

ALMIRA SCHOOL DISTRICT
ALMIRA K-8 SCHOOL

ALMIRA, WASHINGTON

A Community Ignited
Resilience and Unity in the
Wake of Almira's School Fire



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When thick black smoke billowed above Almira, a small Eastern Washington farming town, in 2021, neighbors rushed to save the heart of the community- the town’s only school from a fast-spreading electrical fire.

Students and staff were stunned. Many second graders wanted to know if firefighters could save their backpacks and favorite crayons.

While the historic building was destroyed, the fire did not extinguish their love for learning and could not be a reason for students to fall behind.

Teachers set up make-shift classrooms in a local church and community center. Middle school students were bussed 20 miles away to Coulee City.

By the next school year, the town’s only football field transformed into a village of portables.

The urgency to return to normal sparked a statewide modern-day barn raising. It was an incredible feat that took 20 months to complete.

The new Almira school is more than a piece of beautiful architecture. It represents resilience, the power of community, and an unwavering commitment to the next generation.

SCOPE OF WORK + BUDGET

OWNER	Almira School District
LOCATION	Almira, Washington
PROJECT TYPE	New Construction
COST	\$24,411,000
SITE AREA	2 Acres
GRADES	K-8
SQUARE FEET	48,275
STUDENT CAP.	300
SF PER STUDENT	161



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

While the school is located in Almira, it also serves students in a ten-mile radius from other small farming towns, including Hartline and Coulee City. The school is home to around 140 pre-K-8th-grade students. The City of Almira has 335 residents and a medium household income of \$18,000 less than the Washington State average. Most everyone in this rich agricultural area is a multi-generational farmer or works in education—sometimes both.

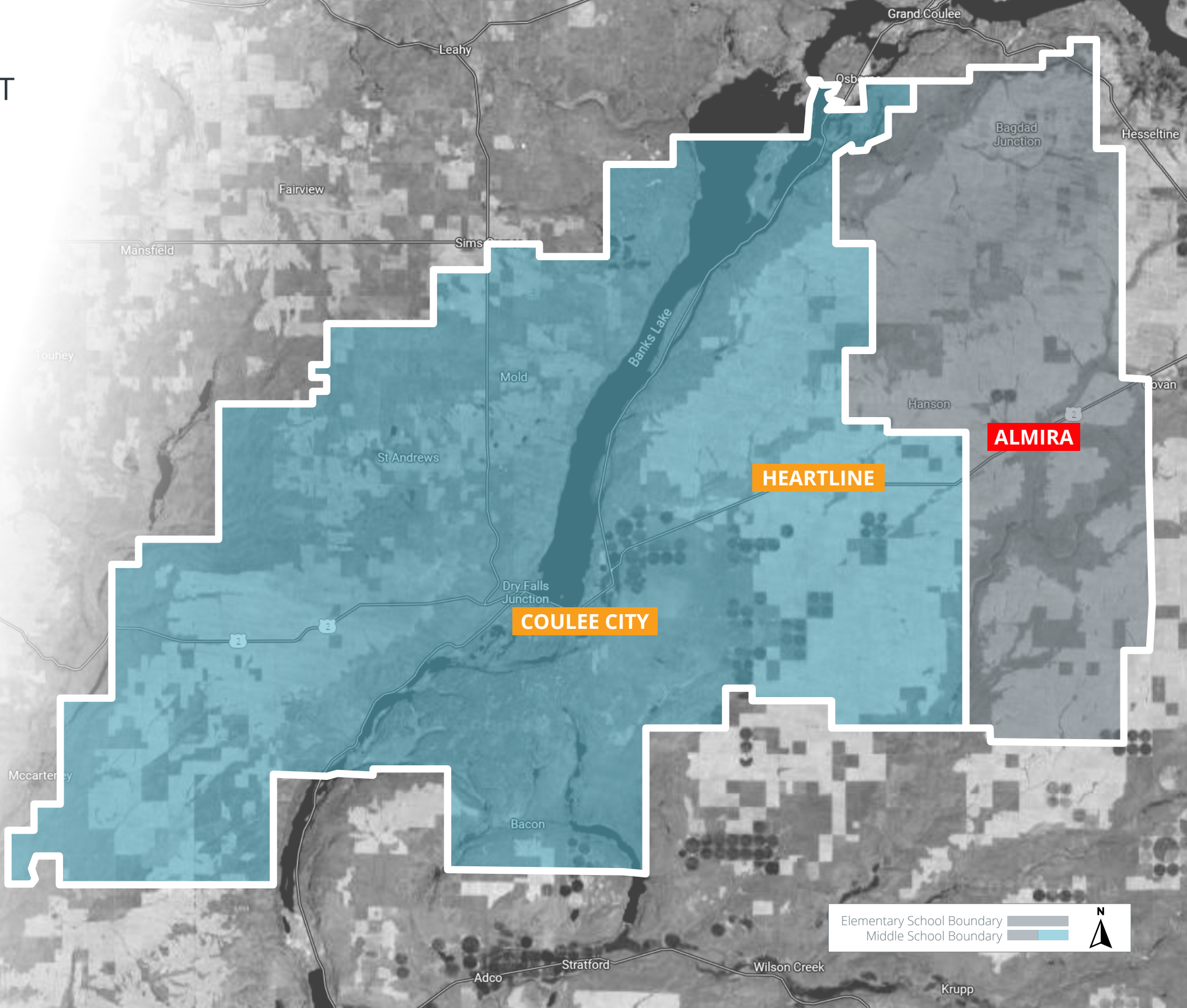
HISTORY

With determination, resilience, and hope for a better life, settlers founded the town of Almira in 1889.

“As families made it to their homestead acreage, they needed to make a home and a living. They took black steel plows to start rollin’ over the prairie sod. Agriculture and ranching turned this landscape into a patchwork quilt of golden ambers, sage greens, and dark, warm soils,”

~ Denny Pinar, Almira Fire Chief

The town rapidly expanded with the Northern Pacific Railroad’s growth and the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam, one of the world’s largest concrete structures, about 20 miles from Almira. For the past century, brick, steel, and concrete have been the primary building materials. The Almira School District’s last major project followed a fire that destroyed the school in the 1950s.



"There are no words. It was so tragic and to have something so beautiful come from it all. We feel so blessed. You never want a school to burn, but you make the best out of what you have."
~ Kelsey Hoppe, Almira School Principal



PROJECT GOALS

CREATE A COMMUNITY CENTER

To create a school that serves pre-k to 8th grade students from rural areas of Almira, Hartline and Coulee City, doubling as a community center, and providing essential services like free and reduced lunch, fulfilling both educational and community needs.

FACILITATE A NEW EDUCATIONAL VISION

Reimagining the district’s future after losing the town’s only school. Quick, thorough visioning sessions with all stakeholders to explore new possibilities, shaping a design to meet every student’s needs.

