

Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center

GREGORY-PORTLAND ISD | PORTLAND, TEXAS



2025 JAMES D. MACCONNELL AWARD

Where Play Leads the Way

Merging equity and experiential early learning, Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center (ECC) is located at the intersection of community and innovation. A bold step forward for Gregory-Portland ISD, the school celebrates its local coastal identity and empowers children to explore and grow in a space designed with them, for them. The facility is a monument to the district's vision for locally themed experiential early learning, opening doors to hands-on exploration and development for the district's youngest learners.

Following numerous design charrettes and workshops in which community and student feedback steered the direction of their new school, the project team worked with district stakeholders to develop a school that is as dynamic as the children it serves. The radial design encourages flow and places the playground at its heart, symbolizing the central role of play in early childhood development. Each classroom pod is color-themed to help children navigate their space with ease, while the layout allows for seamless transition between experiential learning and traditional classroom settings.

The inclusion of local cultural elements, like windmill and seaside motifs, grounds the design in the community's coastal identity and creates a sense of belonging for students, while simultaneously teaching them about their home. Flexible, movable furniture and collaborative spaces adapt the facility to a variety of teaching styles, allowing both students and teachers to thrive in an environment that evolves with needs.

Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center is more than improved infrastructure and added space—it is an immersive, sensory-rich environment built on what its community seeks in early learning delivery.



SCOPE OF WORK & BUDGET

OWNER

Gregory-Portland ISD

LOCATION

Portland, TX

PROJECT TYPE

New Construction

BUILDING AREA

98,108 SF

PROJECT COST

\$48,528,770

OCCUPANCY DATE

May 2024

STUDENT CAPACITY

792

GRADES SERVED

Pre-K and Kindergarten



**18 Themed Learning
Environments**



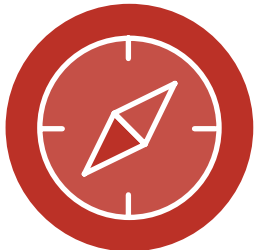
**6 Themed
Pods**



**Dual-Language
Signage**



**Immersive
Design**



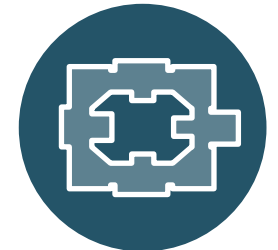
**Color Coded
Wayfinding System**



**Central Plant
Chiller System**



**Contained
Playground**



**In-the-Round
Facility**

A Community Invested

Tight-knit, coastal, and proud.

To build equity across two distinct yet interconnected communities, the town of Gregory and the city of Portland, Texas, Gregory-Portland ISD saw early childhood education not just as a programmatic need, but as a powerful opportunity to invest in future generations. The goal was to create a unifying, immersive learning environment to close the gap in access to education and resources.

Integrating developmentally appropriate curriculum and place-based design, the facility was envisioned to spark curiosity and confidence at the beginning of a child's academic journey—nurturing social, emotional, and physical connections.



