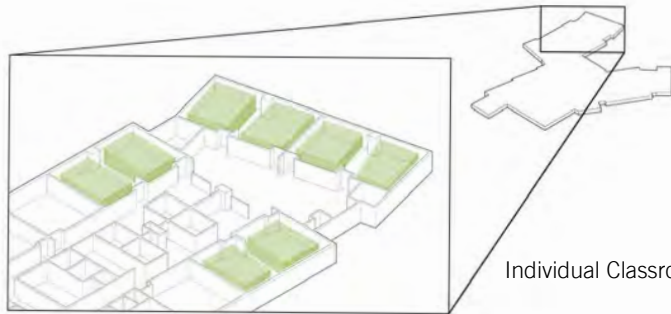


SUPERTEAMS

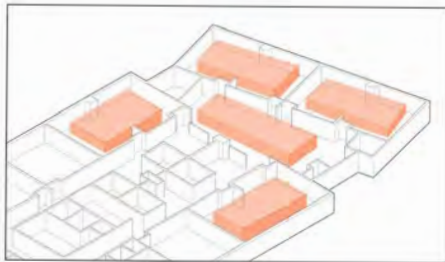
The design team developed a unique solution, called “Superteams,” to provide each grade level a space to call their own, where students can interact and gather comfortably. Each neighborhood needed to be home to a certain number of classrooms while at the same time eliminating the wasted space of a typical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

SUPERTEAMS

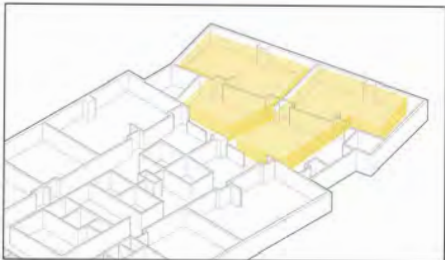
Collaboration areas in each grade-level neighborhood can host up to 250 students in various flexible formats, and classrooms circling the collaboration area can host 30 students each. Sliding glass doors can open up classrooms to spill into flex spaces, which can in turn be divided in half by folding 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



ADAPTABILITY

The art room supports curriculum and provides an adaptable learning environment through access to nature. Flexible furniture can be moved inside or outside through the operable garage door. Nature inspires students to breathe in the fresh air and think outside of the box, getting their creative juices flowing. The back courtyard connects to the walkway near the art room and a meandering stream flows behind the building, setting the scene for a serene learning environment.

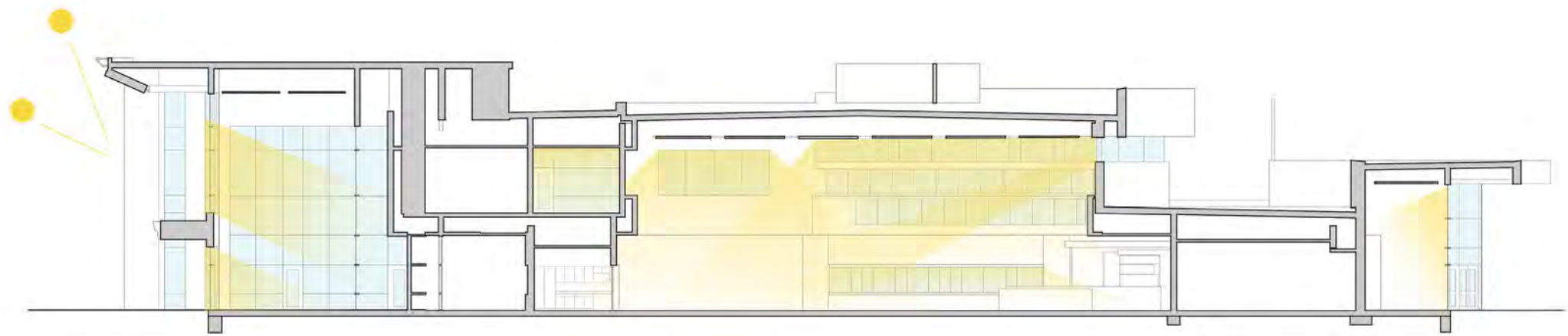


Doors securely and quickly close on extreme weather days, protecting students from the element and any potential security threats.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



Situated in a suburban neighborhood and backed by a natural stream, the fusion of the natural and built environment is seamless. Through coordination with the developer and previous tenant of the existing brownfield site, decreased disturbance of site and vegetation were ensured, maximizing the number of natural plant species. To make use of the rolling hill created from the previous borrow site, the design team maneuvered an option that allowed the school's track to nestle atop the hill, giving students and athletes a sense of being "on top of the world" and instilling pride in their new environment.