MAXIMIZE ADAPTABILITY & ENGAGE ALL

A new school design focusing on adaptability and inclusivity to meet the needs of students and the community for the next 50 years. With limited funds for future renovations, every space needs to be thoughtfully planned to be flexible and inclusive.

SUSTAINABLE AND WELLNESS

A school that prioritizes sustainability and wellness, using durable, low-maintenance materials to meet the Washington Sustainable School Protocol. Emphasizing biophilic design and varied educational environments, creating a comfortable and safe space for students to explore their interests. The design should reflect Almira’s tight-knit community values.

OCTOBER 13, 2021 FIRE DESTROYS SCHOOL

2021

STUDENTS RETURN TO IN-PERSON LEARNING
EARLY AREA ANALYSIS

DESIGN/BUILD TEAM SELECTED

2022

STATE FUNDING
ED SPECS

CONSTRUCTION DOCUMENTS COMPLETE

CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

INSURANCE SETTLEMENT
ADDITIONAL STATE FUNDING

SEPT 2023 - NEW SCHOOL OPENS

CONSTRUCTION COMPLETE

2023

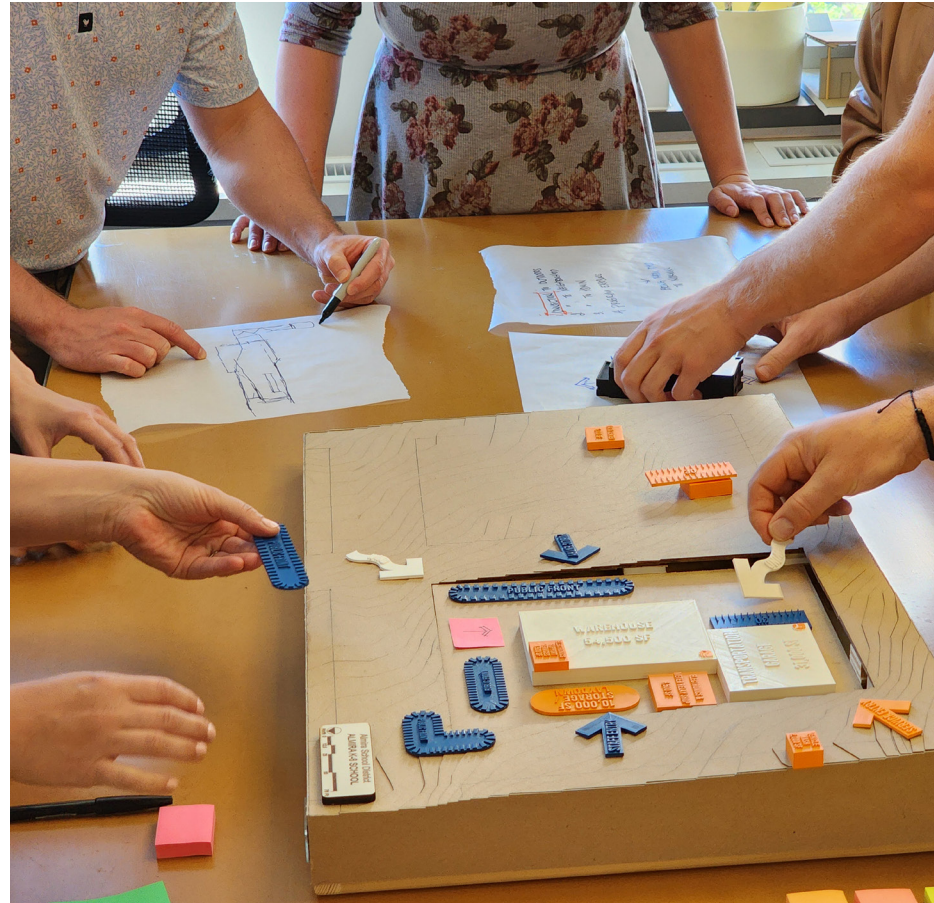
SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED

Following the devastating fire, the design of the new Almira K-8 School showcased a collaborative and community-driven approach, with stakeholder engagement serving as a cornerstone. Even as the embers were cooling, the school district mobilized to ensure that educational disruptions were minimized. Laptops were distributed to every student immediately to facilitate online learning, and temporary classrooms were promptly established in local facilities such as a church and a community center. These actions exemplified the district's commitment to swift and effective stakeholder engagement aimed at meeting immediate needs.

As development plans for a new school commenced, the involvement of a diverse group of stakeholders became even more prominent. The building committee was notably comprehensive, encompassing around 20 individuals: school district board members, the district superintendent, the school principal, the fire chief, teachers, parents, and additional community members. This inclusivity ensured that a wide array of perspectives and needs were taken into account from the onset of the planning process.

Megan Victorino, a second-grade teacher in Almira, emphasized the value of this inclusive approach, noting ***“ALSC was really open to our input. We really appreciated the time spent to hear what kids and students needed to be successful in our new school,”***.



This active listening and incorporation of feedback highlighted the project's commitment to creating an environment that truly supported the success of its future occupants.

As the project progressed, the committee expanded further to include a general contractor and subcontractors, aligning with the decision to employ a design-build delivery method. This approach was chosen to expedite the return of students to permanent classrooms, underscoring the urgency and collaborative spirit behind the endeavor.



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

After many initial conversations, the community and building committee came to a consensus on design principles for the new K-8 school project. Design principles represent innate priorities and qualities the design must possess. These principles become the road map for the design team and consultants to follow when making the hundreds of decisions required to design a school.

REGIONAL BEACON

- > Draw People to Almira
- > Set Course for Community's Future

COMMUNITY CENTER

- > Asset for All Community Members
- > Intuitive Facility Before, During, and After School Hours

DUALITY

- > Flexibility For Teaching Styles and Number of Students
- > Multi-Functionality Within Each Space
- > Adaptability For Future Staff and Trends

HIGH-PERFORMANCE FACILITY

- > Longevity
- > Intuitive Building Systems
- > Low Maintenance/Ease of Maintenance

STEWARDSHIP

- > Funds Corresponding to Highest Need
- > Efficient Use of Time Through Design and Construction



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PROJECT CHALLENGES

The resilient people of Almira have faced challenges head-on. In 1903, a fire destroyed a hotel and newspaper building, and in 1951, the Almira School burned down only to be rebuilt within a year. When it was time to rebuild the school after the most recent fire, the community was prepared.