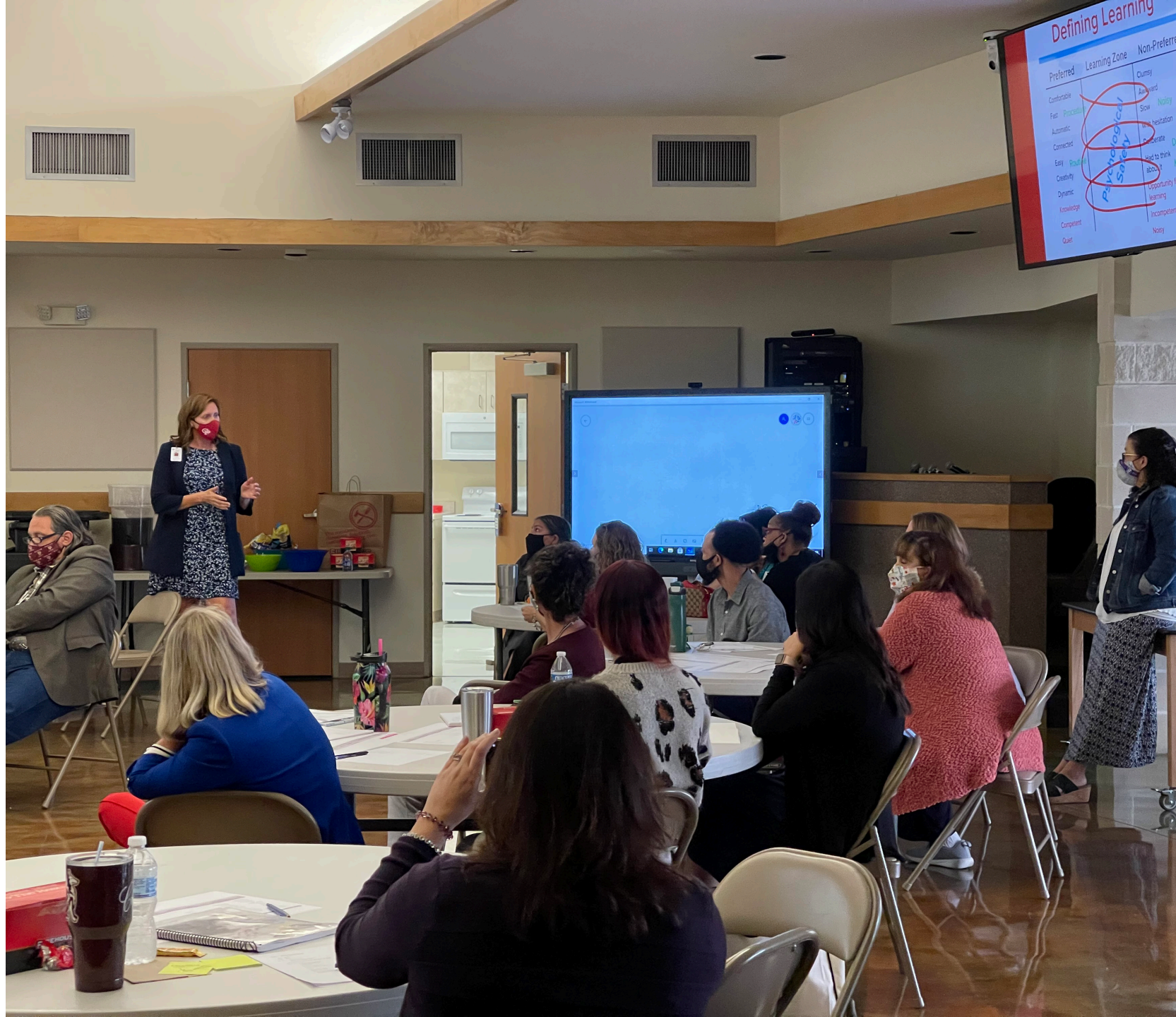
Super-Intentions

Superintendent Dr. Michelle Cavazos was a driving force behind the vision for early childhood education at Gregory-Portland ISD. Her leadership galvanized support by reframing the ECC as an investment in students and the long-term health of the community. This meant bringing the school board, administrators, local civic and business leaders, parents, and students together to envision a school that represented the community and welcomed its youngest members.

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“Some might think it’s a risk to make this investment. And it *is* an investment...not just for the future of our kids, but really the future of every community.”

– Dr. Michelle Cavazos, Superintendent



Challenges



Removing Uncertainty

Facing uncertainty due to COVID-19, the district had to navigate limited face-to-face engagement opportunities and combat pandemic-related fatigue among families and staff. The team faced the task of sustaining momentum for a new, unfamiliar educational facility and delivery that required more than standard outreach. But the district didn't just push forward—they listened differently and allowed the community to guide the process.



Equity By Design

From early engagement through design execution, G-PISD positioned the Early Childhood Center as a regional resource that would unify rather than divide. That meant building trust among all stakeholders through design charrettes, culturally responsive classrooms that reflect community heritage and local ecology, and prioritizing accessibility.

Local Roots

Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center was rooted in bold leadership with an existing interest in experiential learning and a strong cultural identity.

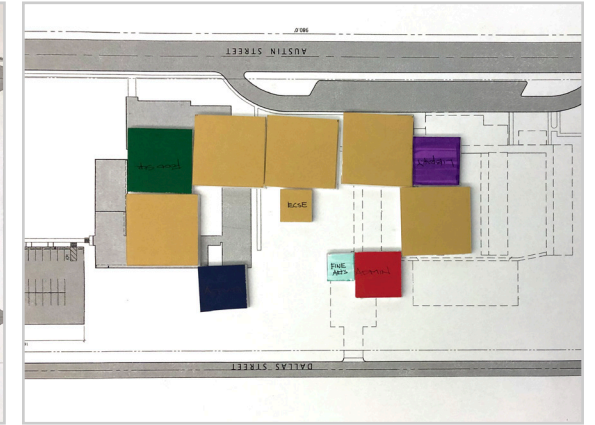
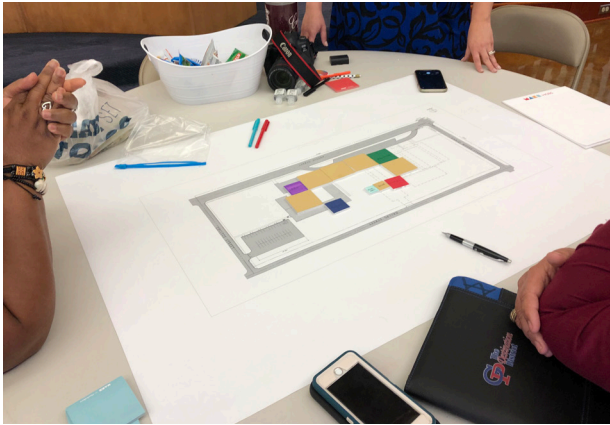
Under Superintendent Dr. Michelle Cavazos, the district exemplified a willingness to invest in early learning innovation. It was Dr. Cavazos's leadership that set the tone for the initiative: displaying an openness to the project team's other successes in experiential learning design, like Mansfield ISD's early learning environments. Her curiosity and openness to this new pedagogy made the community much more enthusiastic about its implementation.