DAYLIGHTING

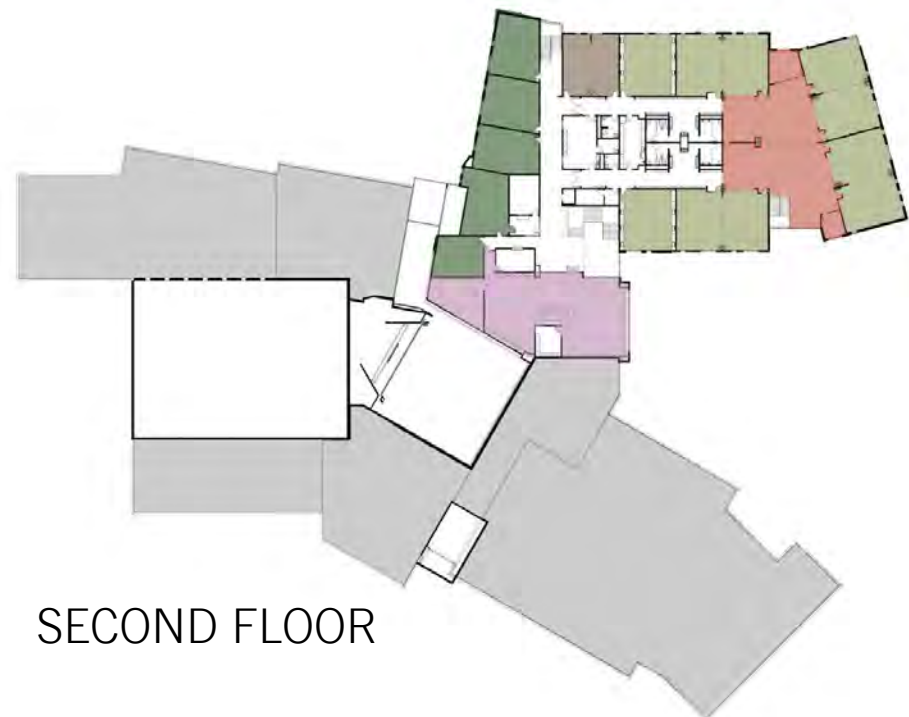
Every corner of the new learning environment is intentionally exposed to natural daylighting and connected to nature, whether it be through floor-to-ceiling windows or operable garage doors. Each classroom has direct access to daylight and outdoor views. The second-story media center overlooks lush foliage 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.



