

# LEWIS C. CASSIDY ACADEMICS PLUS

**Philadelphia, PA**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Designed to set a **new standard** for education in Philadelphia, Lewis C. Cassidy Elementary School is a dynamic, LEED Gold-designed PreK-8 facility that supports 21st-century learning while fostering deep community connections. The 83,000-square-foot school serves 570 students and replaces an outdated early 20th-century building with a flexible, technology-integrated environment tailored for modern pedagogy.

The design overcomes the previous school's spatial and technological limitations by incorporating collaborative learning spaces, a central student common ("the canyon"), and a state-of-the-art media center. The layout **maximizes daylight**, improves circulation, and supports diverse learning styles with specialized STEAM-focused classrooms, maker spaces, and a discovery common. **Biophilic design** and intuitive color-coded wayfinding buttresses the welcoming, inspiring environment.

Outdoor areas extend learning **beyond the classroom**, with a biophilic playground, a green roof, and stormwater gardens that enhance sustainability and student wellness. **Community engagement** is central to the design, ensuring the school's assembly spaces, gymnasium, and outdoor areas serve as neighborhood assets.

By prioritizing inclusivity, sustainability, and innovation, Cassidy Elementary establishes itself as a "**school of choice**," shaping the future of education in Philadelphia while enriching the surrounding community.





## SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET

Design Capacity: **570 Students**

Building Area: **83,000 SF**  
(Replacing an existing 1924 school building.)

Key Features: **New Schoolyard & Playground**  
**LEED-Gold Facility**  
**21st Century Learning Spaces**

Construction Cost: **\$55.2M**



## KEY GOALS

■ Provide students with advanced educational opportunities and safe learning environments.

■ Create learning environments that support innovative approaches to instruction and promote collaboration and inclusion.

■ Provide spaces that allow for students to work and reflect quietly.

■ Create a new urban center that merges with the local community.

■ Elicit pride in students, parents, teachers and the community.

■ Optimize sustainable design and occupant wellness.





# SCHOOL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

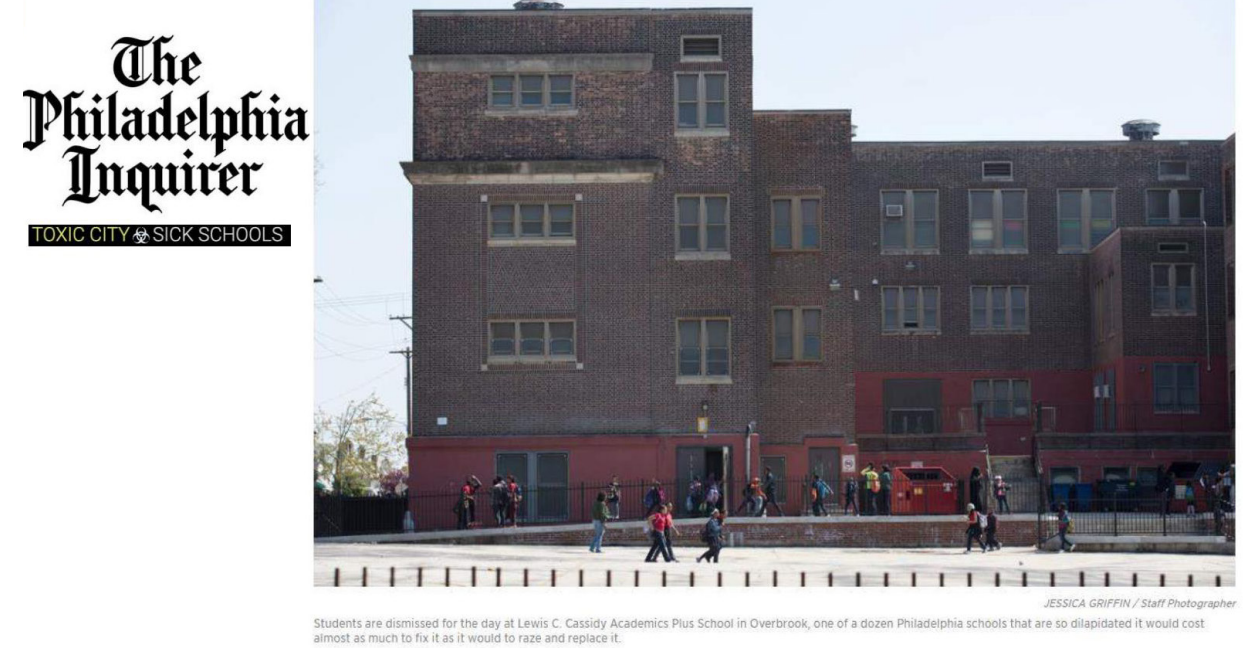
## Existing School Building

Built in 1924 the Colonial Revival building was added to the National Register of History Places in 1988. However, in more recently history the buildings condition worsened to a dangerous state. The existing Lewis C. Cassidy school was featured in a 2018 Philadelphia Inquirer article ‘Toxic City, Sick Schools’, in which the reporter outlines unsafe levels of lead, asbestos, and other harmful materials present in school buildings. In addition to the unsafe learning environments, the existing school building layout was not conducive to the 21st Century Learning standards that the School District of Philadelphia planned to implement throughout the district.

In preliminary studies the design team explored the possibility of renovating the existing facility. However, following conversations with the school district and surrounding community it became clear the best path forward was to start fresh with a brand new building.

“Perhaps the most toxic school in the Philadelphia system is an elementary school in Overbrook called Lewis C. Cassidy Academics Plus.”

-Philadelphia Inquirer, 2018 Article ‘Toxic City, Sick Schools’



## THE COMMUNITY

Lewis C. Cassidy Academics Plus School is located within the Overbrook Park neighborhood of West Philadelphia. With a catchment admissions system many members of the community are alumni of school. Their passion for their community & their students was at the forefront of every conversation.

The design team initiated the planning process in June 2020 during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite restrictions, the design team consistently engaged with SDP administrators, teachers, and community members through virtual meetings for two years. This collaborative approach ensured that the final design addressed diverse needs and reflected community values and aspirations. The outline below describe general organization of the virtual community meetings held throughout the design and documentation process:

### 1 Visioning Listening

The purpose of the visioning session was to listen & learn. This session was the first connection between the community and the design team. The community members were invited to share thier goals and priorities for the new school.