As a district on the Gulf Coast with deep local pride, G-PISD brought a rich cultural and ecological identity to the table, making themes for experiential learning more readily possible. This sense of place was actively leveraged to ground learning in students' lived environment, making it more relevant and accessible.



GREGORY-PORTLAND EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

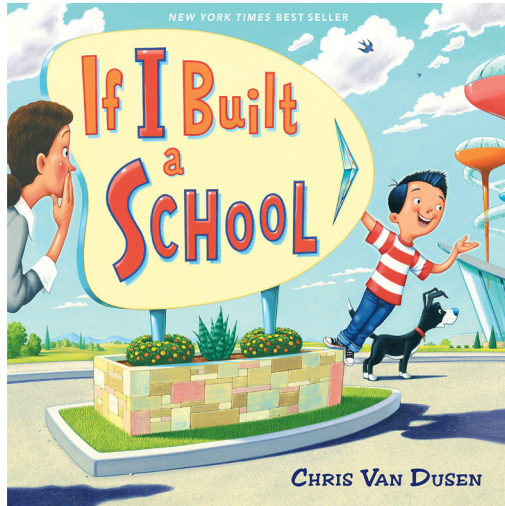




A Shared Vision

Rather than allowing pandemic uncertainty to postpone critical conversations, the district and design team adapted their outreach strategy to prioritize intentional design charrettes. These sessions functioned as collaborative workspaces—bringing together educators, leaders, and community members to shape what the Early Childhood Center could and should be. Participants didn't just respond to ideas—they came up with the ideas themselves—surfacing local values, clarifying priorities, and developing themes and curriculum spaces.

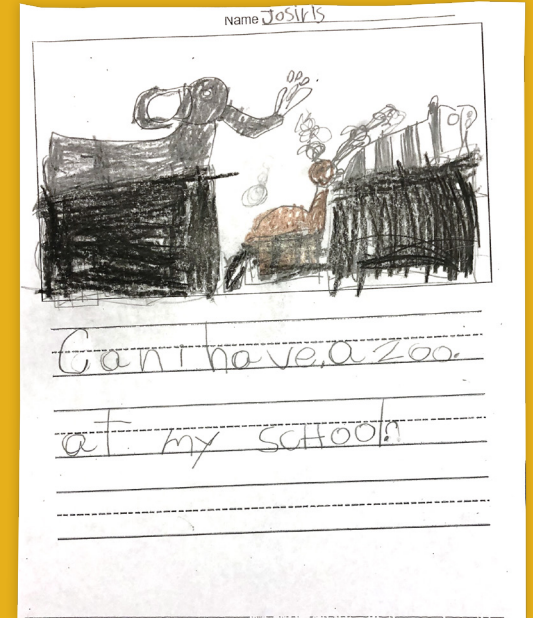
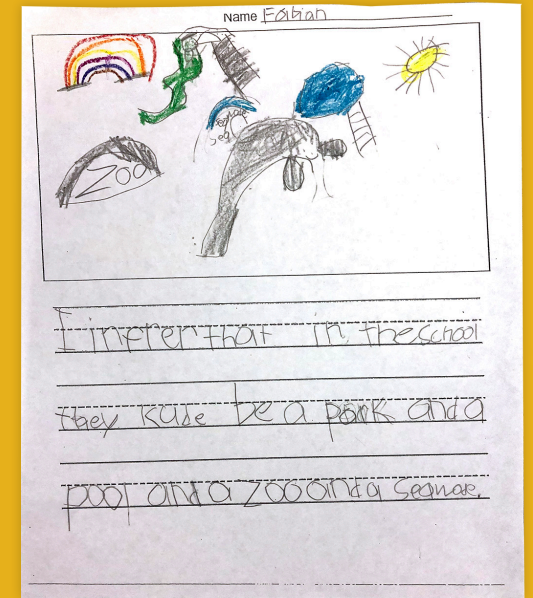
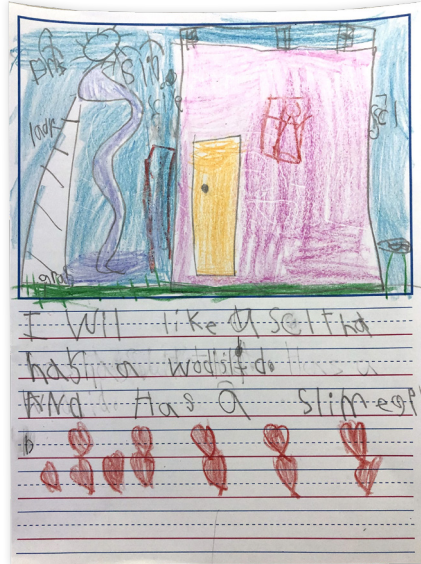
Educators shared their classroom observations, district leaders brought forward strategic priorities, and community members emphasized what mattered most to them. The process itself became a vehicle for trust-building and long-term buy-in. Together, these charrettes clarified a school design born of a shared community vision.