LEGEND

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

FLOOR PLANS





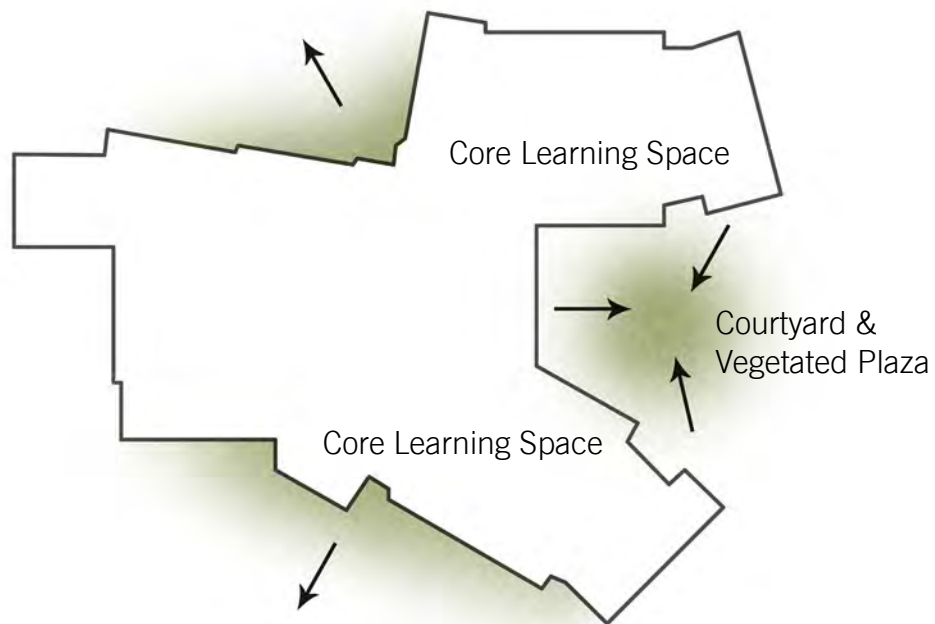
 Storm Water Management

 Bicycle Facilities

 Sensitive Land Protection

 Protected Vegetation and Stream Buffer

SITING CUES



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.

SUSTAINABILITY

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 LEED v4 certified building, sustainable features were prioritized to extend the building's life cycle, reduce the carbon footprint and increase staff and students' wellbeing.

Achieving LEED v4 certification while adhering to district standards posed a major challenge. While open to working together towards certification, the client desired to stay within their determined