### 3 Programming Listening

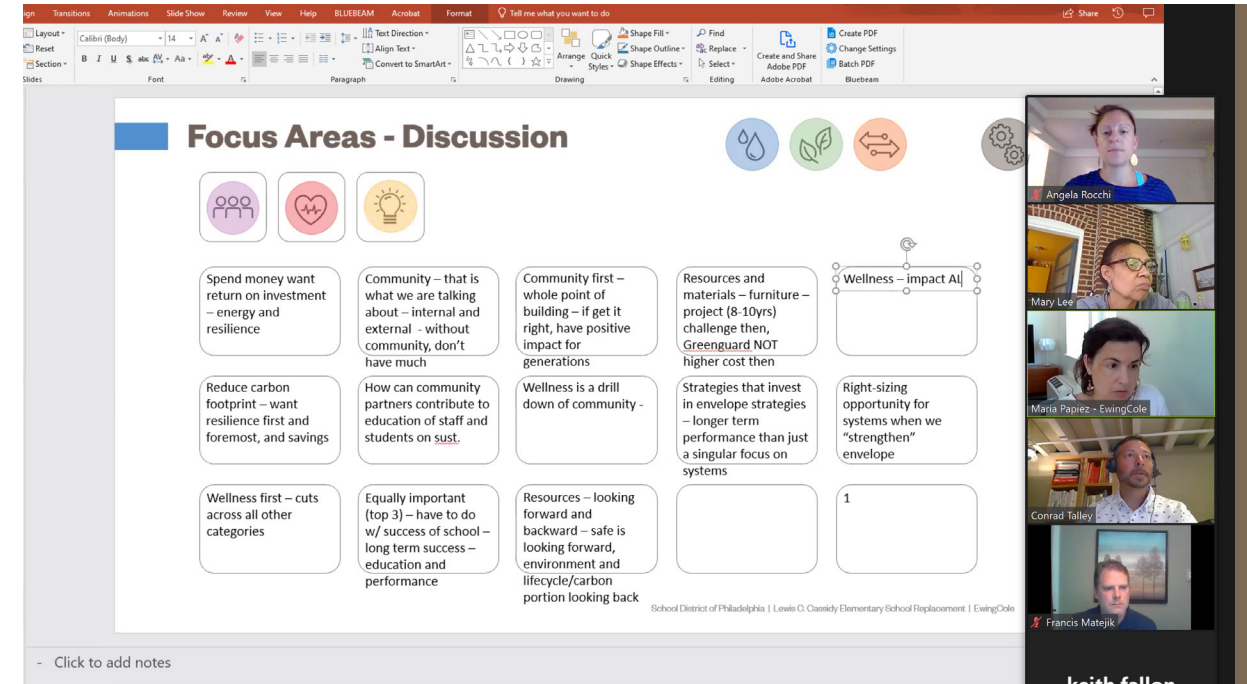
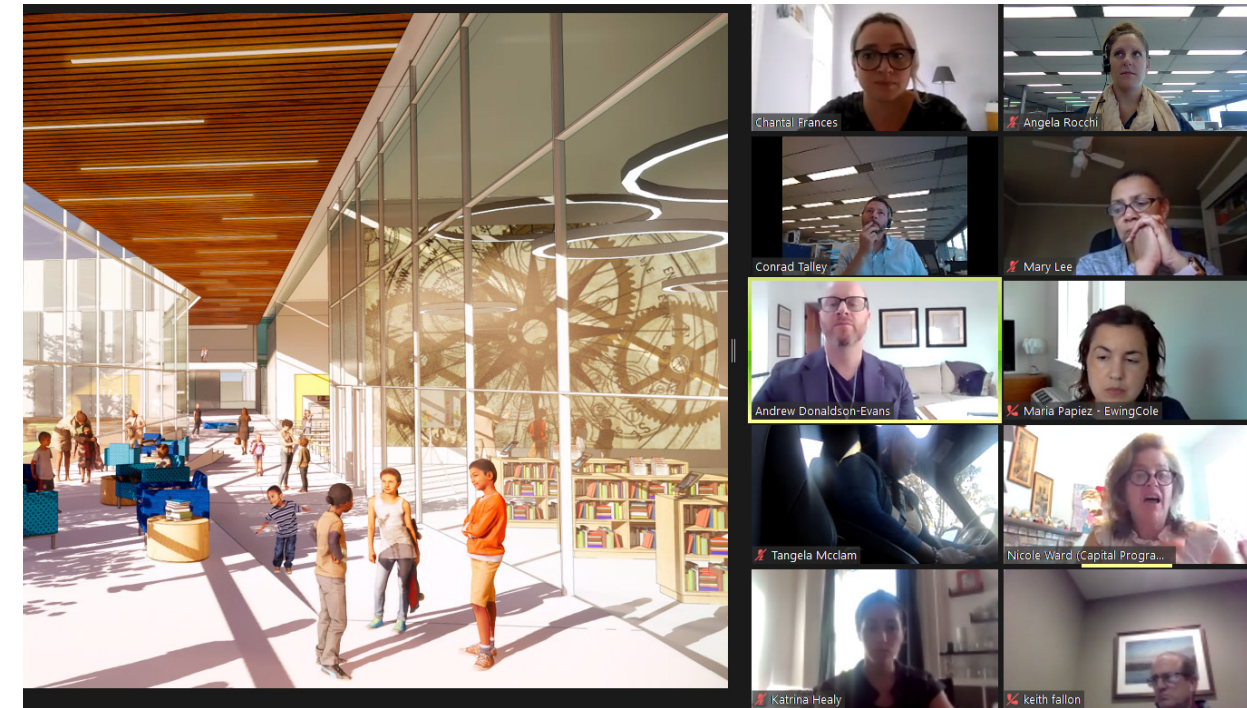
During programming the design team spearheaded a conversation focused on spaces targeted for community use during non-school hours. This conversation guided the design team in planning & programming these spaces to best serve the students and the community.

### 2 Site Organization Workshop

This session focused on site access and organization. The design team presented initial site plan configurations and invited the community members to share input & feedback.

### 4 Planning & Design Workshop

In these workshops the design team presented plans and renderings to the community members. The feedback recieved was then integrated into the final design.





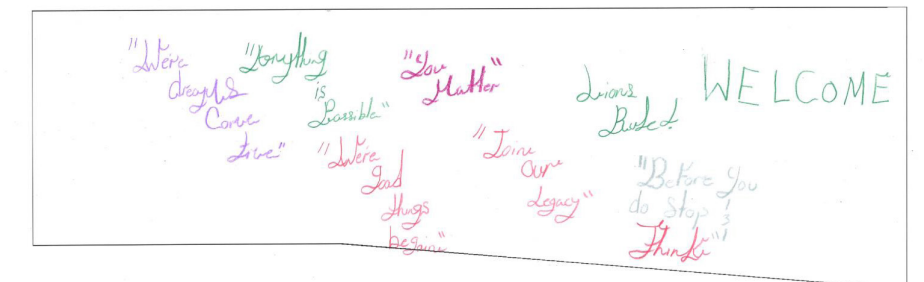
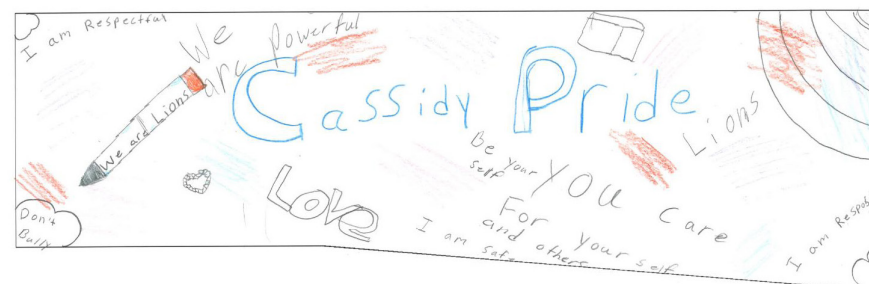
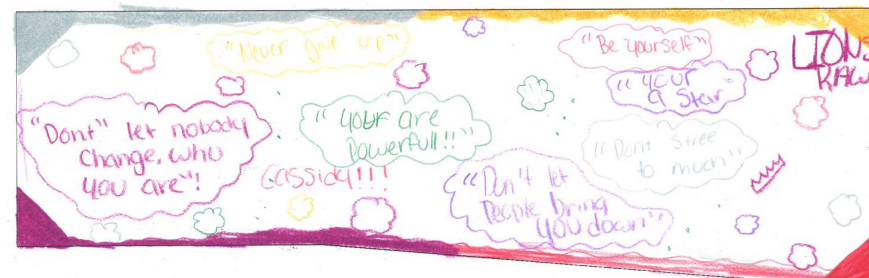
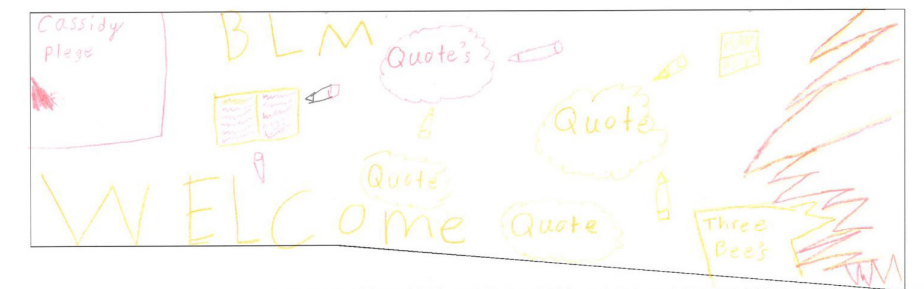


## THE STUDENTS

In 2017, a class of Cassidy fourth-grade students wrote letters to their local state representative regarding the conditions of their school building. One student in particular, Chelsea Mungo shared, "Every day I go to school, I feel like I'm in a prison or a junkyard."\* These letters encouraged local representatives to prioritize funding for a new school for Chelsea & her classmates. The photo included on the top left includes Chelsea Mungo and State Senator Vincent Hughes at the grand opening of the new Lewis C. Cassidy Elementary School in August 2024.

\*Quote provided via Philadelphia Inquirer

Understanding the impact the students had on bringing this project to life, the design team knew it was critical to have their input in the design. Following the virtual community focus group meetings the design team held an in-person design session with Cassidy students. This session focused on **graphic design and school pride**. The students were invited to sketch their ideas. This conversation brought to the forefront an interest in **words of affirmation** and positive language throughout the school. The design team integrated these ideas into the final design with experiential graphics and large format text throughout the building. Featured below are a few examples of the **students sketches** from the design workshop.





## SCHOOL PRIDE



■ Elicit pride in students, parents, teachers and the community.

The building exterior takes inspiration from neighboring brick and stone buildings, but it is designed to stand out as a landmark within the neighborhood to **encourage community use**.

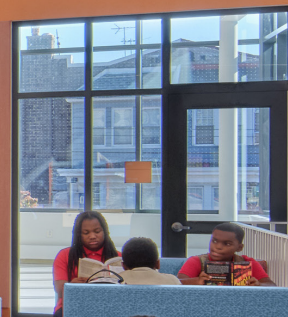
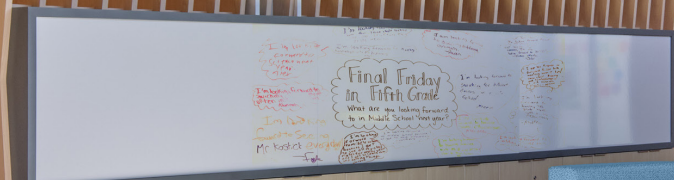
Featured on the Southwest corner facade is a mural of the Cassidy school logo, a pride of lions. The design is painted onto the brick allowing it to both seamlessly blend in with the adjacent facade and also stand out as a **beacon of school pride**.







I AM WORTHY  
WE ARE LEADERS  
I BELIEVE IN MYSELF



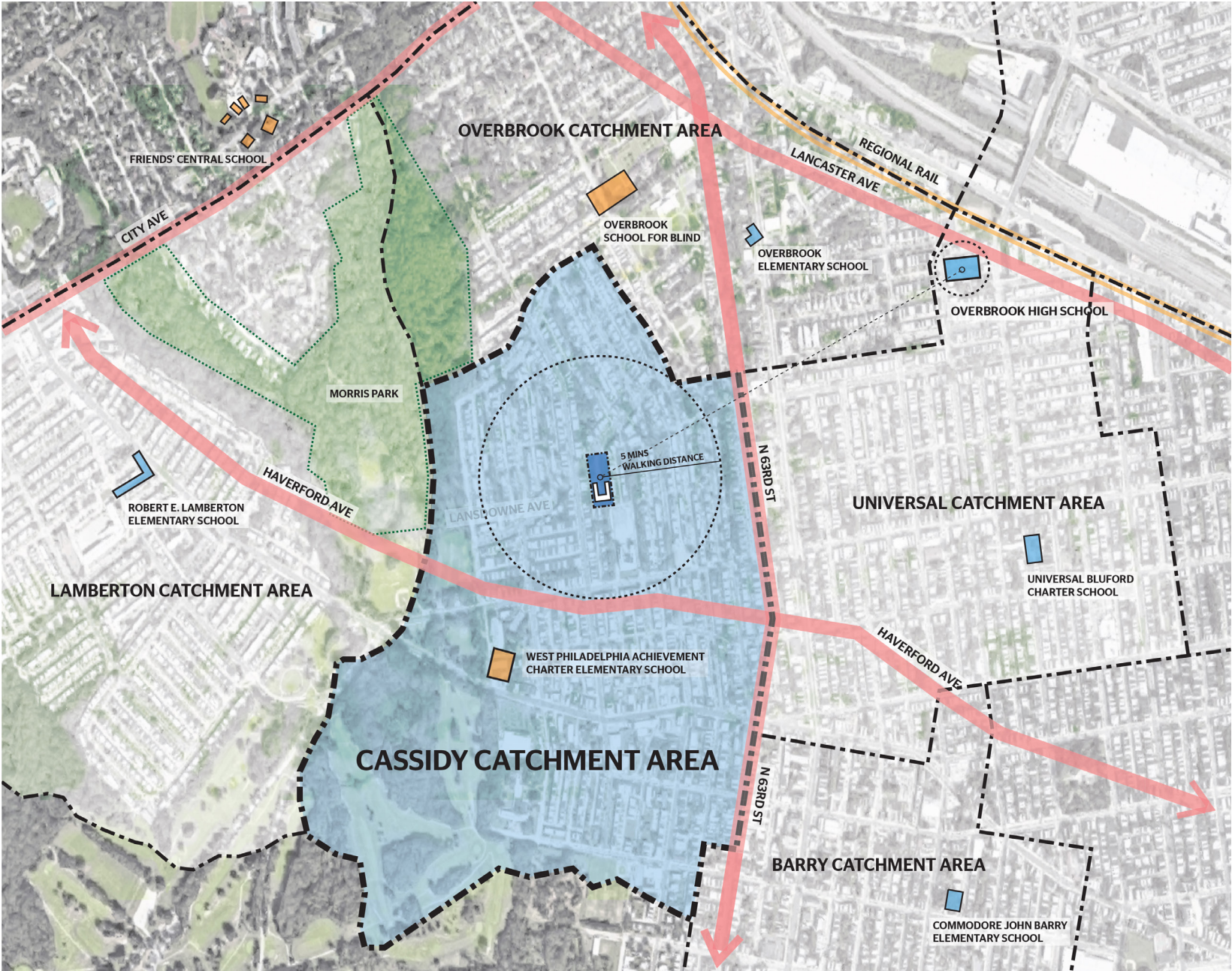
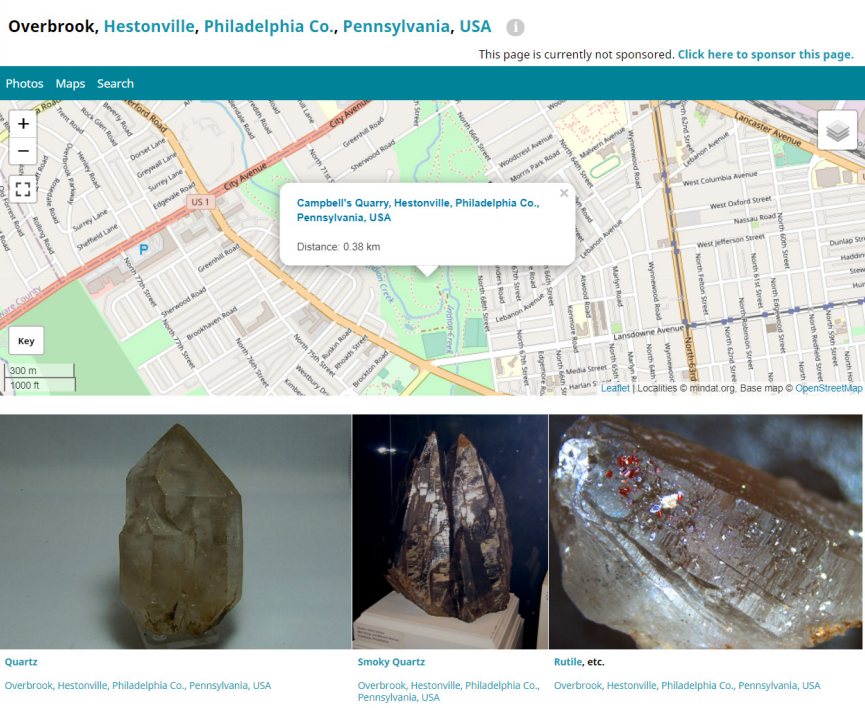
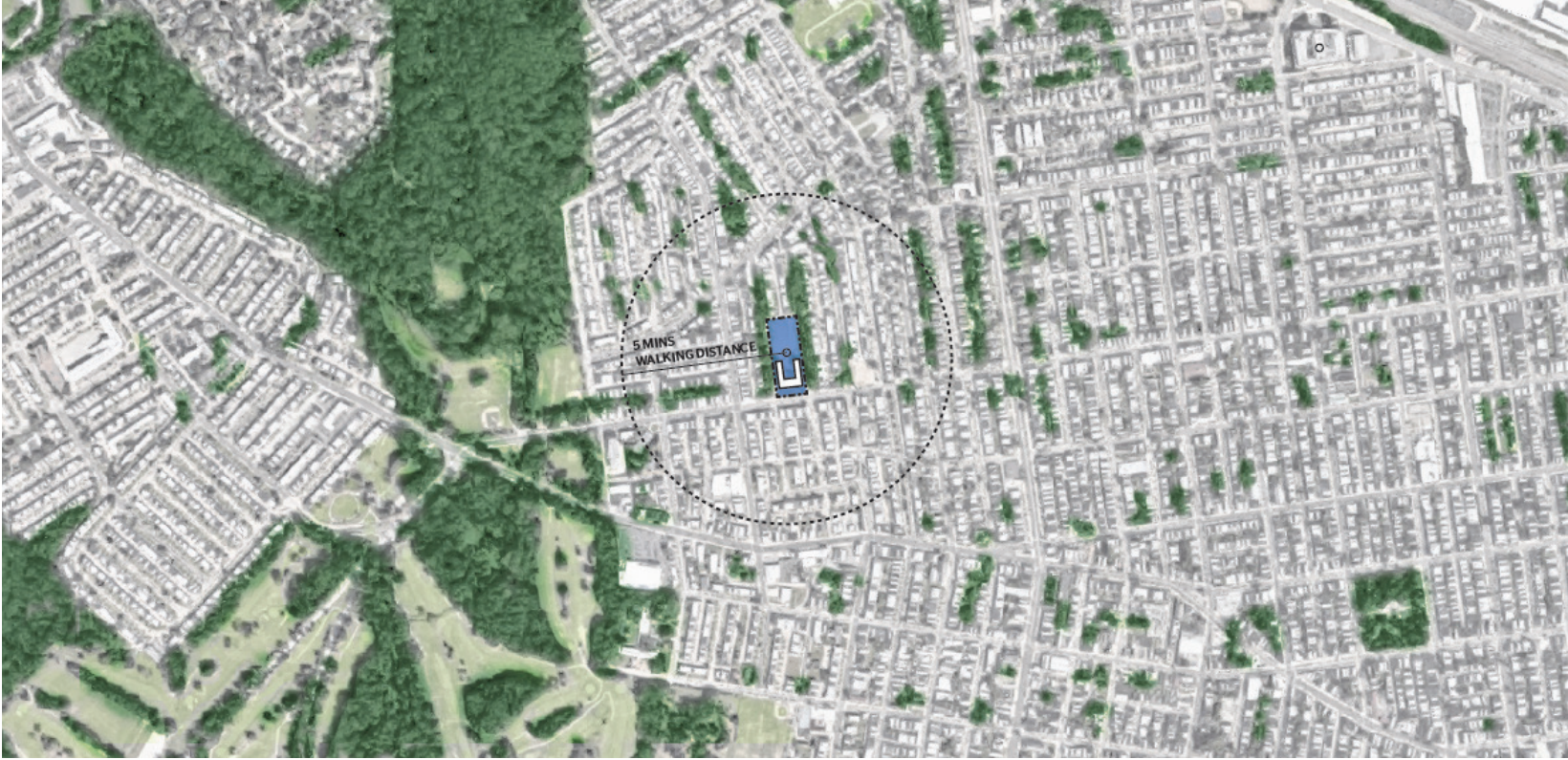


# PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The school is set back from Lansdowne Avenue, reducing its apparent scale amidst the adjacent houses and preserving usable outdoor space. This thoughtful placement integrates the school into the community while **providing a safe inner play area for students**. Careful attention to site identity and viewsheds ensures that the school is perceived as a welcoming and **integral part of the neighborhood**, with open sightlines creating safe and nurturing outdoor spaces.

The site design ensures access for all users, with pathways connecting the school to local transit stops and accommodating both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The schoolyard and parking areas are inclusive, featuring ADA-compliant pathways and play equipment to ensure that all students can participate in outdoor activities.

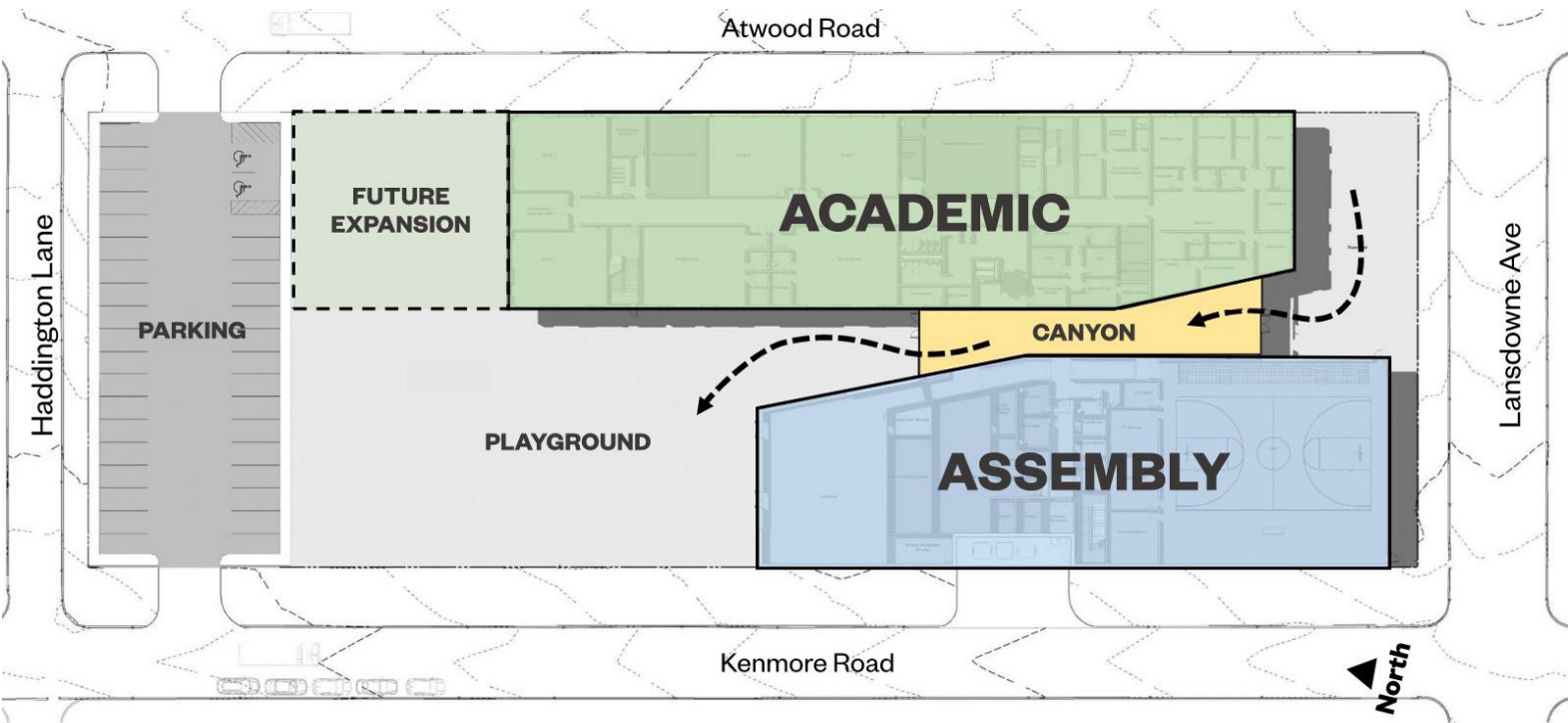
The site is nestled between expansive greenery of Morris Park and the city-scape of West Philadelphia. The split-volume massing references back to a historic quartz quarry of Morris Park. The Cassidy exterior design mimics a cut quartz stone with a muted exterior and a vibrant interior. This allows for a blend of subtle, grey brick facing the community, and playful & colorful metal panel facing the school yard.



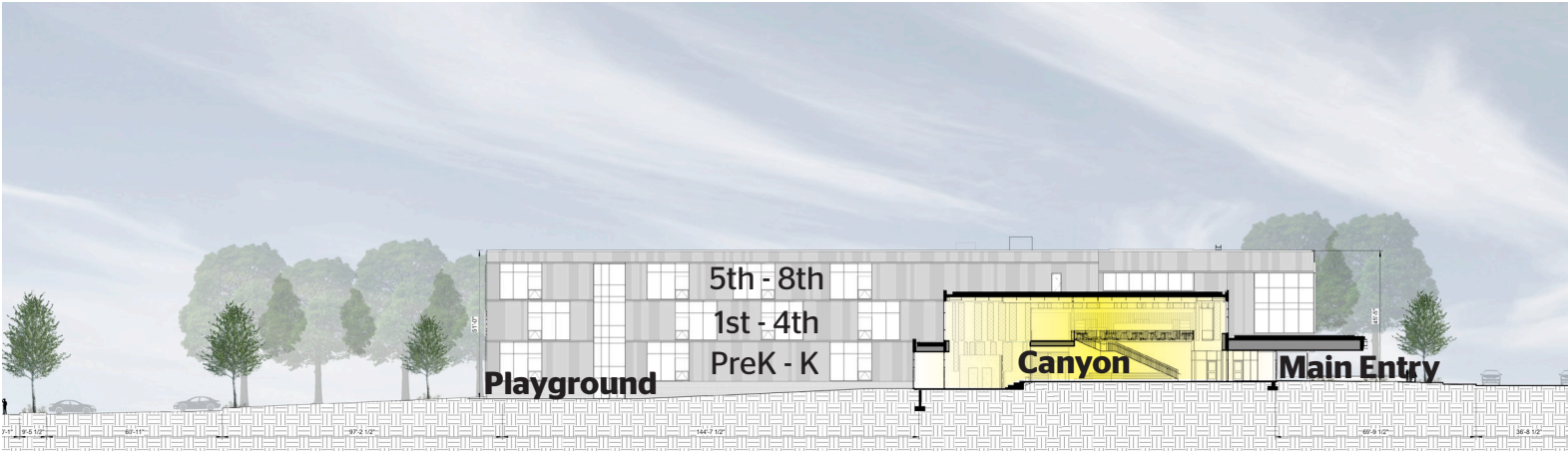


# BUILDING & SITE ORGANIZATION

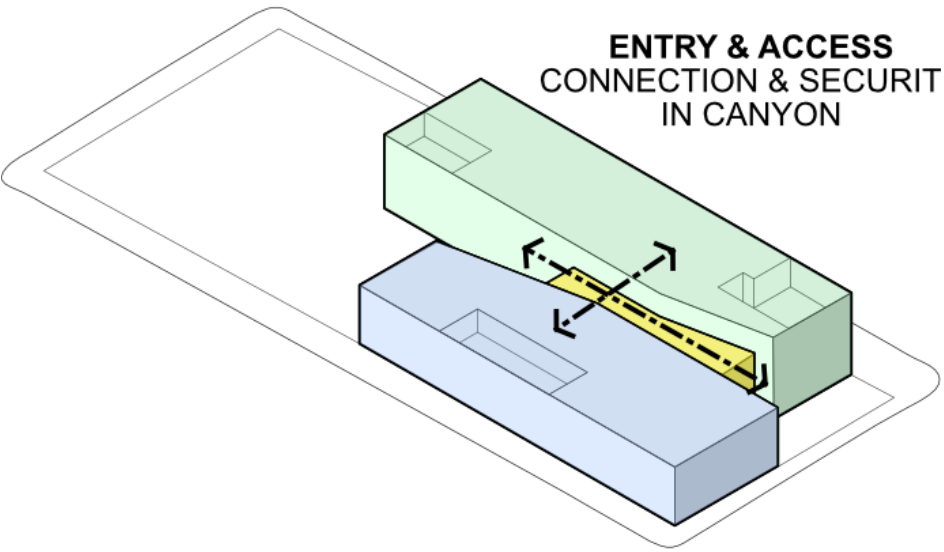
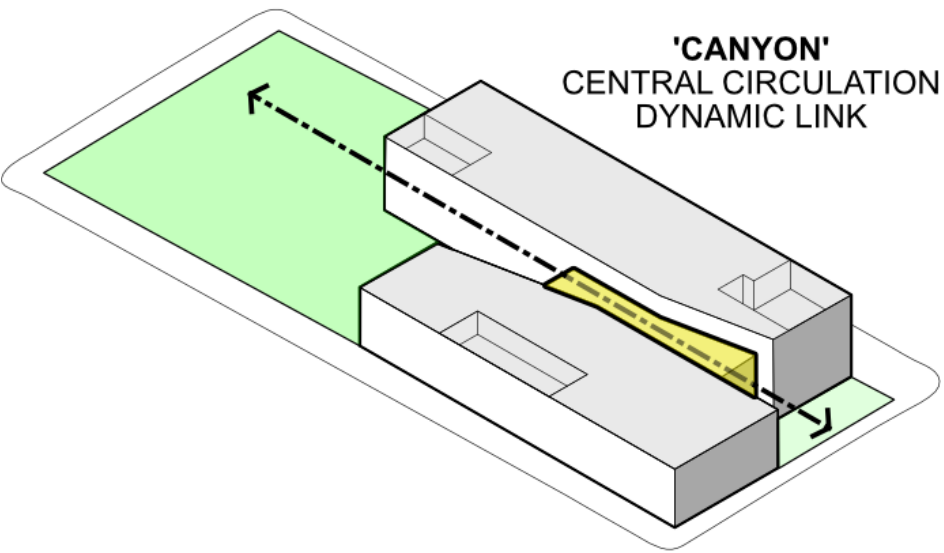
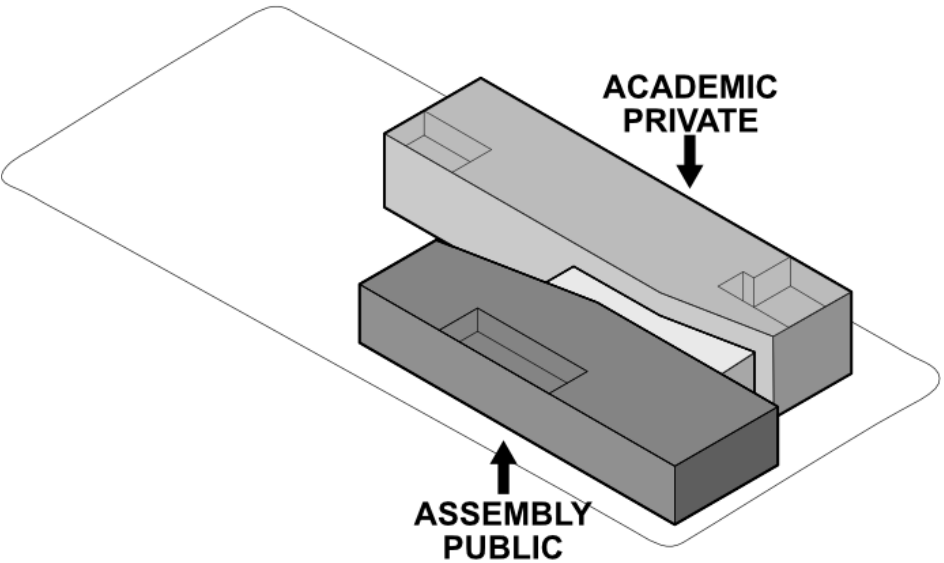
The new school is comprised of two offset volumes, housing primary academic and assembly spaces respectively, and joined by a dynamic, central student commons dubbed the “canyon”. The building mass, designed to maximize exterior landscape and minimize the impact to the surrounding residential neighborhood, offers a small front yard at the main entry and a playground paired with a student entry. Locating the assembly spaces, the gymnasium and cafeteria, on the ground floor of the west volume allows for easy access for community use during non-school hours while keeping the remaining areas in the school building locked and secured.



Program Organization



Building Section

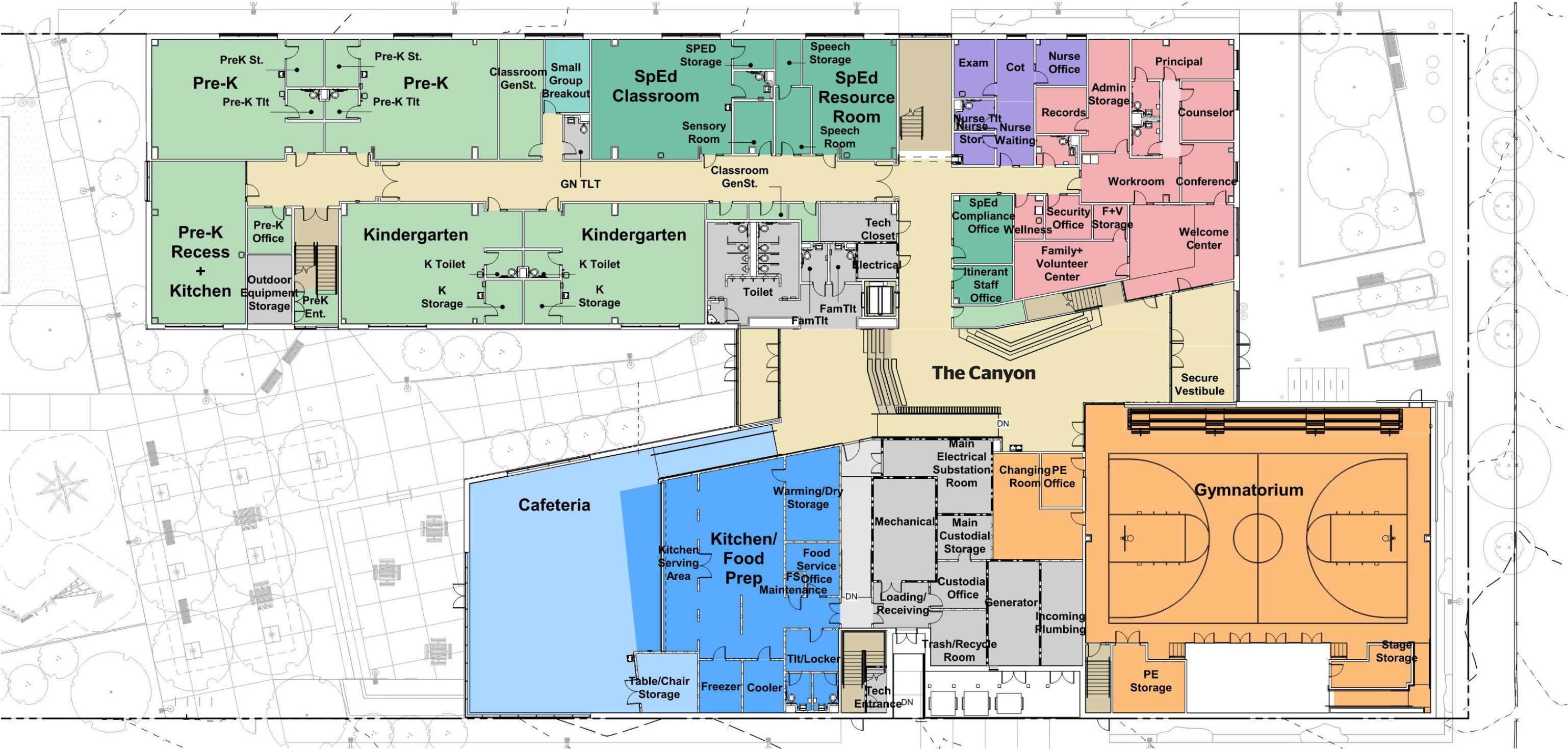




# LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

## First Floor

Public and schoolyard entryways anchor either end of the central student commons, with its two-story volume and winding stairs and ramp that cascade through its length. An overlooking open collaboration and ad-hoc gathering space animate circulation through the **heart of the school**. Spaces such as a cafeteria and a gymnasium/auditorium, stepping down across the sloped site, are directly accessible to students of all ages as well as the wider neighborhood for community events and activities. The school's "canyon" commons serves as its central gathering space, promoting collaboration and spontaneous interaction. This dynamic, two-story space connects academic areas with assembly zones, fostering community engagement. The design prioritizes safety and security through thoughtful planning. Open sightlines throughout the building and grounds enhance natural surveillance and mitigate risk. Spaces encourage positive social interaction, reducing behaviors such as bullying. Controlled entry points and secure pathways protect students while maintaining accessibility for community use.



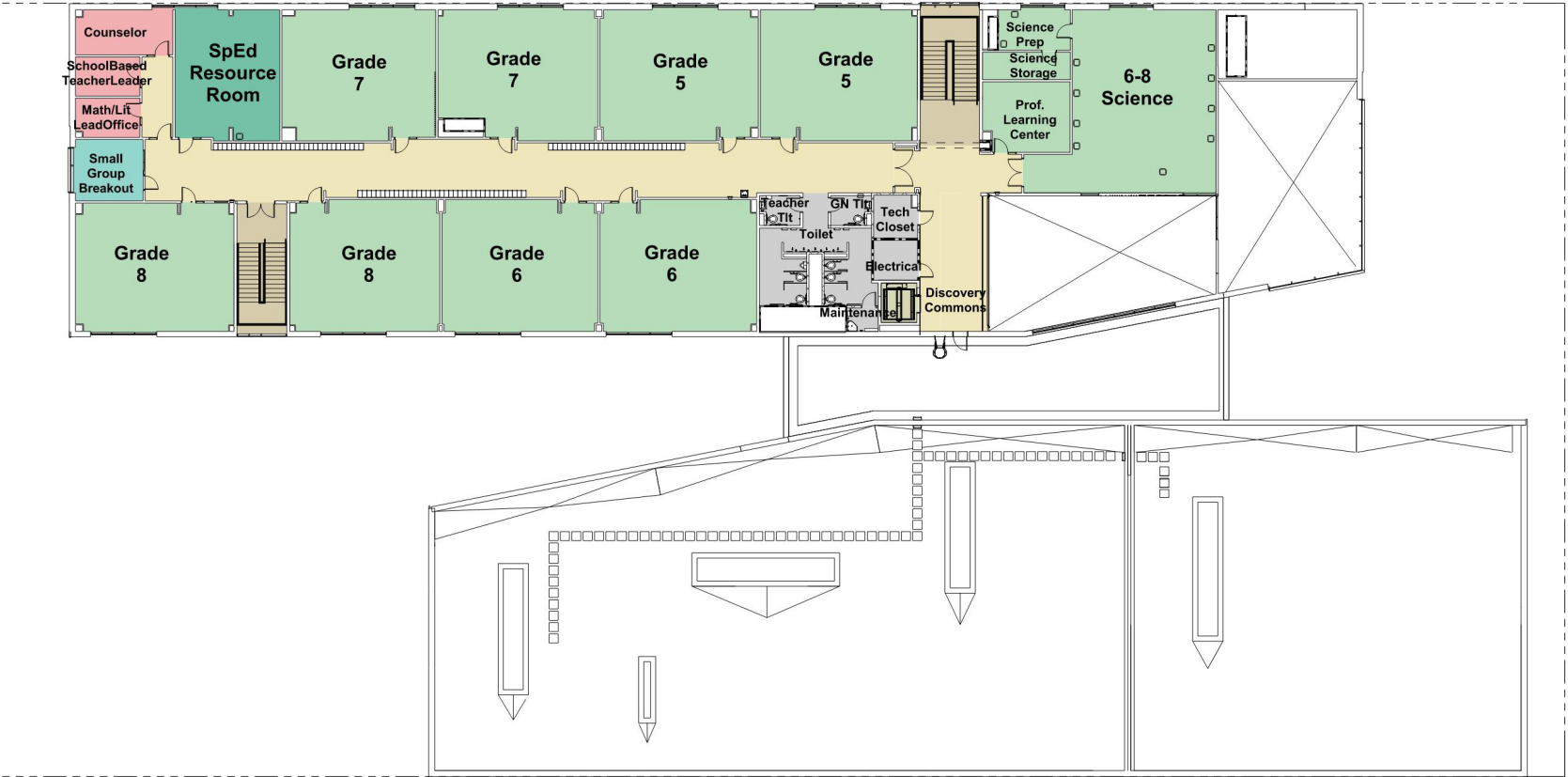


Second Floor

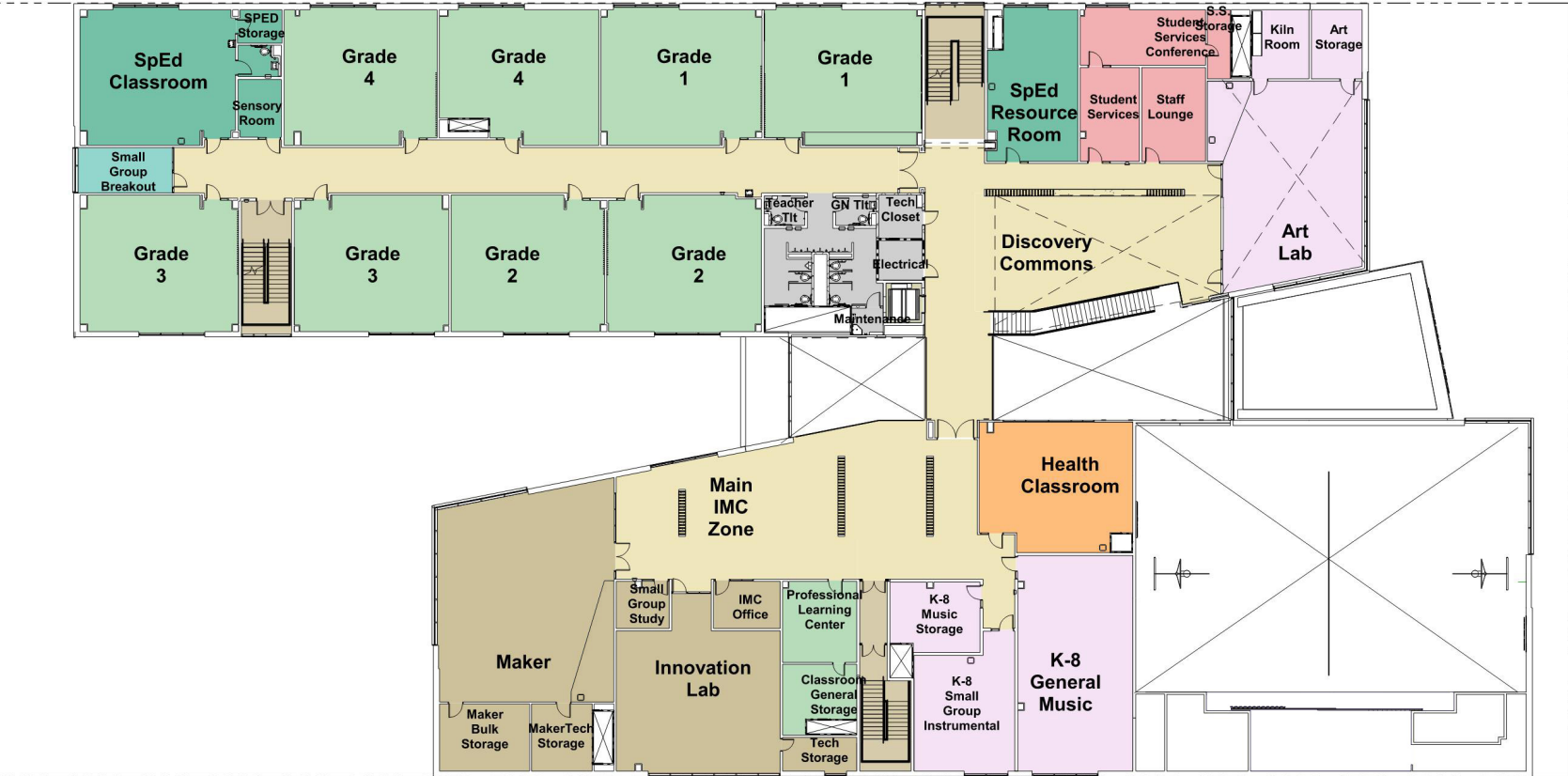
At the second floor a circulating stair connects the Canyon with highly collaborative learning spaces. The Discovery Commons and Media Center bridge across the Canyon space and act as links across the two main building volumnes. These open, collaborative spaces include custom millwork and seating to accommodate multiple scales and styles of learning. The Discovery Commons is a double height space that also acts as a link to the art room and the graded classrooms. The Media Center connects the Maker Space, Innovation Lab, Music rooms, and Health classroom.

Third Floor

The third floor is dedicated to the middle school students. In addition to graded classrooms this floor has a new state-of-the-art science lab. Flexible learning zones are included at the north and south end of the middle school volume with overlooks of the playground and the Discovery Commons.



3rd Floor Plan



2nd Floor Plan



“We created a dynamic and adaptable learning environment that can easily accommodate changing pedagogical requirements. Meticulous attention to detail ensures that every aspect of the design contributes to the overall excellence of the learning environment.”

- Keith Fallon, RA, Education Planner





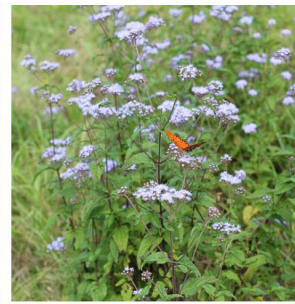
## SCHOOLYARD & PLAYGROUND



*Echinacea purpurea* 'Inferno Orange'  
Purple Coneflower



*Eryngium yuccifolium*  
Rattlesnake Master



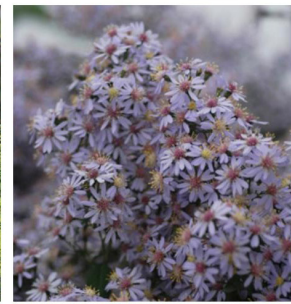
*Eupatorium coelestinum*  
Blue Mistflower



*Heuchera villosa* 'Autumn Bride'  
Hairy Alumroot



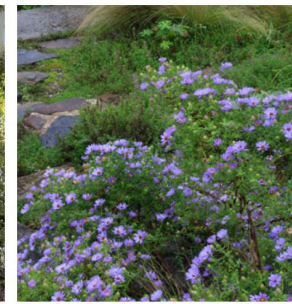
*Amsonia hubrichtii*  
Threadleaf Bluestar



*Aster cordifolius* 'Avondale'  
Common Blue Wood Aster



*Aster divaricatus* 'Eastern Star'  
White Wood Aster



*Aster oblongifolius* 'October Skies'  
Aromatic Aster

Optimize  
sustainable design  
and occupant  
wellness.



### Key Exterior Design Features

- Bioswale, raingarden, and green roof to reduce stormwater runoff
- Educational Signage to foster a deeper understanding of nature
- Accessibly playground equipemnt for all to use and enjoy
- Tiered Steps from Cafeteria to accommodate outdoor learning
- Multiple surface types for flexible play
- Minimize parking to maximize outdoor SF/student







## EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Cassidy Academic Plus supports 21st Century Learning, an approach emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Technology-integrated classrooms enhance modern pedagogies and accommodate future advancements. Specialized spaces offer hands-on and experiential learning opportunities, including a maker space, media center, discovery commons, and visual arts room. Flexible interiors, enriched by vibrant, biophilic design elements, promote engagement and well-being. Daylit spaces encourage focus and collaboration, creating a positive and inspiring learning atmosphere.

The architectural and interior designs create a stimulating and nurturing environment that supports diverse learning styles and activities. Natural light, flexible spaces, vibrant colors, and biophilic materials elements contribute to the physical and mental well-being of students, fostering a positive learning atmosphere. The school follows SDP's 2020 Educational Facility Guidelines, part of Philadelphia's goal of providing educational equity for students across all neighborhoods in the city. Learning environments are equipped with current technology infrastructure and prepared for future upgrades and changes as technology evolves. Classroom environments are carefully designed for optimal student performance by using optimized building systems for lighting, ventilation, and acoustics. Safety and security are given paramount importance, with evidence-based planning and design approaches incorporated to help mitigate behavior such as bullying that can have adverse impacts on learning and safety.

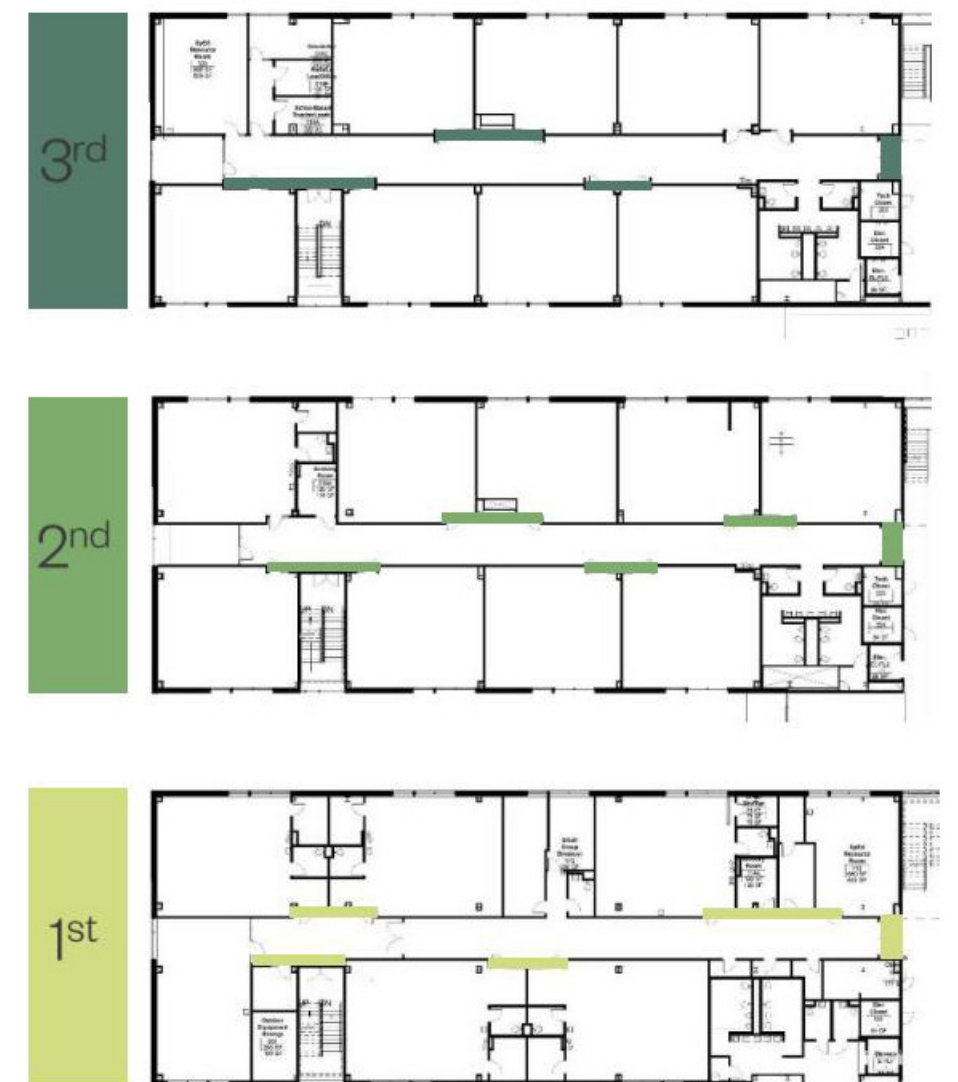
■ Provide spaces that allow for students to work and reflect quietly.







The interior design uses color for wayfinding and references nature to create an inspiring, modern, and comfortable place to learn, gather, and play. With class grades ranging from Pre-K to 8th grade stacked in three floors it was critical to create a sense of change from floor-to-floor. The design of the classroom wing utilizes three shades of green, ranging from a playful, vibrant shade at the ground floor for PreK & K, to a muted forest green at the middle school level.







Create learning environments that support innovative approaches to instruction and promote collaboration and inclusion.





## RESULTS OF THE PROCESS & PROJECT

### ■ Create a new urban center that merges with the local community.

- The Gymnatorium is situated adjacent to the main entry, allowing ease-of-access for off-hours use.
- The state-of-the-art Gymnatorium is equipped with technology and lighting to accommodate school and community functions.
- Corner glazing in the Cafeteria offers expansive views of the neighborhood & playground, including large street-tree's that surround the site.
- Wall graphics in the Cafeteria feature healthy food icons, an idea brought forth by Cassidy students in workshop with the design team.







■ Provide students with advanced educational opportunities and safe learning environments.







“He’s going to be safe here, I feel proud to send him here.”

- Zachary Williams, Father  
Quoted in the Philadelphia Inquirer