If We Built a School

To gather more support and student buy-in, the project team helped the community understand what early learning is, why it works, and how they had been successful delivering these spaces in the past. The district Superintendent read *If I Built a School* by Chris Van Dusen to students—engaging their creativity. Inspired, the children were then invited to draw their ideal classrooms, filling them with images from their imagination, like rainbows, slides, and roller coasters.

The exercises and resulting drawings inspired real design elements for the building, notably in color selection and wayfinding strategies. Listening to the youngest stakeholders ensured that the building made for them was also influenced by them.



Innovation and Inclusion

The visioning process for the Gregory-Portland ECC began with a bold shift in how the district conceptualized early learning. It was not simply about academic preparation, but about creating an immersive, foundational experience that shapes how young children engage with the world and each other.

Drawing inspiration from Mansfield ISD's early learning academy, the district worked to tailor this approach to the specific needs and character of the Gregory-Portland community. Parents, teachers, and district leaders contributed input to ensure the result wasn't imported, but homegrown and embedded in local values to remove barriers and develop a sense of local pride.

Their inspiration placed equity and inclusion at the center of decisions—as Mansfield ISD's students from bilingual campuses consistently excel compared to their peers. The building features dual-language signage to support this bilingual communication—

ensuring students feel supported and able to communicate and collaborate from day one.

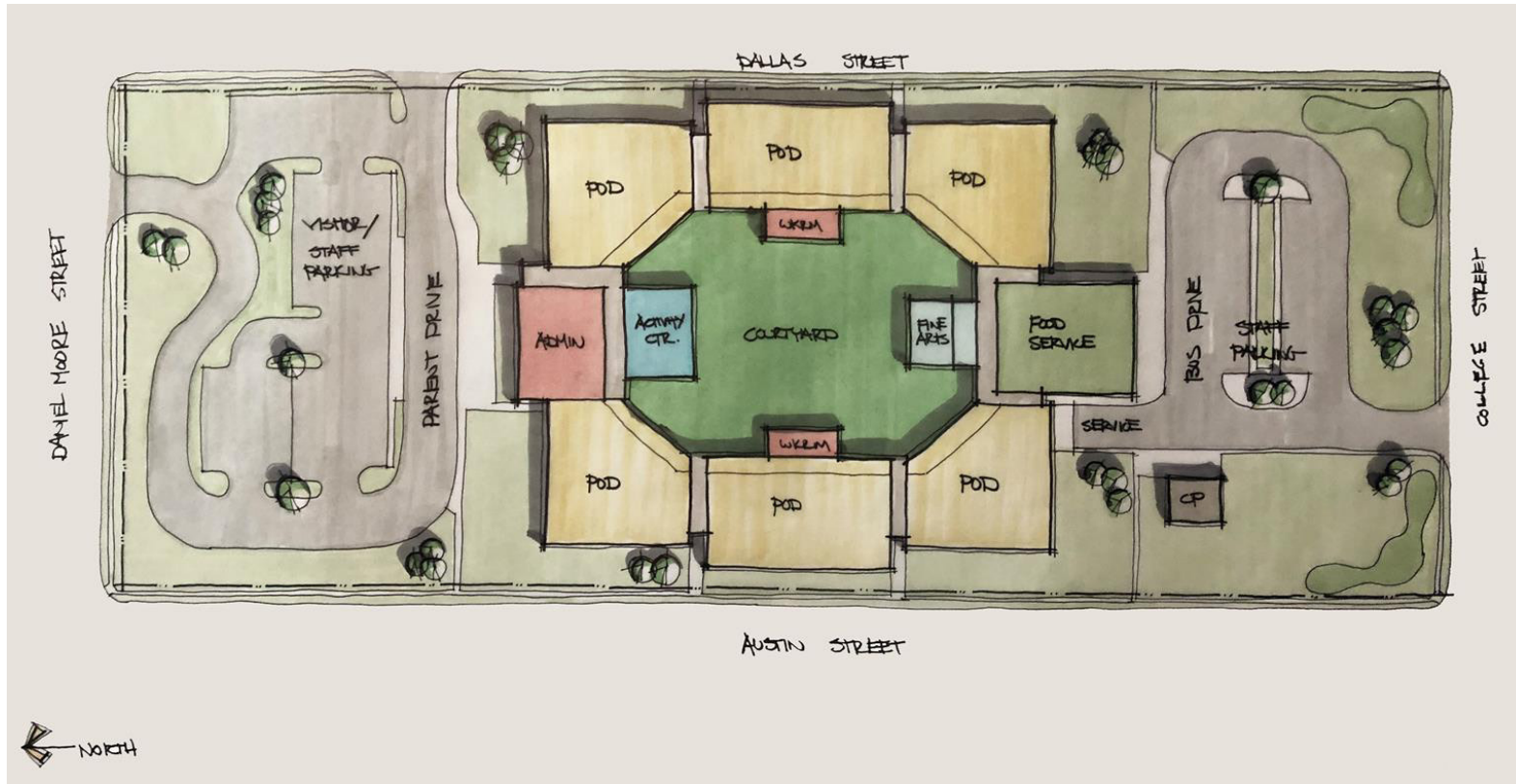
Even shared experiences like lunchtime were designed with equity in mind, with family-style dining encouraging more conversation and strengthening social-emotional development. A dedicated community room near the front of the building also supports this focus on connection—hosting welcome events, parent programs, and community meetings that deepen the school's role as a hub for family engagement.