budget. Sustainability was and remains a priority for the district, so the design team identified areas where the standards could be pushed. The end result is a LEED v4 certified building that achieved all design goals within budget. The final learning environment is filled with natural lighting and opportunities for inspiration, flexibility and collaboration in every corner.

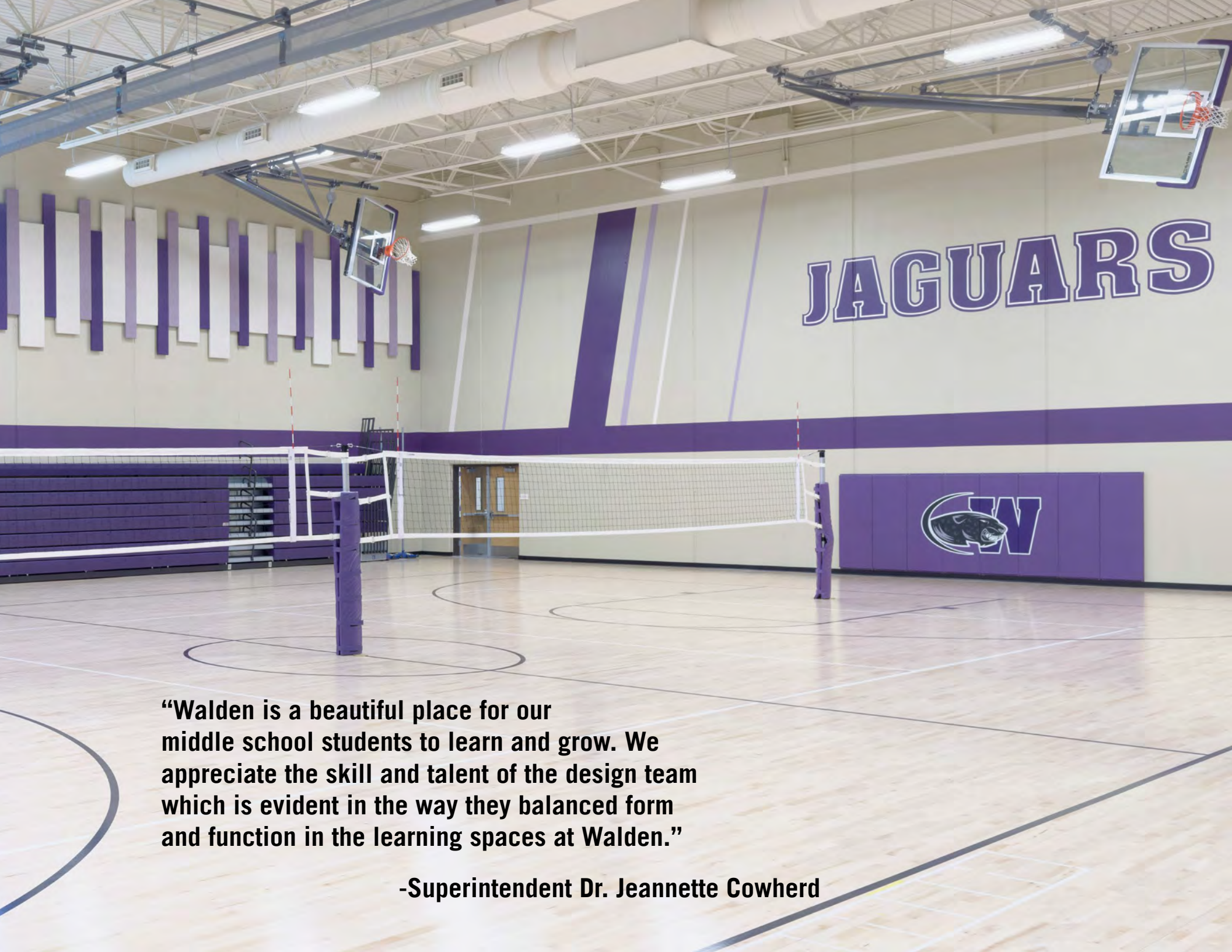
The brand-new building integrates seamlessly into the community. Site placement, the planning process, involvement of stakeholders early on to incorporate a sense of ownership and the flexibility to host community events all play a factor in the ultimate success and sense of excitement that surround the new learning environment.





