



By Helping Those Who Need Help the Most,  
**We Help All Students**



James Baldwin  
Elementary School  
SEATTLE, WA

**A4LE 2024 James D. MacConnell Awards**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a replacement school, James Baldwin Elementary School presented an opportunity for its community, staff, and students to reflect on their shared values and school culture, and re-envision how a building could be inspirational and restorative for their specific community.

To ensure that as diverse a set of voices is able to influence the design, the principal worked hard and creatively to make the Advisory Team accessible to more parents. This diverse team identified some large issues they wanted their new school design to address.

The primary influences on the design of James Baldwin Elementary School were:

### 1. Community-Driven Design with a Focus on Equity:

The design process was heavily influenced by the active and engaged community of educators, parents, and community members. The central question guiding the design was “What Does Equity Look Like in a Building?”

### 2. Support for a Diverse and Vulnerable Student Population:

The school community is diverse, with a high percentage of students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), especially a transient population experiencing homelessness and many families who are recent immigrants and/or are learning English. The design team and stakeholders focused on understanding and addressing the needs of these students, and developing architectural solutions to these specific needs.

### 3. Culturally Responsive and Inspirational Design:

The project embraced culturally responsive design principles, aiming to create a culture of belonging and inspiration within the school. This included using art from people of color as design references, using “mini-libraries” to create refuge spaces that support literacy, and the “Wall of Luminaries” intended to inspire students to imagine themselves as a future luminary.



“What Does Equity Look Like in a Building?”

—Dr. Dedy Fautleroy,  
Planning Principal of James Baldwin Elementary School

## SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET: KEY PROJECT STATISTICS

Design Capacity: **650 students**  
 Building Area: **99,723 sf**  
 The previous building was 41,000 sf, and student population was approximately 300.

Construction Cost: **\$60.2 Million Total**

The new James Baldwin Elementary School replaces a building on the same site. The design began in 2019 and doors opened to students in the fall of 2023.

## Key Challenge

Design a building that answers three questions:

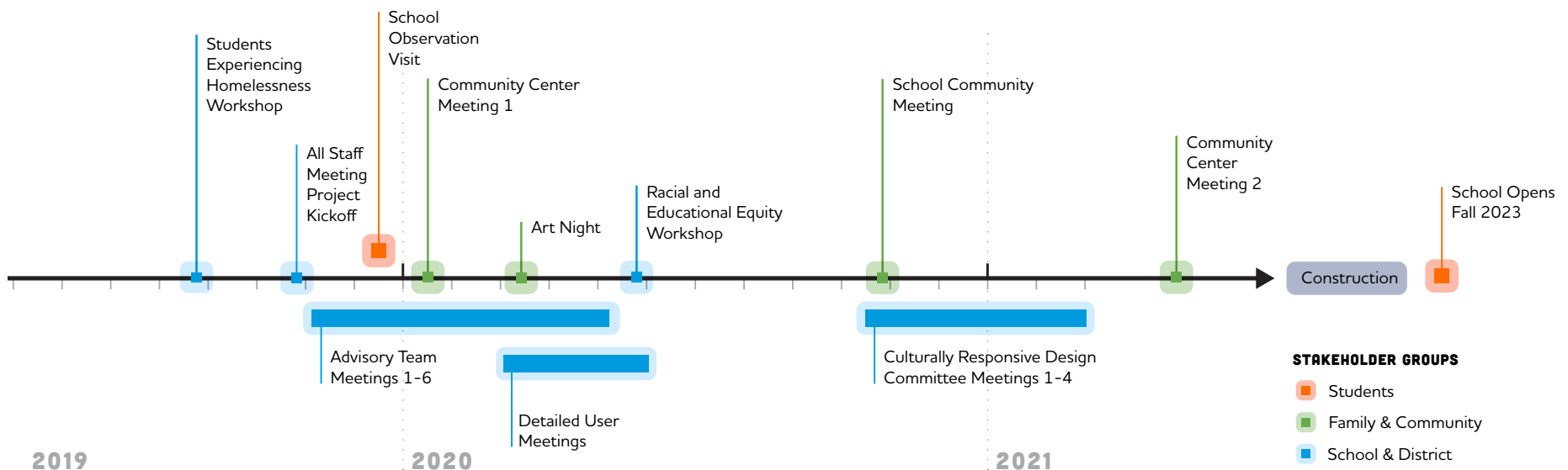
- **What does equity look like in a building?**
- **How can a building support students experiencing homelessness and trauma?**
- **How can school architecture support literacy?**