The curriculum reinforces literacy and numeracy through real-world, hands-on experiences, helping close opportunity and vocabulary gaps that disproportionately affect underserved students. The emphasis on play-based, developmentally appropriate learning acknowledges the diverse ways children grow and thrive—ensuring no student is left behind.



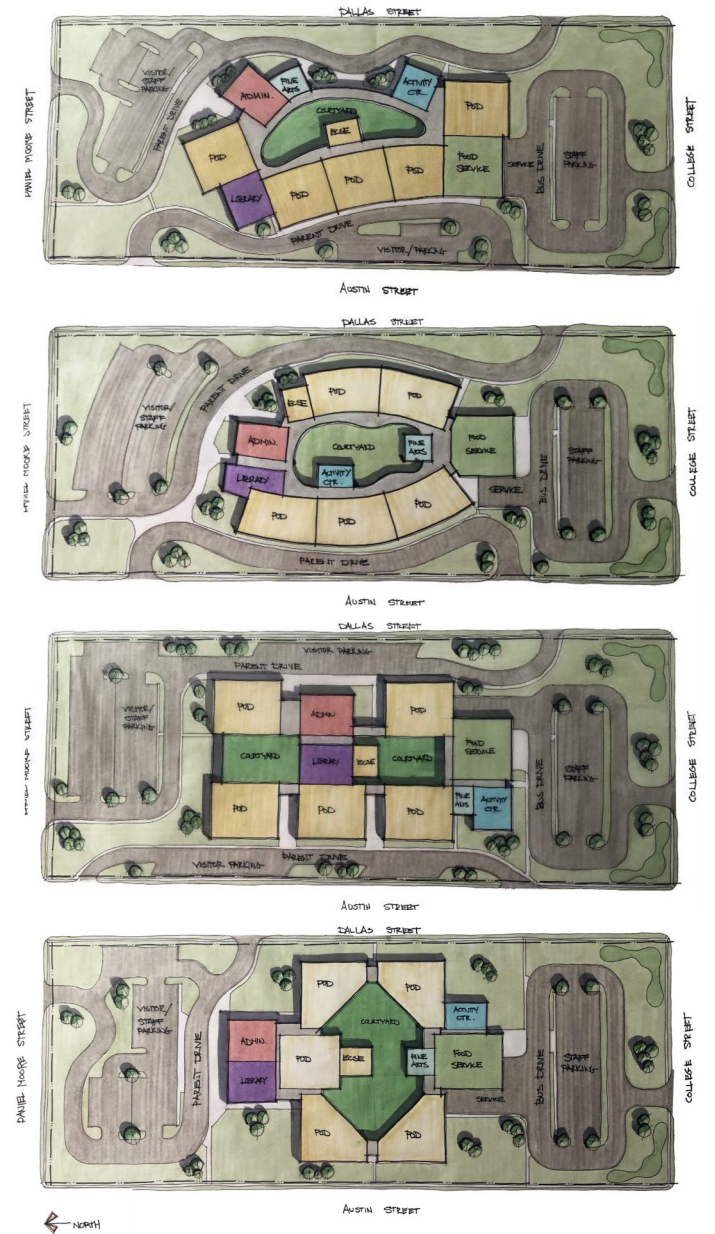
Together, these intentional design and instructional choices reflect a deep, community-driven commitment to meeting every child where they are.





Sketches

These sketches show the process of aligning educational goals with physical space. Each experiential pod contains unique, themed rooms and serves as a pedagogical tool that functions as a unified experience from day one. The project team worked with stakeholders to determine a layout that would engage and mirror the natural curiosity of young children as they transition between learning environments. The one-story building form not only maintains a scale appropriate to Pre-K and Kindergarten learners and its surrounding neighborhood, but also acts as a protective enclosure—serving as the fencing element for the secure central play area and buffering students from the strong coastal wind gusts.





Welcome to the Neighborhood

Maintaining the fabric of their neighborhood was paramount to the families attending the G-PISD Early Learning Center. Designed with respect for its setting, the facility maintains the scale and character of its surrounding residential area: the pitch of the roof line resembles a house, one-way roads reduce adverse traffic impacts on neighbors, and the team worked hard to design an exterior that did not look barren. Each feature works to deliver a natural, welcoming addition to the neighborhood.

Inside, the facility is organized into 18 immersive, themed experiential classrooms grouped into six themed neighborhoods, that reflect local culture, regional ecology, and everyday life—such

as "Our Gulf Coast," "Farm to Table," and "Let's Get Going." The building's radial design places the playground at its heart, symbolizing the central role of play in early childhood development. Each classroom pod is color-themed to help children navigate their space with ease, while the layout fosters flow and interaction.

The immersive spaces are more likened to miniature worlds rather than classrooms: curated with 3D objects, cozy nooks, and tactile elements that spark connection and curiosity. Every component, from layout to materiality, was chosen to immerse and welcome young learners, and to prepare them for the wider world.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Immersive Interest

The hands-on, minds-on environments empower children to actively engage with environments designed to resemble real world environments, but in lessons that develop literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning at a young age. Beginning their academic journey in these spaces is key to building a lifelong love of learning, creating excitement beyond what traditional configurations can deliver. Throughout the year, students rotate between classroom pods—getting the chance to experience each environment while also emphasizing the natural flow of the building's layout. Turning away from traditional educational delivery, the immersive environments build skills and interest in curriculum.

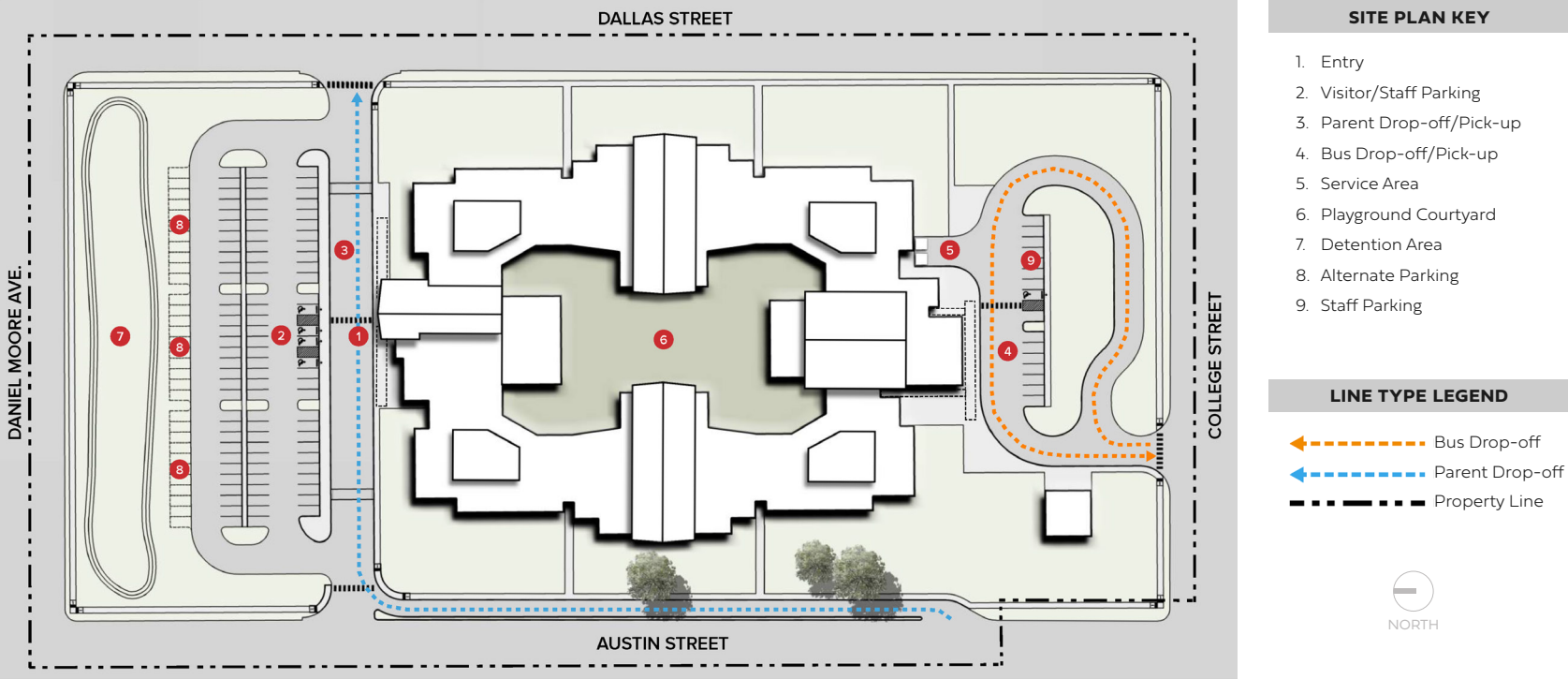
Classrooms are filled with tactile elements, flexible sensory supports, and custom educational materials to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities. Natural lighting, calming colors, and biophilia support student wellness, joining intentional inclusive programming to ensure every student thrives.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Center of Joy

Play is literally placed at the heart of the school, with the centrally located playground visible and accessible from all interior sides. Envisioned to complement the experiential learning space inside—the playground intentionally leaves more to the imagination, encouraging children to invent their own themes and activities. Its location embodies the belief that movement is essential to learning. The secure, enclosed access points allow students to safely transition between indoor and outdoor environments throughout the day and serve as a reminder that play *is* learning.



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Learners First

Recognizing students as the ultimate beneficiaries of their work, the district and team aligned on the clear and unwavering priority to put their little learners first. Every design move, every instructional strategy, and every operational decision centered on the belief that young children learn best through exploration, play, movement, and socialization.

Envisioned as not just a place for academics, but as a launchpad, the school meets children where they are developmentally, not just chronologically. The team invited students to draw their ideal learning environments—insights that directly shaped color selections and space types to promote inclusivity and allow the rainbow-colored space to reflect creativity and the full spectrum of childhood expression through interaction.

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“...these experiential environments give [kids] an opportunity to play and develop social skills and emotional skills that will carry them through for the rest of their lives.”

- Robin Rice, Early Childhood Center Principal



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



The Classroom is the Curriculum

As an early learning center, the environment is not a backdrop to instruction, it *is* the instruction. Every space was designed to directly align with the district's curriculum and instructional goals for Pre-K and Kindergarten learners. The thematic learning rooms provide experiential anchors and build background knowledge for content mastery, vocabulary acquisition, and place-based understanding.

Classrooms are desk-free, using a variety of table heights, seating arrangements, and open space to accommodate different modalities. The color-coded interior neighborhoods work with integrated pull-out rooms and shared common spaces to provide options for varying class sizes. Educators teach through play, movement, storytelling, or direct instruction—without needing to leave their core learning environment.





Hallways to Hubs

Hallways meander through the building's radial shape and the centralized courtyard, allowing for flexible programming and safe transitions between spaces. In both traditional classrooms and learning pods, furniture can be reconfigured, and classrooms open to adapt to student or curriculum needs. The amphitheater and cafetorium extend learning into performances or family engagement opportunities like movie nights.

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

From Abstract to Reality

Physical, experiential engagement solidifies new and abstract concepts by embedding them in exhibits where students can physically interact with them. Rather than reading out of a textbook, these concepts come to life as students role-play and explore them in theme-immersive environments. For example, in the “Farm to Table” room, students can play the roles of consumer and merchant at a play produce stand. Building this real-world connection deepens understanding and creates a school where kids want to be and learn.



GREGORY-PORTLAND EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER



JOURNEY IN TIME



RAINFOREST



INTERNATIONAL



CONSTRUCTION

Floor Plan

LEGEND

-  Pod Multi-Purpose Space
-  Exhibit Classroom
-  Traditional Classroom
-  Activity Room
-  Dining/Kitchen
-  Fine Arts
-  Administration



EARTH



OUR GULF COAST



FARM TO TABLE



GREENHOUSE

Setting the Standard

Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center fundamentally redefines early childhood education in the district by delivering on its goal to put learners first. Hands-on, exploratory learning is embedded into every room, ensuring student social development, movement, and communication skills are developed earlier and more intentionally.

Furthermore, the facility serves as a proof of concept. Its advancement of early learning standards and whole-child development has sparked broader district conversations about vertical alignment—especially as high school CTE pathways and early childhood spaces become more closely mirrored. Educators from across the district visit the campus to understand how the interactive environment can shape instructional delivery in future learning scenarios.





A Step Ahead

Purposefully designed for Pre-K to Kindergarten learners, Gregory-Portland Early Childhood Center builds foundational skills through immersive, vocabulary-rich environments that address the importance of early literacy gaps and support whole-child development. The experiential classrooms build children's understanding of their community and broader world and while engaging the curiosity-driven learning and social-emotional growth sought by the district and parents.

The school's model marks a shift in how educators approach instruction, with integrated special education and sensory support encouraging new pedagogical practices focused on inclusivity, interaction, and student-led learning. Early results report enhanced vocabulary and social skill development and the expectation these students will already be a step ahead academically and socially.



G-PISD voters pass \$205 million bond

The News of San Patricio | May 4, 2025 | Landan Kuhlmann



KRIS 6 NEWS
CORPUS CHRISTI

Gregory-Portland ISD passes \$176M school bond proposition

KRIS 6 News | May 7, 2023 | Sophia Englehart

Voters in Gregory and Portland have once again demonstrated their support of public education on Saturday, according to a press release from Gregory-Portland Independent School District.

Unofficial election results showing reasonable indication that a \$176 million school bond proposition has been **approved by approximately 65% (1,357 votes).**

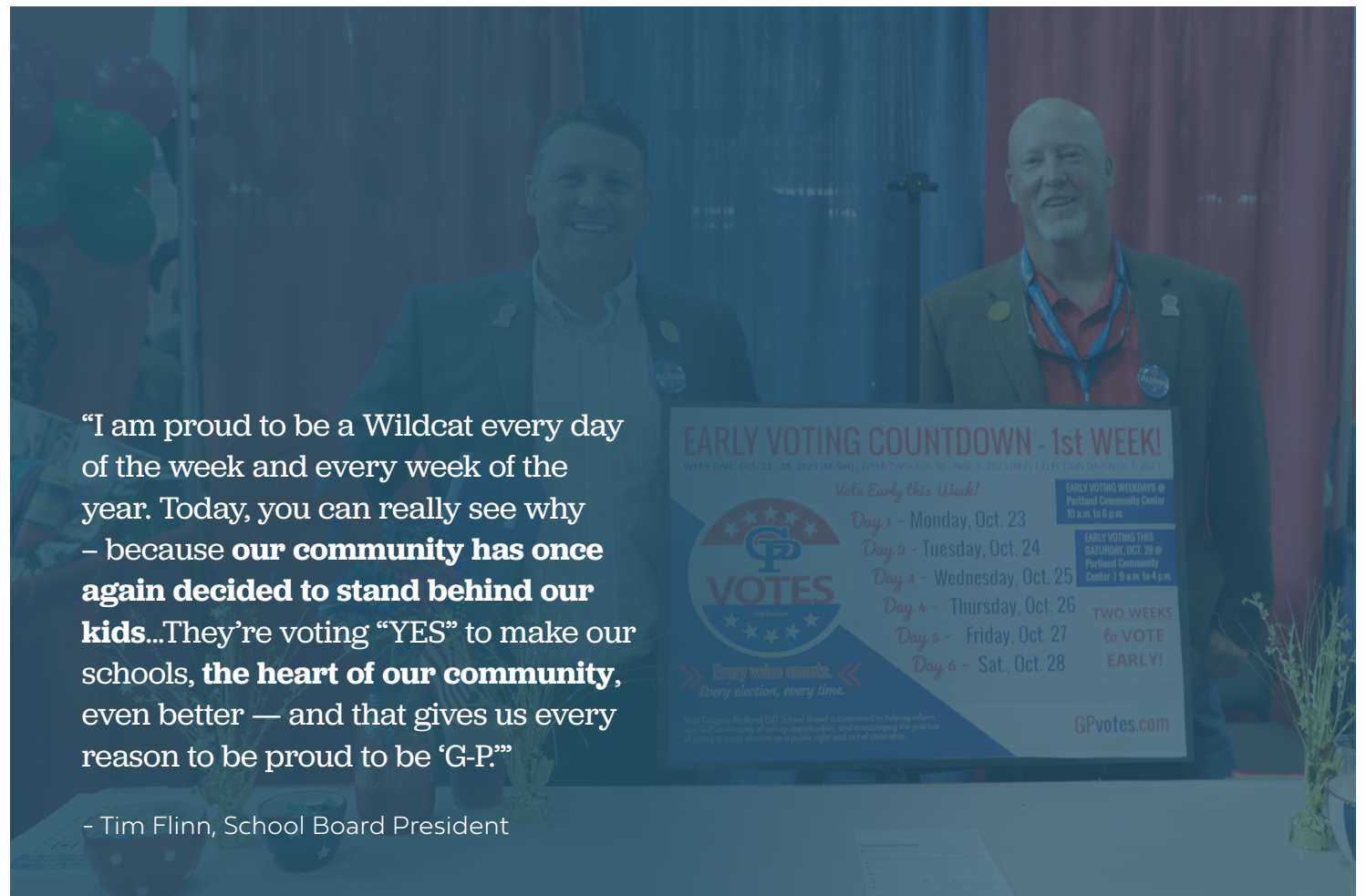
Prop C approves a rotation / replacement of technology and other technology equipment for district and school use, while Prop D will be for consideration of a district Visual & Performing Arts Academic Center.

San Patricio County recorded 2,092, thought likely some absentee ballots still have to be counted before the final results are compiled, the release states.

"We'd been hearing a lot of positive feedback in the last few weeks regarding this school bond. These election results reveal that **our community actively supports our students, staff, and the long-term advancement of public schools,**" Cavazos said. "With this support, we'll be able to access revenue generated for school bonds."

The bond will include the fund to fund several projects:

- **Adding hands-on learning opportunities at four GPISD elementary schools that are aligned with learning models at the new Early Childhood Center**
- Construction of a replacement campus, baseball and softball turf fields for T.M. Clark Elementary School
- Cafeteria renovations at two schools
- A new G-P High School band hall



“I am proud to be a Wildcat every day of the week and every week of the year. Today, you can really see why – because **our community has once again decided to stand behind our kids...They’re voting “YES” to make our schools, the heart of our community, even better — and that gives us every reason to be proud to be ‘G-P.’**”

- Tim Flinn, School Board President

District Vision

G-PISD’s theme to “wonder constantly” is exemplified in the Early Childhood Center, even becoming a catalyst for systemic change at the district. The facility’s early success moved voters to approve a 2023 bond to other elementary schools and initiate career exploration in their middle school—a direct investment in long-term academic continuity that aligns with high school CTE pathways.

A Foundation for Wonder

From the design charrette process to the first day of school, Gregory and Portland, Texas residents exemplified the sense of wonder that the Early Childhood Center now cultivates in its youngest learners. The school is a reflection of the community's vision—delivering a facility that serves as an extension of its neighborhood and local culture.

This co-authored vision established a shared investment in the future, and one that is encouraging the district to expand experiential learning across later grade levels. What began as a bold idea has since become new momentum and a model for equity, innovation, and early-childhood development for years to come.