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.



“Walden is a beautiful place for our middle school students to learn and grow. We appreciate the skill and talent of the design team which is evident in the way they balanced form and function in the learning spaces at Walden.”

-Superintendent Dr. Jeannette Cowherd

RESULTS OF THE PROCESS & PROJECT

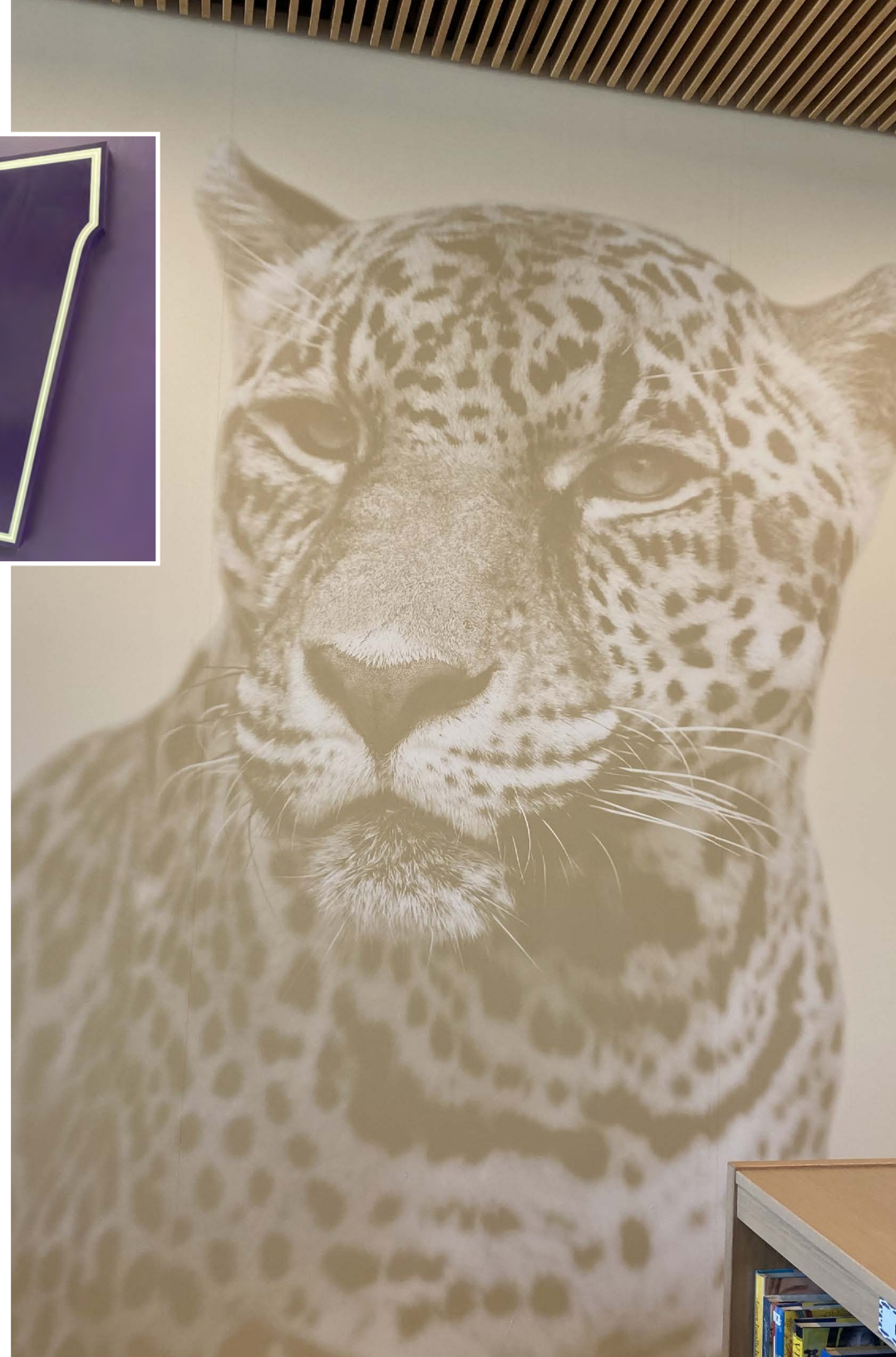
DISTRICT GOALS

At the beginning of the project kick-off, the school district's goals were overarching and broad: create a new standard of learning for grades six, seven and eight while restructuring to achieve a building that would support curriculum, student well-being and emerging trends in education. As the design process evolved, those goals became more specific and focused on what would contribute to student success. The final learning environment ultimately reflects the broad goals as well as the more specific goals of connections to nature, transparency, learning on display and student security.



EDUCATIONAL GOALS

One of the biggest educational goals outlined was ensuring a flexible environment that could easily adapt to any age and size of group. The Superteams concept developed by the design team allows each grade-level a space to call their own with the ability to accommodate the entire grade if necessary. Flexible furniture and operable walls give teachers and students endless options to adjust to the learning style that fits them best. This adaptable space as well as the central commons encourage cross-curriculum studies and life-long learning, preparing students for success not only in the classroom but outside of it as well.





COMMUNITY GOALS

Walden is the result of a long-range planning effort where stakeholders of all types were involved. District staff, students, parents, community leaders and members were all invited to participate and contribute input. One of the results was the planning of criteria around the middle school. This new criteria set up a sixth, seventh and eighth grade level configuration that would relieve an over-crowded sixth grade center and with the construction of Walden, create a fourth middle school, eliminating an additional transition during a Park Hill student's educational journey and establishing parity of instruction. Walden is a community building, designed for the grade levels to have their own individual neighborhoods to establish communities internally as well as designed as a campus that is accessible to the community with outdoor learning areas, playing fields and track.



UNINTENDED RESULTS

Walden intentionally changed the way that education in the Park Hill School District was being delivered by improving the flow from elementary school, to middle school to high school. Through accomplishing design goals, there were also unintentional achievements that altered district standards. The technology at Walden set the new standard for how the district would approach classroom organization and set up.

EDUCATIONAL VISIONING DOCUMENTS

DISCOVERY ACTIONS

As a part of visual programming, the Park Hill Design Team was asked to draw a light bulb. Each light bulb was unique, as each person naturally has a preconceived idea of what a light bulb looks like. Similarly, the design of a school is not derived from anyone's specific idea but rather a collective vision for the project.

Excellent design is not simply how something appears but also how it functions. As a team, Park Hill built a foundation for the school by expressing various action words that illustrate their desires and determine the driving factors for the design. This foundation establishes the intent of the school's design as a shared vision.