## The Response

**Design a school that supports the students who need the most support and, in so doing, support ALL students.**

**DESIGNING FOR EQUITY.** James Baldwin Elementary School serves a diverse population with many vulnerable students coming from trauma, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other challenges. The design supports students furthest from educational justice with a “tapestry” of spaces at different scales where students can interact and feel safe. A curved, meandering hallway weaves through the school, removing any institutional feel and adding a sense of discovery. Every space is filled with natural light; biophilic connections to the outdoors give visual relief.

## Persistent and Sustained Planning and Community Engagement



# Context: The School Community

The educators and community at the formerly named Northgate Elementary School, were working to engage their diverse students in the best way they could, but their existing school building did not support them in this endeavor. They desired a solution for their new school where they could say in the end that the design genuinely supported teaching and learning.

## School Community

- + **11-25%** homeless, **40%** transient
- + **41%** Hispanic, **23%** African American, **18%** white, **18%** other
- + **35%** ELL, students with limited English proficiency
- + **73%** Free and Reduced Lunch
- + High percentage of students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – trauma directly or indirectly related to housing instability and living situations
- + Many immigrant and refugee families – 20 spoken languages.
- + Staff and social services address a wide variety of student needs.

**“Our students are not defined by statistics except that they are 100% awesome.”**

— Dr. Dedy Fauntleroy,  
Planning Principal of James Baldwin Elementary School



## THE BLANKET SPACE

The story of a recent student, as recounted to us by the school family support worker, greatly influenced our teams thinking about how design solutions can aid students who are struggling with various types of trauma in their lives and families.

A few years back, a young girl would bring a blanket to school. Fairly consistently, there would be a time during the day when she felt the need to run out of the classroom and find a place down the hall where she could sit, cover her head with the blanket, and retreat from the rest of the school.

This story, coupled with design team research about the effects of trauma, led us to work with the Advisory Team to create retreat spaces **within** the educational environment.

## SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT

# Project Kick-off Workshop: Designing for Students Experiencing Homelessness

The project began with a workshop at the District offices exploring how school architecture can support students and their families that have housing insecurity or are experiencing homelessness. The workshop brought together District Educators, McKinney-Vento Coordinators\*, Seattle homelessness support workers, Mary's Place Coordinator\*\*, School principals, capital projects staff, and the design team, including our research department leader.

As the discussion started, this group appreciated the rare chance this project brought to allow some coordination between people and groups. This group discussed needs of families, students, and school administrators/educators in light of recent research. Some of the group conclusions included:

- + **To support students, you must support entire families.**
- + Students need to receive support in a way that **normalizes the experience** and they still **feel a strong sense of belonging** with the entire school community.
- + Students experiencing homelessness and related trauma will need their basic needs met (food, clean clothes, shower) but will also require support that **allows them to stay engaged in their education** and minimize time away from their class and teacher.
- + The experience of the natural environment is restorative. **A restorative physical environment creates opportunities to connect** both visually from inside the building and physically through easy access to outdoor experiences.

**This workshop led to the creation of a new space for the District – a family room.** This space provides resources and support for families in a comfortable and non-threatening environment that is near the main office but without being part of the main office.

\*McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act authorized federal support funding for children experiencing homelessness.

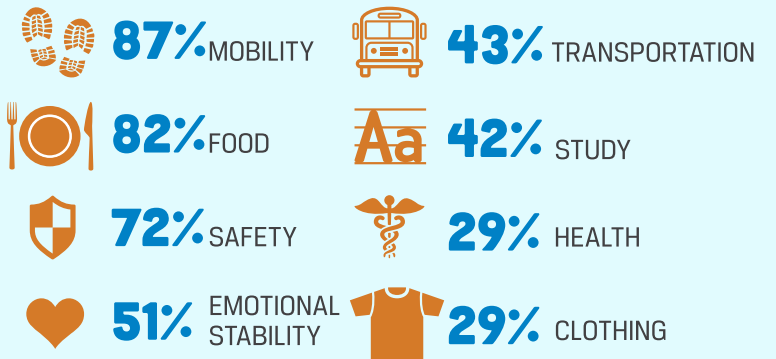
\*\*Mary's Place is a local non-profit that supports families experiencing homelessness and related trauma, especially families of single women and children.