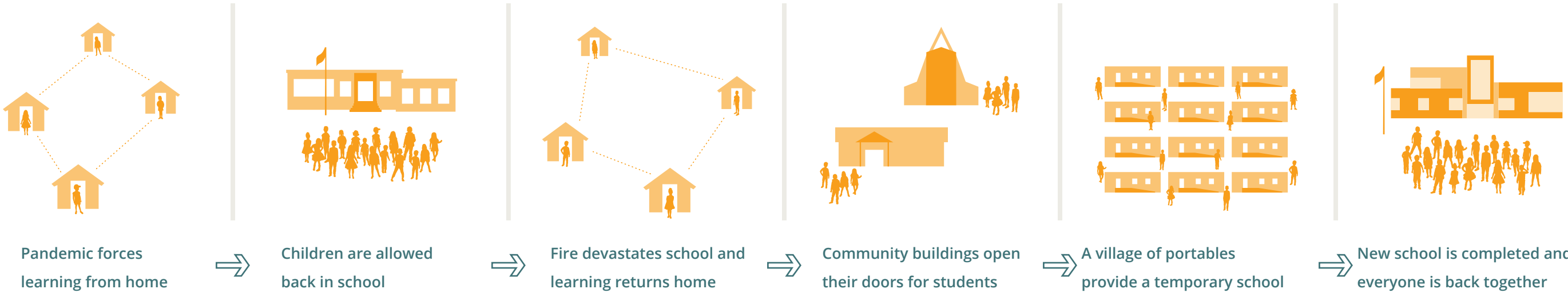
The district, ALSC Architects, and contractors faced budget uncertainties and a tight schedule. Funding came from insurance, state matching funds, and a state grant. Initially, only state-matching funds were certain, forcing several design revisions to meet the budget constraints. The design-build team was chosen in December 2021, starting with visioning and educational specifications in January 2022, and construction documents were completed in just six months.

Navigating the insurance claims for the destroyed school added complexities. A design was outlined to replace and upgrade the building, with costs estimated in collaboration with the insurance company. The process of determining replacement costs extended through the design development phase.

Local lawmakers worked with state representatives to secure a state grant, officially expanding the budget in spring 2022, just three months before construction began. This increased budget allowed stakeholders to envision and create a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a new, brighter future.



ALMIRA STUDENTS' JOURNEY TO NORMALCY



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

AVAILABLE ASSETS

Wearing bright orange hard hats and safety vests draped well past their knees, students and their teachers would often walk through the construction of the new school to see the latest improvements. During one visit, students scribbled their names in black Sharpie on a massive steel support beam. Then, they watched in awe from afar as a construction crane gingerly placed the final beam into place.

Everyone in this small rural community, from state lawmakers to school custodians, pitched in to help make the new school a reality. Much like the barn-raising of another era, this school represents a region's collective effort, resilience, and determination committed to education and the next generation.

“Meeting the needs of these students and responding to this tragedy has resulted in everyone from leadership to construction subcontractors giving their best.”
- School District Project Manager



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

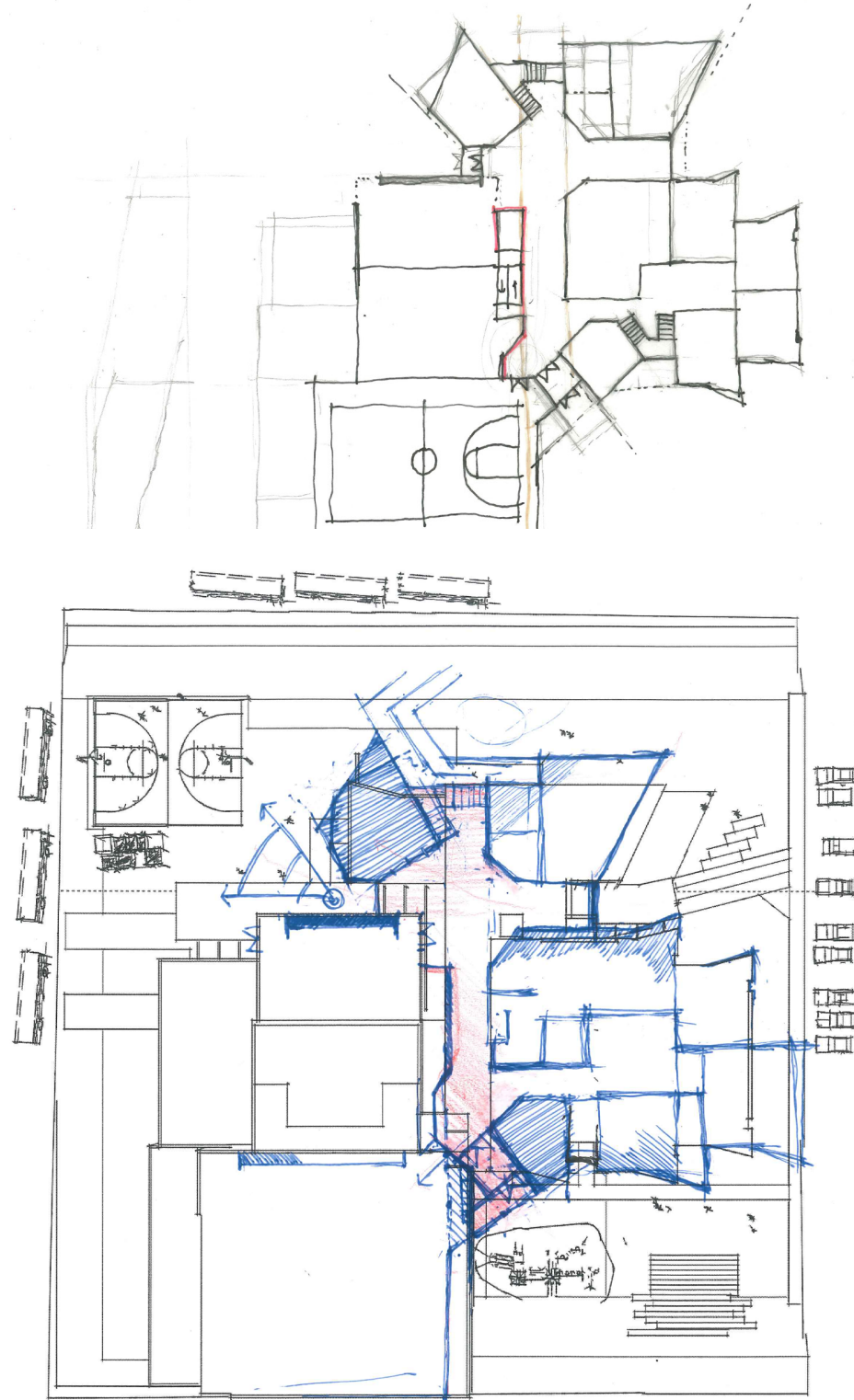
VISIONING PROCESS

Typically, replacing an existing school is years in the making. This generous timeline allows for extensive thought, creativity, and exploration to establish a vision for the future. Because the fire was sudden and unexpected, we didn't have the luxury of time. Even though we had to move quickly, the level of thoughtfulness and big-picture thinking to meet the needs of students and the community were not diminished.

The rebuilding process was guided by an inclusive committee of community members, teachers, and administrators. This diverse group ensured a wide range of opinions and experiences were considered, leading to a consensus on our shared vision. The committee's weekly meetings allowed for in-depth discussions within time constraints.

"ALSC Architects really didn't know our small town like we did. And they knew that. They made an incredible effort to understand what makes our small town and school so unique,"

~Sean Mathewson, High School Math/Theater/Baseball Coach



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

LETTER FROM THE CHIEF

After an initial visioning session took place, ALSC received an e-mail from Denny Pinar, Almira Fire Chief.

“You asked a deep question at the last meeting about how we see the finished school. That was a tough off the top of our heads question. So putting some thought to it, here is my answer;

We are the ACH Warriors, we carry the colors of black, crimson, and silver. Brick and block have stood the test of time. Pioneers shaped this land and it was all done with steel. I see an exterior made of brick and block, black to light grey mixed block with a mixed charcoal to red brick, with steel accents. Not only do these colors represent the ACH community. The black to grey is for the steel that made this farmland. The Concrete in Grand Coulee, a main reason many of us are here. Also the smoke and flame that destroyed it... From the ashes it will come back from. The red bricks, paying homage to the red brick buildings who have been in Almira since her beginning. This would be the third school with brick walls. Exposed steel, for the men and women who have used this tool since time began.

The interior learning area school would have a look of our landscape. From sage greens, golden harvests, to warm sunsets.

The gym would reflect the outside with brick and block and exposed steel. The stage/auditorium/multipurpose are would also be block and steel. The stage would have a huge steel beam on top of two large block walls. That way all performances, assemblies, gatherings, and graduations would be under that strong structure that will never bend or break. This would show the strengths of all that came before, and all that go forth. That we will never bend or break.

~ Denny Pinar, Community Leader & Fire Chief



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

HISTORIC BRICK TOWN

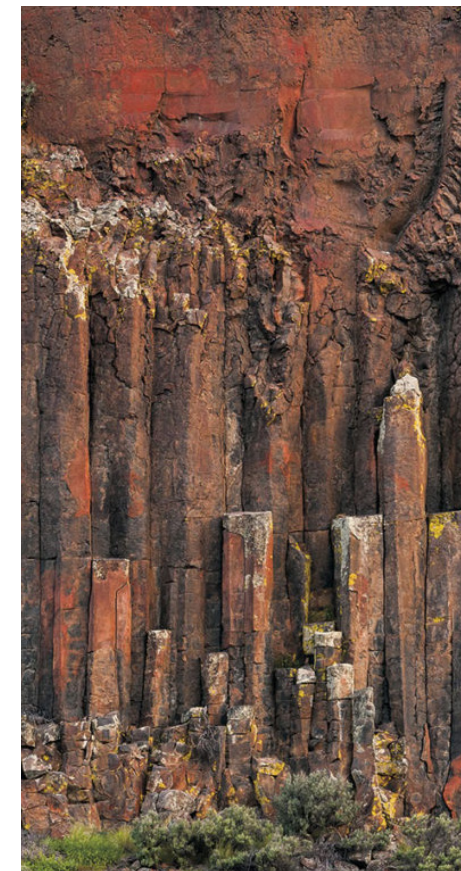
The original school, constructed from red brick, stood as a symbol of permanence and reliability for the town. Along the main street, the town's most prominent buildings proudly display traditional brick facades, establishing a standard for civic architecture in the community. A variegated blend of deep reds, complemented by dark charcoal hues, was chosen to reflect the area's rich industrial heritage.

INDUSTRIAL ORIGINS

Railroads link each farming town within the region, forming a network of agricultural hubs that punctuate the Palouse landscape with grain silos and farm structures. At the core of this community lies a history of taming the land through agriculture and industry. The construction of the Grand Coulee Dam provided essential irrigation and economic vitality to the area, bolstering the town's prosperity. This monumental engineering feat allowed towns like Almira to thrive across the Columbia Basin. The use of steel and concrete not only established these towns but also connected communities, fostering regional growth and cohesion.

REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

Basalt rock coulees, expansive water drainages, and layers of fertile volcanic soil narrate the region's dramatic geological history. The colossal Missoula floods sculpted deep rock ravines while enriching the flatlands with mineral-laden soil. The landscape is a study in contrasts: dark basalt rock coulees framed by olive-hued sagebrush stand in stark juxtaposition to irrigated fields bursting with vibrant yellow canola and lush green crops.

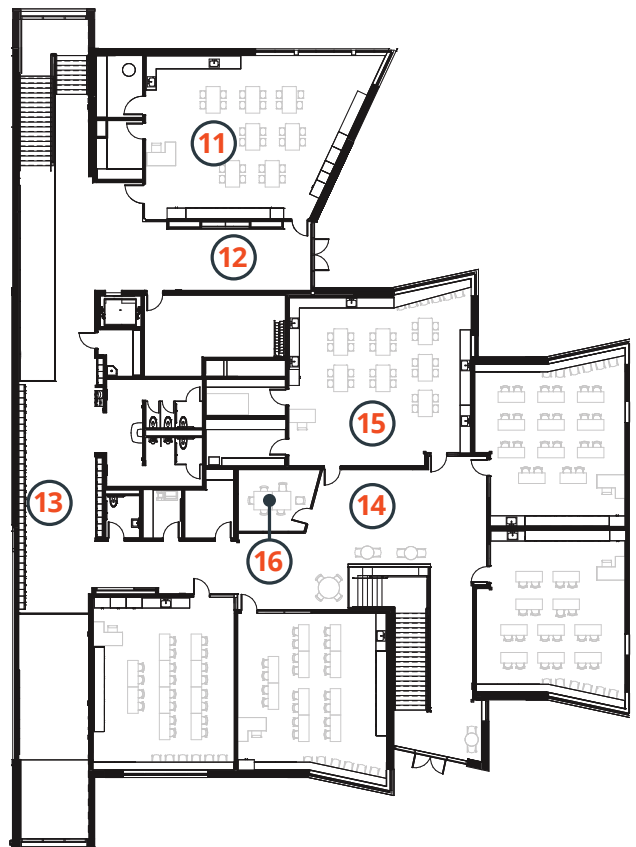


PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

LEVEL 1



LEVEL 2



LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN

- 1 MAIN ENTRY
- 2 ADMINISTRATION
- 3 SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS
- 4 ADA RESTROOM
- 5 LIBRARY
- 6 MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM
- 7 STAGE / MUSIC CLASSROOM
- 8 KITCHEN
- 9 GYMNASIUM
- 10 SMALL GROUP BREAKOUT SPACE

LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN

- 11 ART CLASSROOM
- 12 ART GALLERY
- 13 LOCKERS
- 14 LEARNING COMMUNITY (5TH-8TH)
- 15 SCIENCE / CTE CLASSROOM
- 16 SMALL GROUP BREAKOUT SPACE

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

The site slopes over 20 feet from the southwest north to the northeast corner. The old building didn't accommodate students or staff with disabilities in a very welcoming or inclusive manner. People in wheelchairs had to go outside the building to get into the gymnasium even though there was direct access from the main school. The old one-story school had many levels mainly accessed by steps with ramps added later. It was a goal of this project to not only provide required access for all but to provide it so they weren't treated like second class citizens with separate accommodations. The main entrance and playgrounds are all easily accessible and the first floor is all one level. The playground is designed to accommodate wheelchairs.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

PROMOTE EQUITY

Recognizing that students have different backgrounds, strengths, interests, and experiences guided the goal of meeting the needs of all students and allowing them to reach their potential. Opportunities for a variety of learning approaches were provided throughout the school, including hands-on learning, small group learning, students learning from each other, and learning from play and expression. An art gallery celebrates students' creativity and the stage celebrates students' performance and musical talents as much as the trophy cases celebrate athletes.



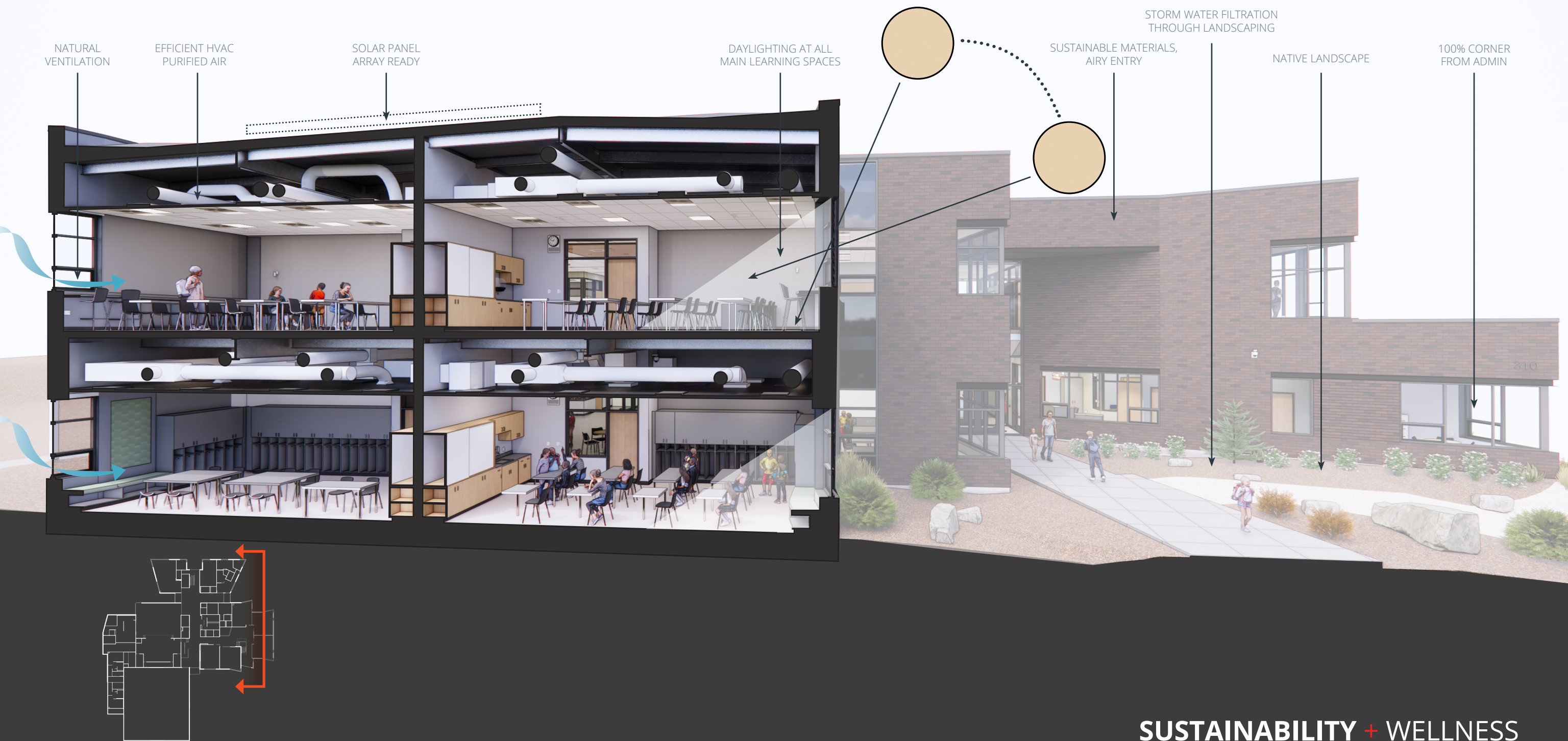
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

INCLUSIVE

The students served by this school are from 3 small rural communities or individual remote homes located miles from their closest neighbor. The school creates a welcoming environment that encourages a sense of belonging and community. These students haven't built friendships with most of their peers outside of school due to their separation. Fostering a sense of community for the students helps them develop socially and emotionally. Maximizing these needs positions them to also succeed academically. The design creates two distinct learning communities that encourage building relationships and connections in a safe and comfortable environment.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



SUSTAINABILITY + WELLNESS

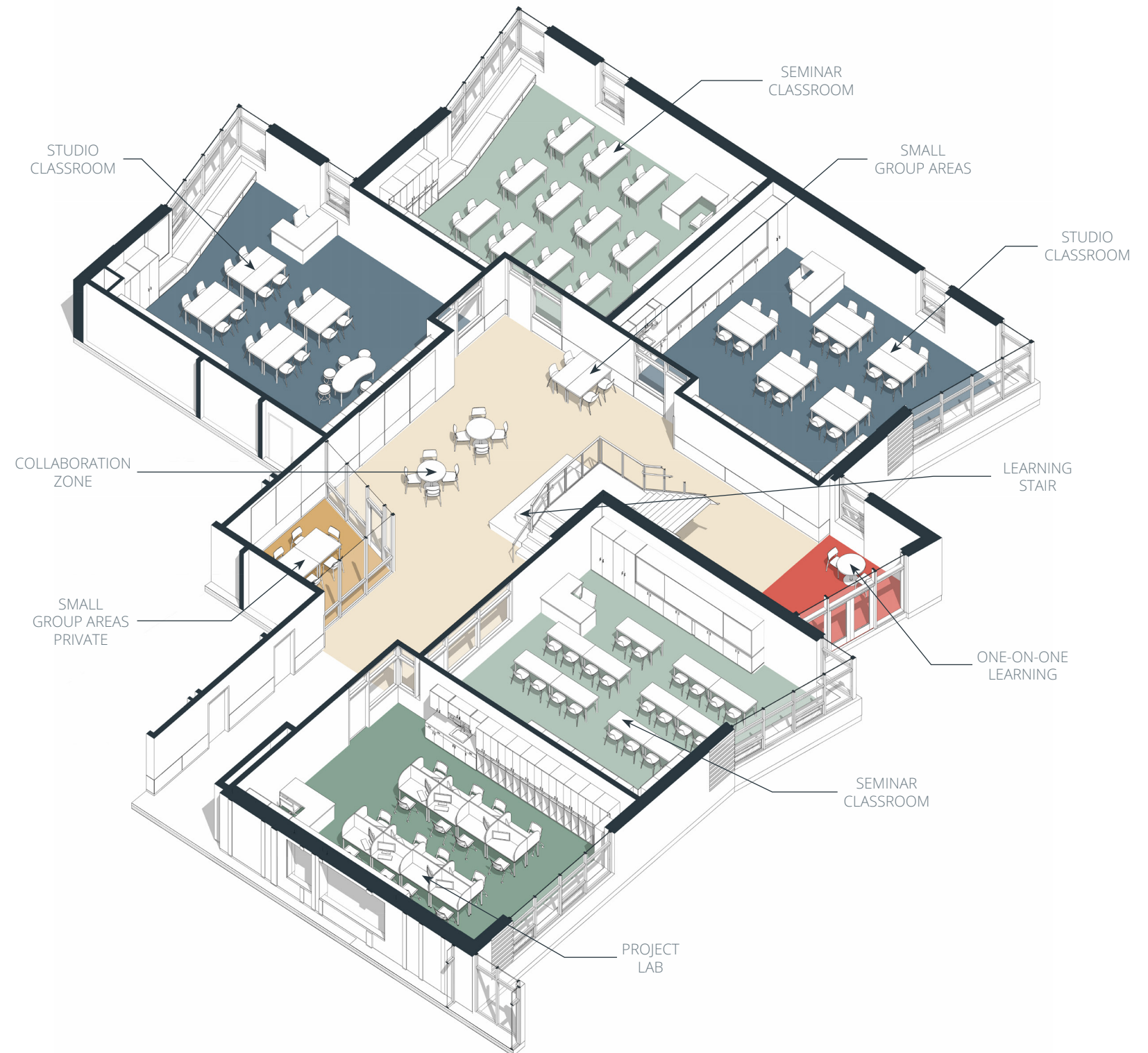
EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

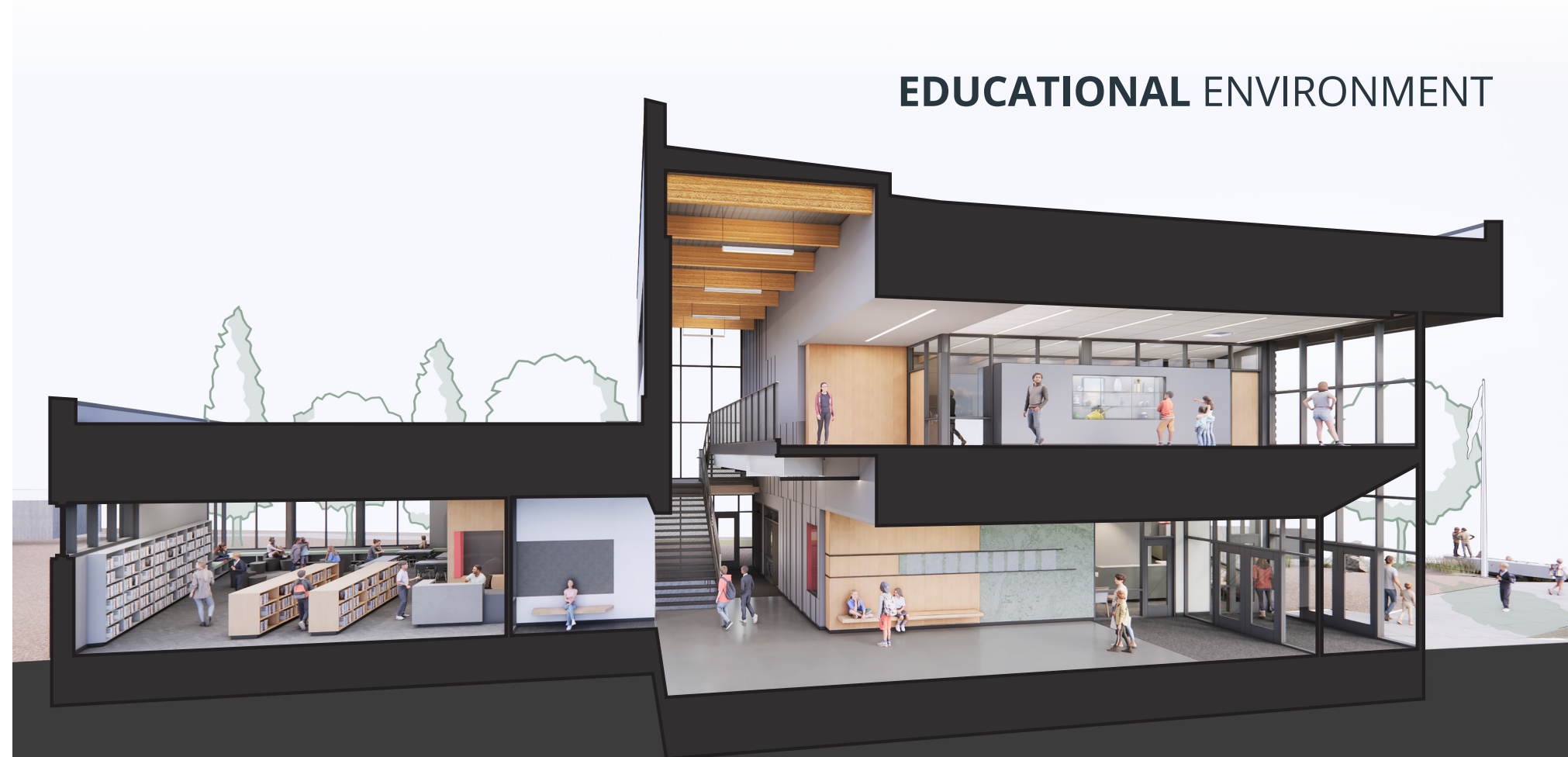
A VARIETY OF LEARNING STYLES

When designing a school intended to serve the community for the next 30+ years, stakeholders eagerly embraced contemporary ideas and concepts of 21st-century learning. Reflecting a shift towards more collaborative, technology-integrated, and flexible educational experiences, the design team of the new Almira K-8 school allocated space for various types of learning interactions. Recognizing that education extends beyond traditional classroom walls, the school includes seminar spaces, open and private small group areas, social zones, self-guided study areas, and supportive one-on-one spaces.

These environments have essential modern tools such as interactive whiteboards, state-of-the-art projectors, flat-screen televisions, and adaptable laptop connections. Additionally, the design incorporates elements that support STEM and STEAM learning, maker spaces, and technology labs, ensuring students are prepared for the demands of the future. Flexible furniture and movable partitions further allow quick reconfiguration of spaces to suit different teaching and learning styles.

This versatile setup ensures that teachers and students can easily adapt their surroundings to meet the evolving requirements of the modern curriculum, fostering an optimal learning experience for all. It also supports personalized learning paths, encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, all key competencies in the 21st-century educational landscape.



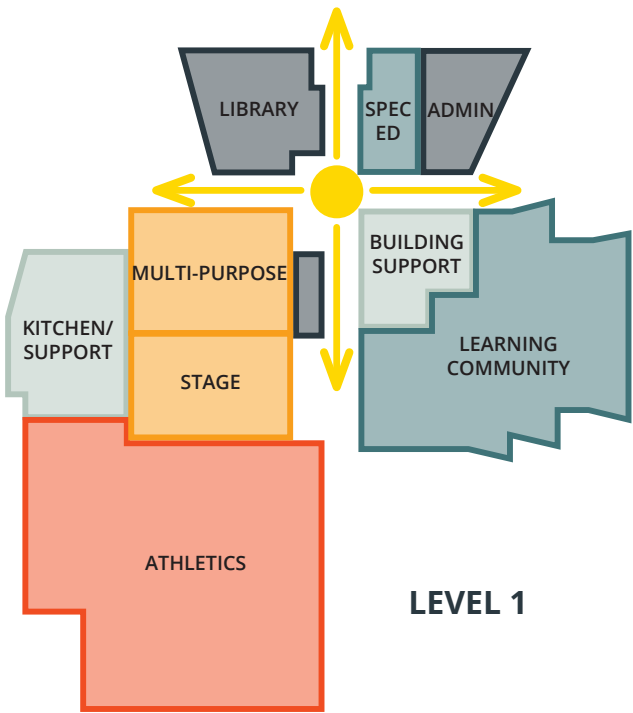
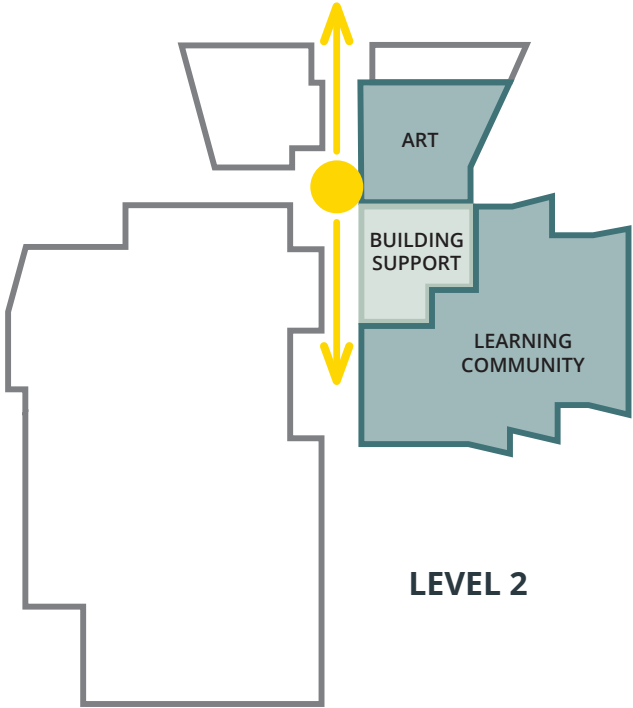


PROGRAM EXPOSURE:

Students at Almira have easy access to a wide array of programs, thanks to the strategic design of the school's layout. Transparency and connectivity are key features, ensuring seamless access to classrooms, the library, the art room, the gymnasium, and the multi-purpose room, all conveniently linked to the main circulation routes.



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



CLOSENESS SUPPORTS SAFETY & COMFORT

The school’s simple planning creates two significant paths of circulation. These hallways feed all programs, administration, activities, and maintenance functions. This efficiency in planning creates a school that staff can easily supervise, which adds to the feeling of comfort for all students.

A SCHOOL FOR EVERYONE

When working with a community as close-knit as Almira, it is of the utmost importance to accommodate every occupant’s needs in the new school. One such need was that of a student with advanced disabilities, including an adult-sized changing table. This feature, along with many other accessibility accommodations was a high priority and included in the design of the new school.





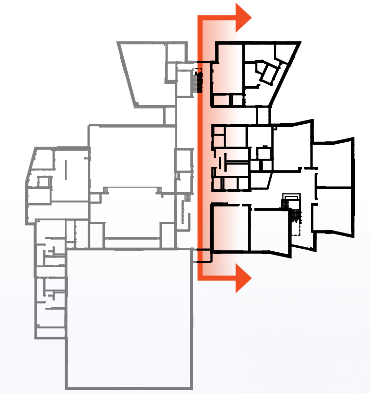
DISTANT VIEWS



CREATIVE EXPRESSION ON DISPLAY



PERSONALIZED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

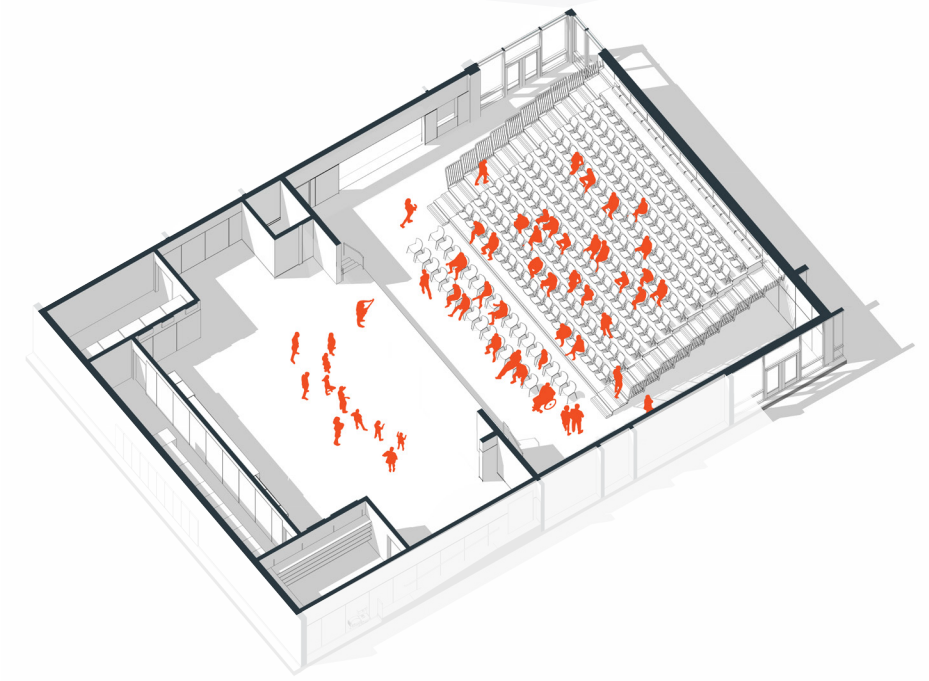
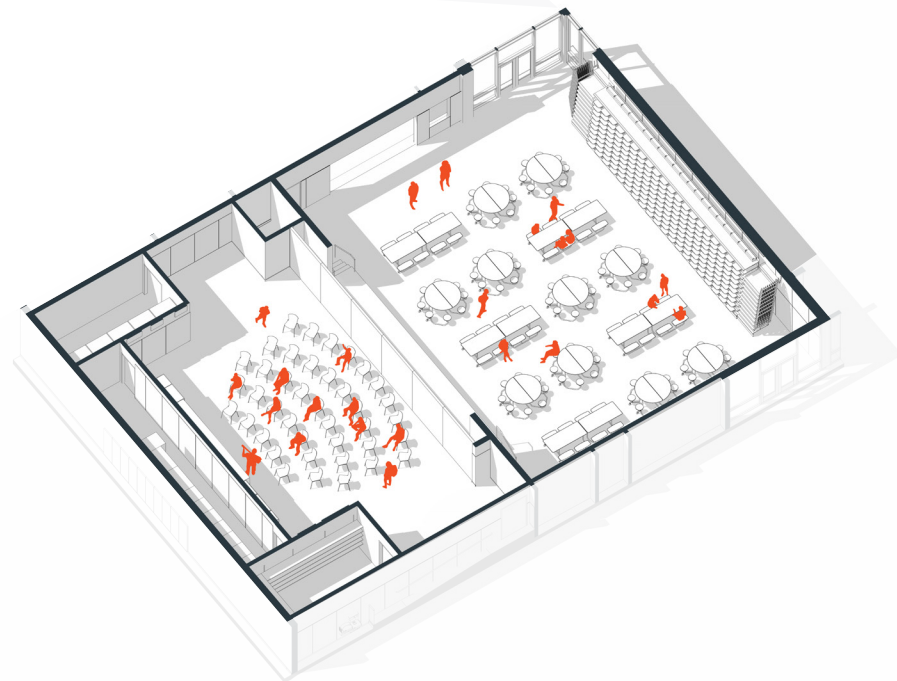


EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

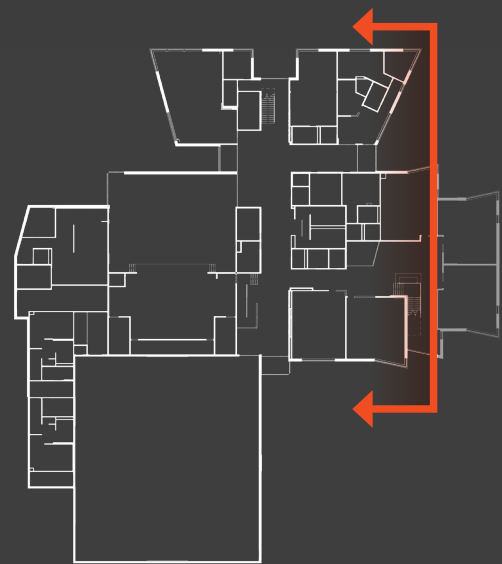
EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



HIGH VALUE IN THE ARTS: It was evident early in the process that Almira School District values the arts programs such as music, theater, and art more than the average school. A multitude of studies were conducted to discover the best way to configure the Multi-Purpose Room, Stage, and Gymnasium. To satisfy all the needs of the Music and Theater programs while still giving acoustic separation for the multi-purpose room from the Gym, the Music Room/Stage has a grand presence centered in the multi-purpose room. A wide range of flexibility is apparent in this space with a large operable wall at the front of the stage, and upholstered bleacher seats that can be pulled out during a performance. Blackout roller shades are then drawn in time for the community to pour in to watch a performance.



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE SCHOOL AGE GROUPS

In this small-town K-8 school, accommodating the diverse age groups necessitated a thoughtful separation between elementary and middle school students. This was achieved through a two-story classroom wing: Kindergarten through 5th grade resides on the first floor, while 6th through 8th grades are located on the second. The classrooms were tailored to suit the needs of each age group, with features like cushioned window seats for younger students and counter-height seating for middle schoolers. This design met with stakeholders' approval and fostered a sense of progression and achievement as students moved up to the second-floor learning community.



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



SMALL DECISIONS = BIG IMPACT

*"My take is that any activity can be play or not play.
The secret sauce is playfulness."*

~ Ben Mardell, Project Zero

Play is essential for children, helping them navigate their physical and social worlds. At Almira, providing equitable play was a priority despite challenges such as limited space and a 10-foot elevation change. These obstacles sparked innovative solutions. The sloped site was reshaped for accessible play structures, embankment play, and a nature path, seamlessly integrating nature into the play-scape. This design encourages exploration and a connection with the environment, boosting children's self-esteem as they solve problems, test ideas, and challenge themselves outdoors. Nature reduces stress and rejuvenates attention, positively impacting classroom behavior.

The play-scape offers both prescribed and imaginative play options, catering to children's physical, emotional, and mental needs. Simple, intuitive design ensures accessibility for all. An outdoor classroom space further promotes the idea that play is a vital learning tool.



RESULTS

"I'm blown away by the architecture and the small details like the wallpaper by the front office. It's an aril agriculture map of the area. It's meant so much to this community,"

~ Megan Victorino, Almira Teacher

"A whirlwind of a process. The school is what drives the community and that's why it was important to have the building here,"

~ Sean Matthewson, Almira Teacher

"Meeting the needs of these students and responding to this tragedy has resulted in everyone from leadership to construction subcontractors giving their best."

~ School District Project Manager

"I love my new school because the playground is huge and has so many fun things to play on!"

~ Second Grade Student





*"The phoenix is our motto
for this school year,"*

~ Sean Matthewson

As students enter Sean Matthewson's classroom, they're greeted by a larger-than-life yellow and orange mythological phoenix bird clutching a burned tenor saxophone. Sean played that very saxophone as a kid, and it was one of the few instruments that had been saved from the electrical fire. The rising phoenix symbolizes the resilience and steel-like strength of this tight-knit community. Rising from the ashes makes way for transformation, new beginnings, a new school and a bright, bright future.