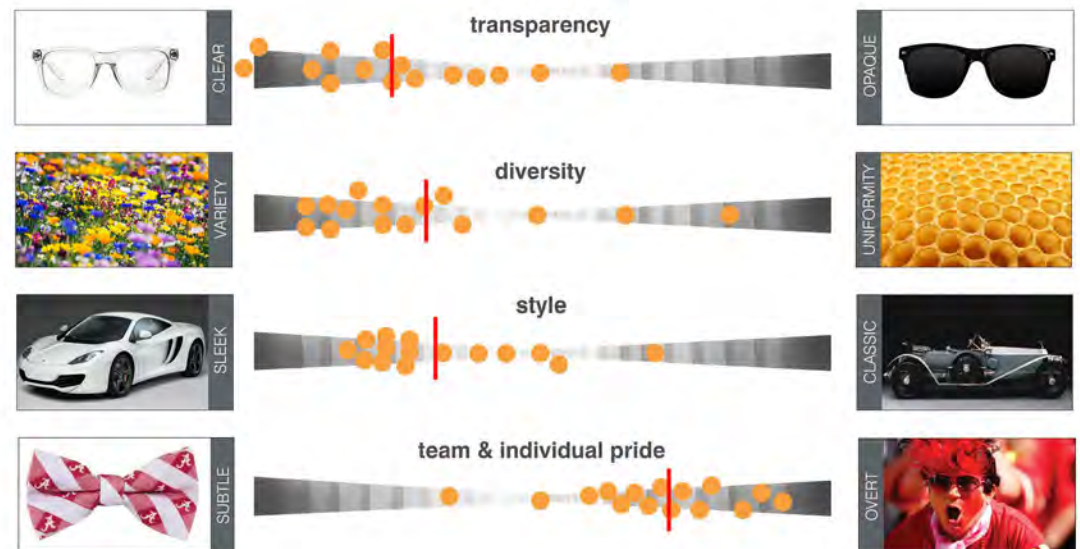
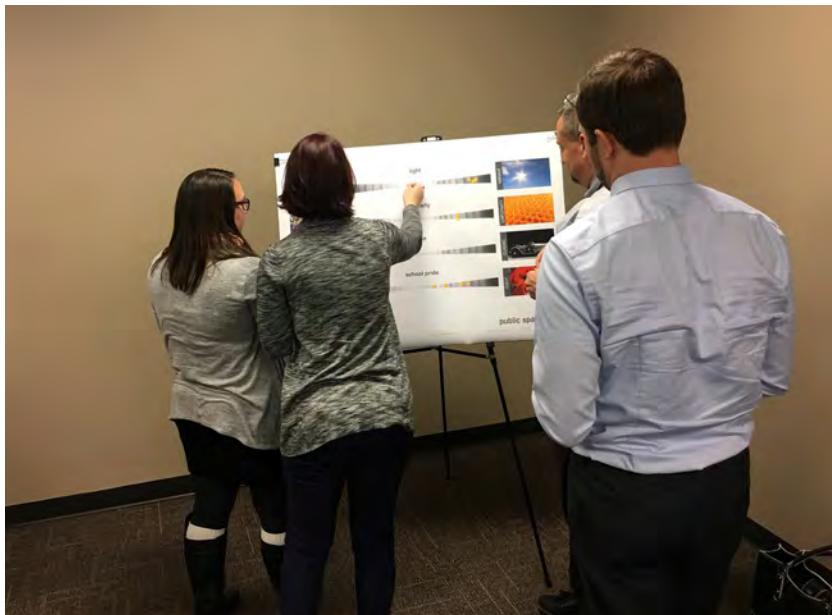




DESIGN ATTRIBUTES EXERCISE

In order to gauge the Park Hill Design Committee's thoughts on the overall feeling of the spaces in the new school, the group participated in a Contrast Study. For each space, a variety of characteristics specific to each were used to gain feedback. The orange dots placed on the scale represent each person in the group and the red line is a representation of the overall groups average.