## How can a building support students experiencing homelessness and trauma?

**Research led to understanding how design responds to and supports student psychological needs.**

### THE BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

The cycle of poverty and homelessness can be broken by reducing the barriers to learning. Below are the top barriers our students report.



Student Survey, Positive Tomorrows Schools

### Research and Data Analyzed and Discussed in the Workshop and subsequently during design:

- + Data from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of Washington, California Department of Education, and the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and the Positive Tomorrows School Student Survey (Oklahoma)
- + Learning Policy Institute and National Education Policy center 2017 report, "Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A review of the evidence."
- + National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014)
- + Hierarchy of Needs as applied to Educational Spaces - Perry 2006-12

# School Design Advisory Team: Defining Educational Values and Goals

The School Design Advisory Team consisted of parents, community members, and educators and collaborated with the design team to set values, goals, and design direction for the new school. The school principal worked hard to ensure that parents who might not otherwise have been able to participate were included.

The Advisory Team and the design team investigated the core questions that would define a successful school including supporting students experiencing homelessness, literacy, and embedding equity in the design.

The Advisory Team challenged and inspired the designers to pursue solutions that were both practical and inspirational. They set lofty goals and pushed for tangible results in the building.

Rather than just saying they wanted an “inviting” building, the Advisory Team said:

“The Building should feel **non-institutional.**”

Rather than just saying they wanted “variety” or “flexibility” in their building, they wanted:

“A **Tapestry of Spatial Choices** to support learners in many ways, achieving multiple goals at once.”

As the new school is planned to grow to over twice the previous student population, the Advisory Team identified building scale and the scale of each neighborhood within the school as a key concern. They articulated that they wanted:

“A strong sense of **community at multiple scales.**”

## ● What does equity look like in a building?

### ADVISORY TEAM CRITERIA FOR MEASURING DESIGN SUCCESS:

- + Restorative and Supportive
- + Celebrates and Encourages Reading
- + Facilitates Community
- + Contains a Tapestry of Spaces
- + Feels Non-Institutional



Former Northgate Elementary School

The former school was a series of narrow hallways with many doors. The Advisory Team was clear that this did not support students with trauma, make the school approachable for parents, or assist in achieving their educational goals.

## School Design Advisory Team: Support Literacy with Architecture

The School District asks its educators to achieve the goals of the District strategic plan. At the project kick-off, the District asked the design team to design the school so that the building supports the goals of the strategic plan. Over multiple sessions the School Design Advisory Team explored strategies for supporting readers and embedding reading into multiple aspects of the school culture.

### **Key Strategies Developed by the School Design Advisory Team:**

- + Reading needs to be an ever present experience as you move through the school.
- + The library should be central, inviting, and present soon after entering the building.
- + Students first need to be inspired and become curious, then reading can become a means to satisfying their curiosity.

What if our school was like a neighborhood of **“little free libraries?”**

– Design Advisory Team member

● **How can school architecture support literacy?**

### **DISTRICT STRATEGIC PLAN:**

**Overall Goal:** The District strategic plan is “laser focused on supporting Students of Color who are furthest away from educational justice, beginning with African American boys and teens.”

**Key Priority:** “We want all students reading at grade level by the end of Third Grade.”

**“Curiosity is the spark to inspire a desire to read.”**

– Design Advisory Team member



# Culturally Responsive Design: Creating a Culture of Belonging

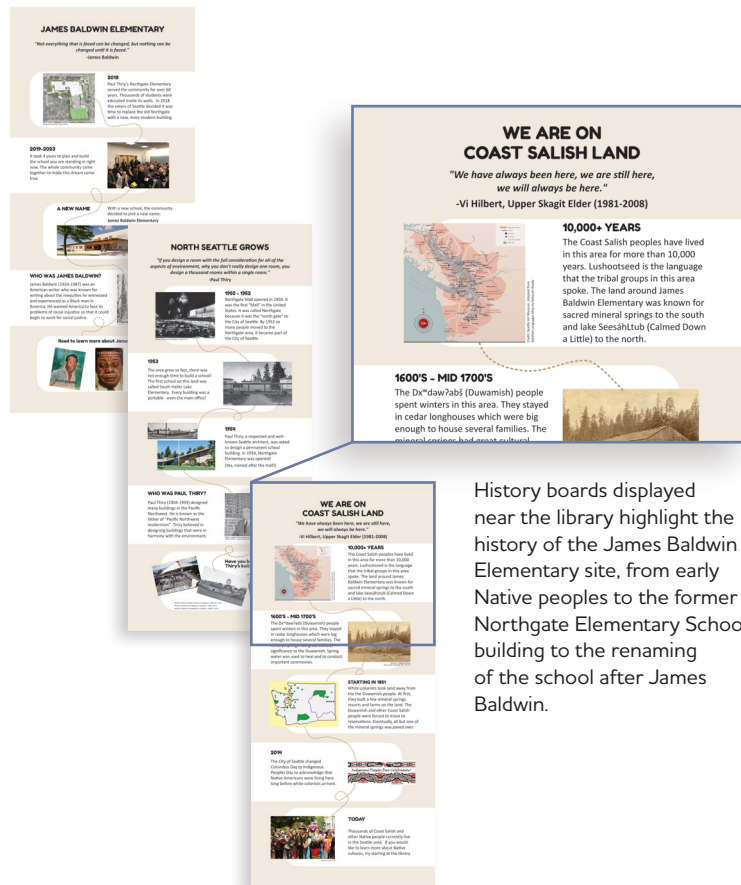
As we learned about the current school culture, the Advisory Team helped us understand the work the school staff do to create a “Culture of Belonging.” The staff and administrators pride themselves on the strong connection they have with students and the way they foster relationships between students. The staff brainstormed ideas for how the design could spark inspiration and connections.

The Advisory Team discussed how the stars and constellations illuminating the night sky are seen by people the world over – a unifying natural element. The stars bring light to the world, literally and metaphorically.

People can also bring light to the world through their words and actions. Those who shine particularly bright through their contributions to our world are hailed as ‘luminaries’. Scientists, writers, artists, athletes and activists, particularly those from communities whose light has been obscured in the past, are celebrated on the Wall of Luminaries.

## Light breaking through and overcoming darkness.

This became a theme that guided thinking on multiple ways students can be both inspired and connected to each other, including the “lite brite” wall, the Wall of Luminaries, and the constellations embedded in the floor at the entry to each classroom neighborhood.



History boards displayed near the library highlight the history of the James Baldwin Elementary site, from early Native peoples to the former Northgate Elementary School building to the renaming of the school after James Baldwin.



Rendering: Wall of Luminaries

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE DESIGN COMMITTEE

As the design direction was set, a Culturally Responsive Design Committee was established by the principal with community members, artists, and the school art teacher. This group met multiple times with the design team to provide feedback and direction on how the design details and finishes could be responsive to the school and community culture. The Culturally Responsive Design Committee discussed relevant cultural references that could inspire the design and how art (especially student created) can be a great connector and way to equalize the playing field and allow all students to equally participate.

The committee also guided the team on how the “Wall of Luminaries” could be realized. They created an initial list of individuals who could be “Luminaries” that was subsequently reviewed and finalized by the school, becoming the Luminaries on the wall of the school.

**Identity      Hope      Perspective**



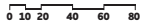
## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The site consisted of two plateaus separated by a large retaining wall. The new building was designed as the site retaining wall with the Commons/Stage, Gymnasium, and play areas on the lower plateau and the remaining building on the upper plateau. Additionally, the construction of the new building occurred while the former building was still occupied.

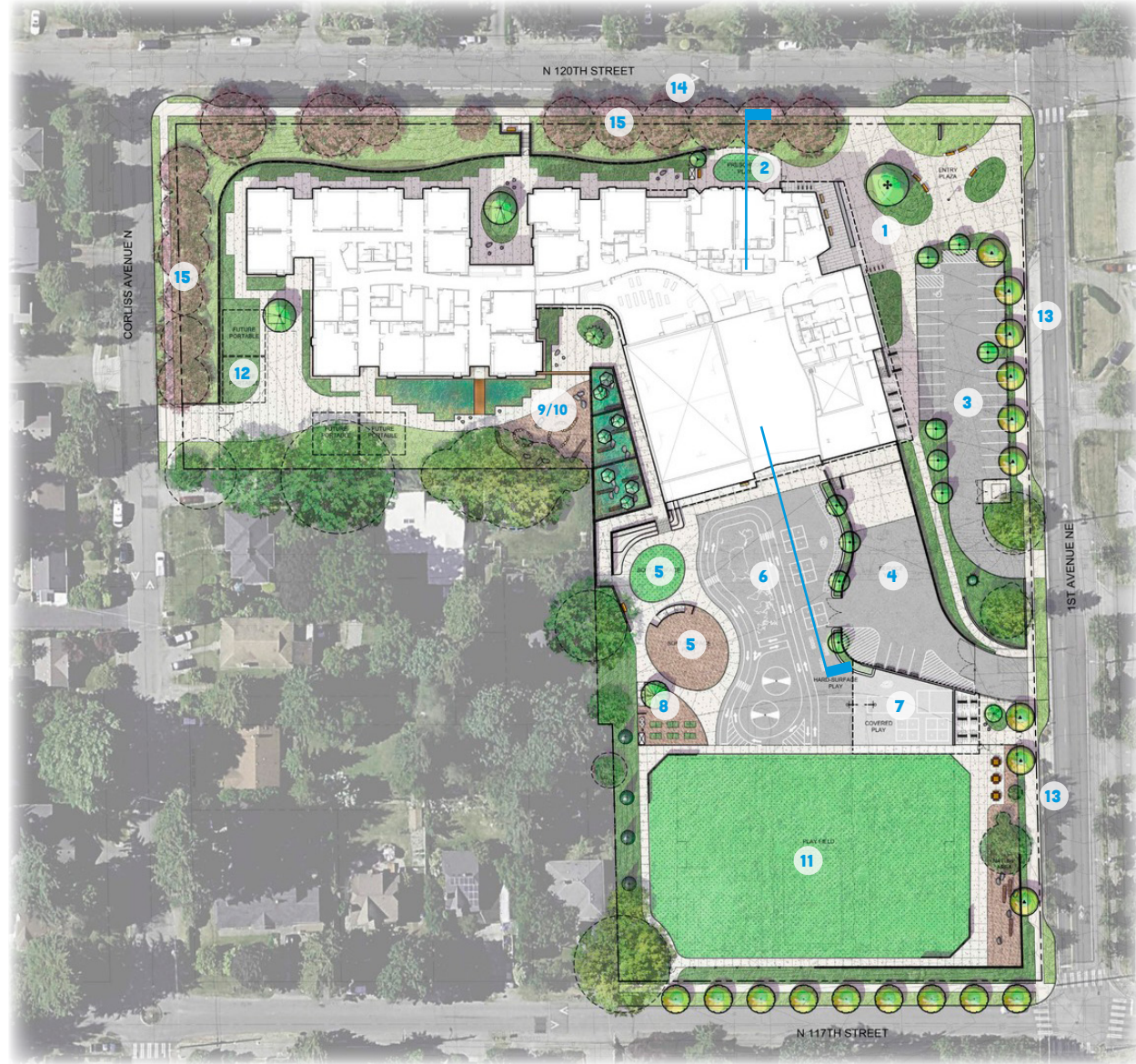


Aerial photo: New building in foreground, original building in background.

### N SITE PLAN



- |                      |                       |                                  |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Entry Plaza       | 6. Hard-Surface Play  | 11. Play Field                   |
| 2. Pre-School Play   | 7. Covered Play       | 12. Future Portables             |
| 3. Staff Parking     | 8. Garden Area        | 13. Bus Loading Area             |
| 4. Service Yard      | 9. Nature Play        | 14. Car Loading Area             |
| 5. Soft-Surface Play | 10. Outdoor Classroom | 15. Preserved King Norway Maples |



**PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Much of the building is experienced through the preserved street trees – helping the neighborhood retain its leafy feeling.



## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

# Art of the Built Environment

The Culturally Responsive Design Committee was especially influential in guiding the colors, finishes, and special touches throughout the school. They directed the designers to use African-American Artists as inspiration—in particular, the use of vibrant colors. Specifically, the works of Amy Sherald inspired the accent colors used on the classroom window “bay” windows and in the seating nooks and accent colors throughout the school interior.



Amy Sherald's Untitled (2017)



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



Diffusing the Institutional Feel

“We don’t want a long hallway with a bunch of doors in it.”

— Design Advisory Team member

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

### Diffusing the Institutional Feel

A meandering hallway with regular openings into shared spaces and large rooms such as the library and art room make the path through the school feel natural and non-institutional.



**PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Sparking Curiosity,  
Engaging with Nature

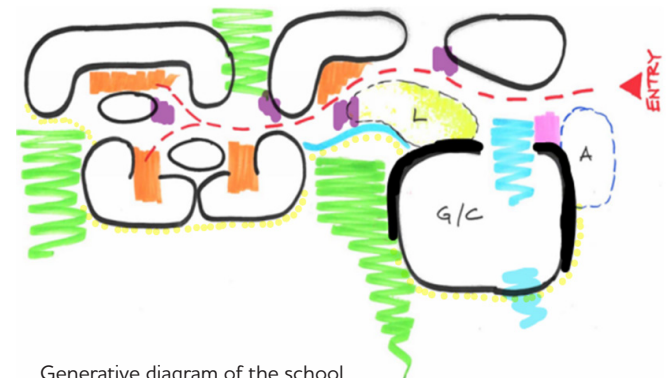


## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



## A Strong Sense of Community at Multiple Scales

The typical educational specification for the District groups six classrooms per grade level around a shared learning commons. The School Design Advisory Committee expressed concern about the scale of a neighborhood with six classrooms, especially considering the increased need for students who have experienced trauma to feel like they belong. This evolved the design and modified the educational specification so that each grade level is divided into **two groups of 3 classrooms** around a smaller learning commons and connected through a hallway with adjacent gender inclusive restrooms. Each neighborhood flows to the next and **no one ever feels like they are “down at the end of the hall.”**



Generative diagram of the school

## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



## Gender Inclusive Restrooms

An inclusive school environment helps everyone feel like they belong throughout their daily experience. To that end, gender inclusive restrooms were provided throughout the school. They consist of individual stalls with full height walls and solid doors for privacy. The handwashing sinks are located outside of the stalls in a common area off of the hallway – within view and earshot of classrooms to allow for passive supervision. This school is one of the initial schools within the District with all gender inclusive restrooms. After their first year of use, staff feedback has been positive.

“This is a civil rights issue.”

—Dr. Dedy Fauntleroy,  
Planning Principal of James Baldwin Elementary School

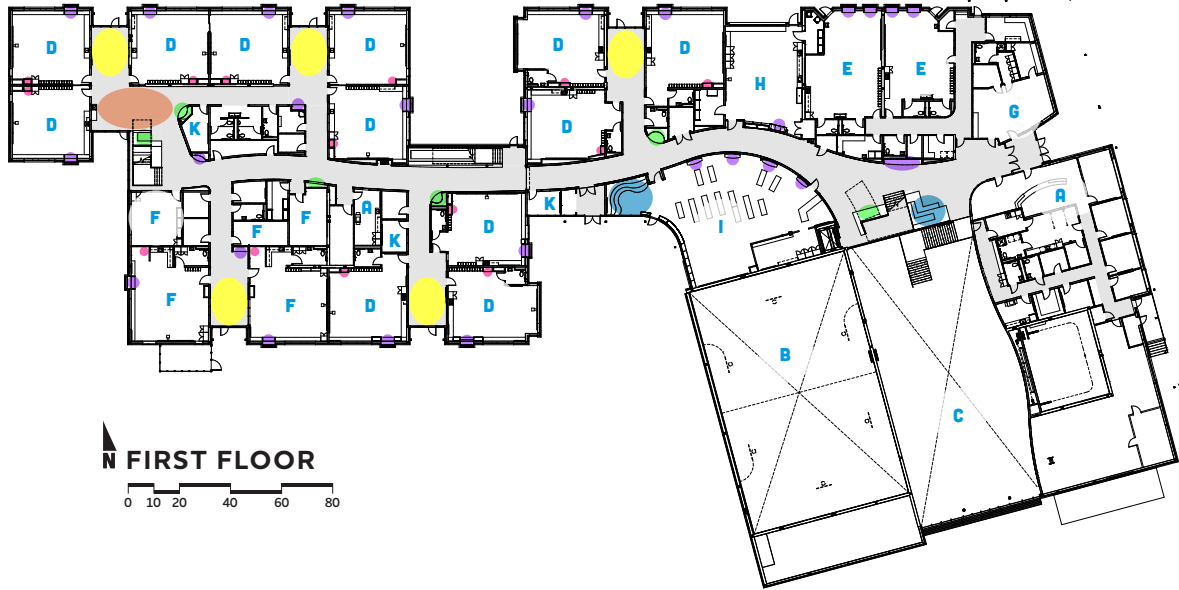




## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

# Tapestry of Spatial Choices

A tapestry of spatial choices allows students to choose between spaces of different scale and character that responds to their psychological needs at specific moments.



### SPACE TYPES LEGEND

- Kid Cubby
- Cozy Seating Nook / Window Seat
- Mini Library / Reading Alcove
- Learning Commons
- Group Seating / Story Area
- Group Activity Area

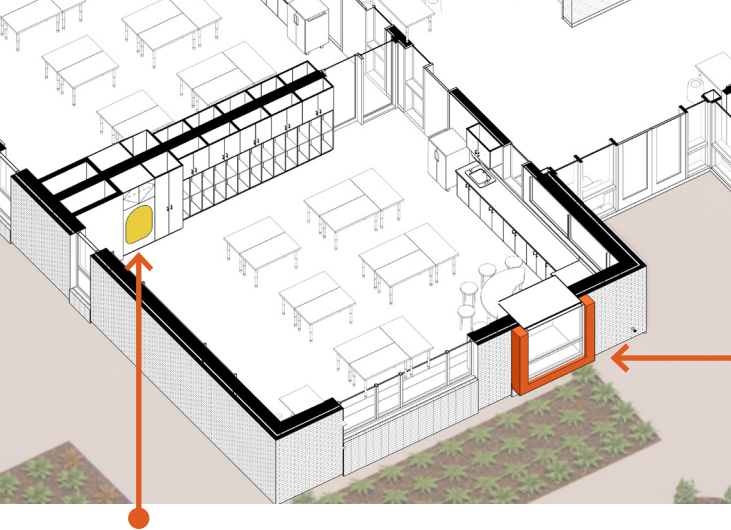
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FIRST FLOOR  
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### LEGEND

- A Administration
- B Gymnasium/PE (below)
- C Commons + Kitchen (below)
- D Classrooms
- E Preschool/Childcare
- F Special Education
- G Family Room
- H Art
- I Library
- J Staff Lounge
- K Small Group
- L Music



N  
SECOND FLOOR  
0 10 20 40 60 80



## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

# Tapestry of Spatial Choices **Within** the Classroom

Small group spaces and refuge spaces (“blanket” spaces) for one or multiple students.



## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

# Tapestry of Spatial Choices Outside the Classroom

On a recent visit to the school we observed an educator and a student walk down the hall and peek into the library. When they noticed that the library was occupied, the educator said to the student,

**“Let’s go to your spot.”**

This ability for a student to be able to “have their own spot” is exactly the educational environment envisioned for a school where students belong, have connection to their school as a “place,” and where students and educators can use refuge and reading spaces for a wide range of learning needs, including social-emotional.

Mini-libraries and cozy seating nooks are found near classroom groupings and along curving hallways, providing easy to reach, easy to see places for a student to take a moment alone before rejoining their class.



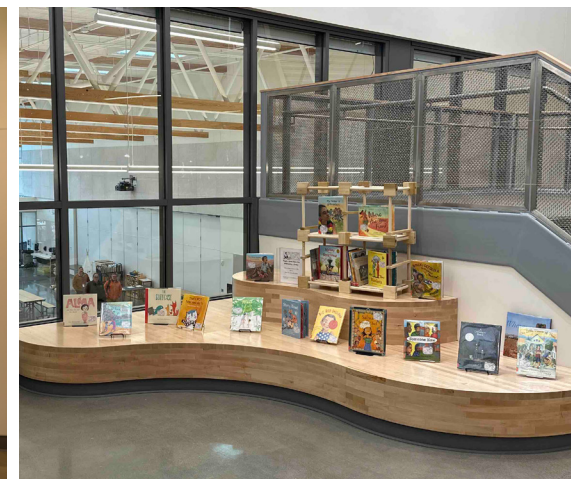
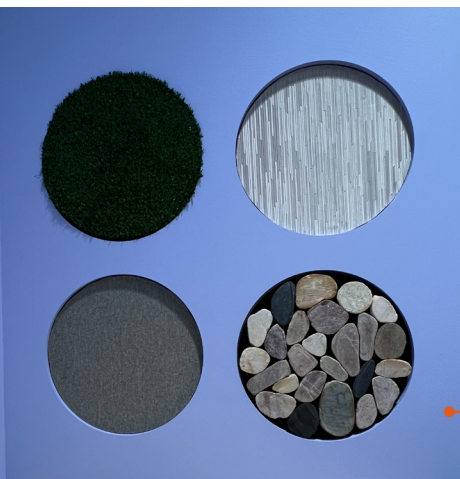
## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



- How can school architecture support literacy?
- How can a building support students experiencing homelessness and trauma?

## Literacy Culture & Refuge Spaces

“Little Free Libraries” throughout the school celebrate reading and allow educators to curate and highlight lessons with reading material. These spaces also serve as cozy refuge spaces adjacent each classroom wing. **These refuge spaces each have different colors and textured materials to facilitate self-soothing when students need it.**



## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

# Literacy Culture

The “Big Free Library” is adjacent the entry lobby and central to the school with large windows to the curving hall and access to an outdoor learning area.

Second floor informal reading area overlooks the library.



## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Students see themselves as a future “Luminary”



The Wall of Luminaries celebrates those who have illuminated our world with their contributions to science, art, literature, and sport, and by advocating for a more just, equitable, and humane world. Strategically placed mirrors allow students to see themselves among the luminaries—a future luminary. The initial selection of Luminaries was voted on by school staff and focuses on notable groups and individuals from multiple cultures and background who are giants in their fields, including science, mathematics, literature, athletics, education, and activism.

### ENHANCING A SENSE OF BELONGING:

**Identity**

**Hope**

**Perspective**

## RESULTS

# Family Room

During the pre-design workshop on students experiencing homelessness and subsequent discussions, a very important strategy was to ensure that the **FAMILIES and not just the students are supported by the school**. Additionally, it was noted that entering the administrative offices can be intimidating so having a separate space for families to receive support is helpful.

This led to the creation of a family room that is accessible both from the entry vestibule and the main lobby. This space was added to the school program. The District has subsequently made the family room a **standard part of their elementary school programs**.

The family room has a flexible space for a variety of student and family activities. Connected is an office for the Family Support Worker, a meeting room, a storage area to provide clothing, food, and other items that students and families might need, and a restroom with shower.

Family room suite is separate from administration to stimulate use by community.



### MULTIPLE USES OF FAMILY ROOM:

- + Connections to support agencies
- + Vaccinations
- + Food distribution and clothing assistance
- + Family support

## RESULTS



"Lite Brite" pegs allow students to engage with a map of the world through play.



At the entry to each neighborhood of the school is a different constellation. The names for the constellations are identified as they would be in cultures from around the world.

## Sense of Belonging: Connection to our World

Multi-cultural events throughout the year unite the learning community.

**"Wherever we are from, we are under the same stars."**

— Advisory Team member

Native blessing of the school.



Día de los Muertos celebration.





## RESULTS



A school where every student can find their place.

“Now we know **what equity** looks like in a building.”

— Dr. Dedy Fauntleroy,  
Planning Principal of James Baldwin Elementary School