The team spaces consist of the primary academic spaces that are populated by students the most. Spaces within the teams consist of the core classrooms, open collaboration space, integrated SPED classrooms and various support services. The characteristics used to analyze these spaces were transparency, diversity, style, and team and individual pride. Transparency within academic spaces was a high priority. This pertains to the openness from classroom to classroom as well as the classroom spaces to the shared open collaborative space. The diversity of the space was interpreted differently amongst the group. After a group discussion the group came to the conclusion that in terms of diversity there should be variety in the options and choices students will have in each space, but also have the need to maintain parity allowing each student to have similar experiences.



CHARACTER STATEMENTS

The purpose of developing character statements is to set the vision of the project with both educational and architectural statements. This sets in place a core direction for the project- a manifesto for the design of the school, and is the criteria by which all design decisions should ultimately be made. Through various interactive exercises, the Design Team gathered background information from the Visioning and Leadership Teams. Analysis of this information revealed several strong patterns that directly informed the document. The district leadership team then refined the statements, establishing the character statements.

inspired Staff

A supportive environment for staff and facilitators will inspire them every day. In return, a positive environment for staff will create a positive environment for students.

- want staff to feel inspired every day
- staff needs the tools to do their jobs

build on the Park Hill Legacy

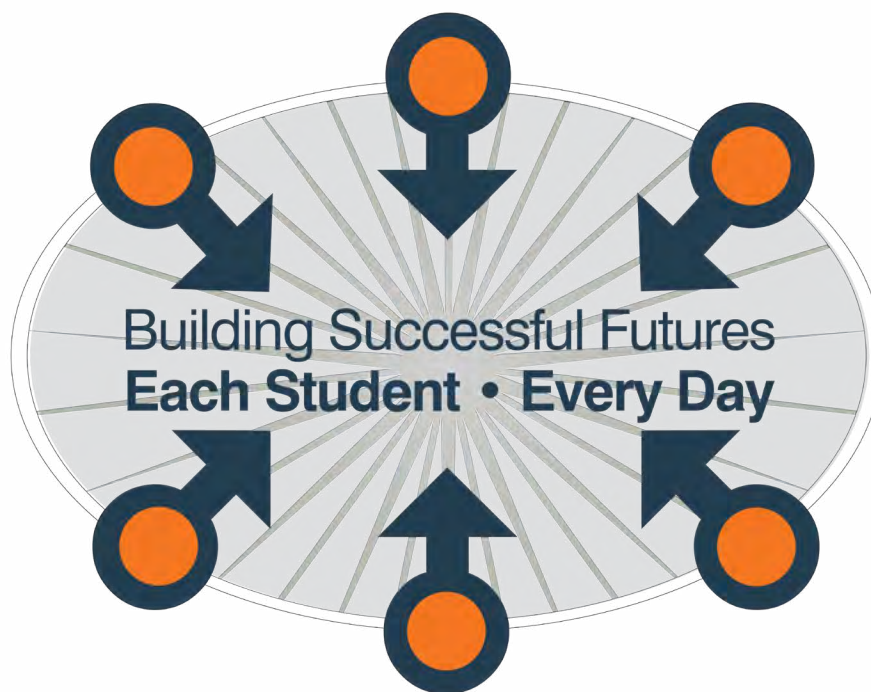
We will create a new environment that builds on the positives of Park Hill and continues to push the boundaries of excellence.

- Park Hill School District is sought out by parents and staff alike
- continued success for Park Hill

a learning environment for All

We will create opportunities for the wide range of diverse learning styles and needs.

- environments that meet the needs of all kids
- students who want to come to school
- serve diverse students, learning styles, and needs



create a Safe Space

We will create a physically secure space and a school that allows students and staff to feel emotionally and socially safe and welcome.

- safe to try
- safe to fail
- emotionally safe
- welcome in the space

continued Student Success

During this rapidly changing time in a student's life, we will create an environment that engages each student daily and beyond.

- middle school students are changing every day
- students are discovering and growing as individuals

foster Parent and Community Trust

Create a trusting and inclusive space that allows parents and the community to feel welcome.

- inclusive environment
- parents want peace of mind and a sense of security
- generate trust through responsible use of public resources



WALDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL