

Magnolia Speech School

MADISON, MISSISSIPPI



JAMES D. MACCONNELL AWARD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Magnolia Speech School undertook a transformative redesign of its campus to better support children with a wide range of communication disorders and sensory needs. Guided by its mission to empower these students, the school was reimagined as a multi-sensory, accessible, and calming environment—one that supports diverse challenges without overwhelming or excluding any child.

To bring this vision to life, the Executive Director and select Board members—including alumni and parents—partnered with a specialized design team. Together, they created a campus equipped to serve its exceptional learners, dedicated educators, and an expanding community.

Design goals for the new Magnolia Speech School included:

Multi-Sensory and Differentiated Learning Environments

Recognizing the wide spectrum of challenges students face—from sensory sensitivities to academic readiness—the school was designed as a flexible, supportive environment. Every space was thoughtfully crafted to promote individualized instruction and accommodate varied sensory needs, ensuring every child can engage, learn, and thrive.

Acoustic Optimization for Auditory Learning

Because Magnolia students process spoken language differently from their neurotypical peers, the school was designed with a strong emphasis on speech intelligibility. Every space prioritizes sound clarity—amplifying the auditory signal while minimizing background noise—to enhance communication and learning outcomes.

A Community-Focused Atmosphere

Beyond academics, Magnolia fosters strong family involvement and community connection. The campus includes welcoming, inclusive areas where families can learn strategies to support their children at home. A state-of-the-art clinic was also incorporated, providing therapeutic services not only to students and their families but to the broader community as an outpatient resource.



“This was not one person designing a school. This was multiple people — teachers, parents, grandparents, architects, and our construction company. Everybody, they’ve just known what a special project this is.”

- Valerie Linn, Former Executive Director



OWNER
Magnolia Speech School



PROJECT TYPE
New Construction



PROJECT COST
\$13,000,000



STUDENT CAPACITY
110



LOCATION
Madison, MS



BUILDING AREA
29,838 SF



OCCUPANCY DATE
August 2022



AGES SERVED
1-12 YEARS

THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Magnolia supports children ages 1 to 12 with neurological disorders affecting hearing, speech, and communication. Most attend for two to five years before transitioning to mainstream schools. The school offers individualized instruction in a highly diverse environment designed to build speech, language, and social skills. With customized programs for each student, Magnolia nurtures each child's growth through collaboration among teachers, therapists, families, and staff. The architecture promotes connection and exploration, reflecting the school's inclusive ethos. A wide network of stakeholders—from families to medical and educational professionals—helps reinforce Magnolia's mission of whole-family support and lasting impact.



“We are so very grateful for our building; the details, the location, the environment, the culture of hope, love, and acceptance that you feel when you enter through our doors.”

– Leatha Phillips, Interim Executive Director

VISIONING FOR THE FUTURE

Designing a diverse array of specialized spaces for learning, therapy, and play required close, ongoing collaboration with Magnolia’s skilled teachers and therapists. Even seemingly standard elements like a teaching wall—demanded in-depth, hands-on sessions with educators across developmental age groups to fully understand the tools and techniques they use to reach children with sensory challenges.

Through collaborative sketching, role-playing, and 3D visualization, we refined not only the design but a shared understanding of what truly works. These immersive, iterative workshops became the rhythm of the project—deepening communication not only between us and the school, but within the school community itself.



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Over time, visits sparked new conversations and ideas that carried forward between meetings and across disciplines. School leaders have shared that this process helped foster a more open, creative culture among faculty, bridging divisions that once existed between separate wings in their former building.



“I don’t think that any other school could have done for me what Magnolia did for me and others that go there!”

- Andrew Bell, Magnolia Speech School Alumnus

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

Early in the programming sessions, the design team and stakeholders arrived at a critical working definition of attention: the brain's ability to focus on signal amid sensory noise. This became the cornerstone of the design strategy—to elevate sensory signal and minimize sensory noise wherever possible.

This approach shaped every aspect of the school's design and has proven remarkably adaptable, supporting a wide range of educational methods beyond the original program. Notably, the school has since expanded its services to include children with dyslexia—demonstrating the building's usefulness in accommodating needs well beyond the speech and hearing conditions it was initially designed to address.

The new facility also actively fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion. Diversity is strengthened by the school's role as a welcoming community anchor—bringing families together through events, fostering connections across backgrounds, and creating a sense of belonging for everyone who walks through its doors. Equity through accessibility was a guiding principle: universal design elements like wide hallways, sensory-friendly materials, and flexible classroom layouts ensure all students—regardless of physical ability or learning style—can participate fully.

In the classroom, this commitment to equity is further expressed through the strategic use of differentiated spatial zones. Teaching walls were designed to be visually calm and focused to support direct instruction, while the rear of each room—filled with natural light from expansive glazing—offers a more visually engaging setting. This purposeful contrast creates intuitive zones within each space, making classrooms more responsive to different types of learners and enabling individualized support in a shared environment.

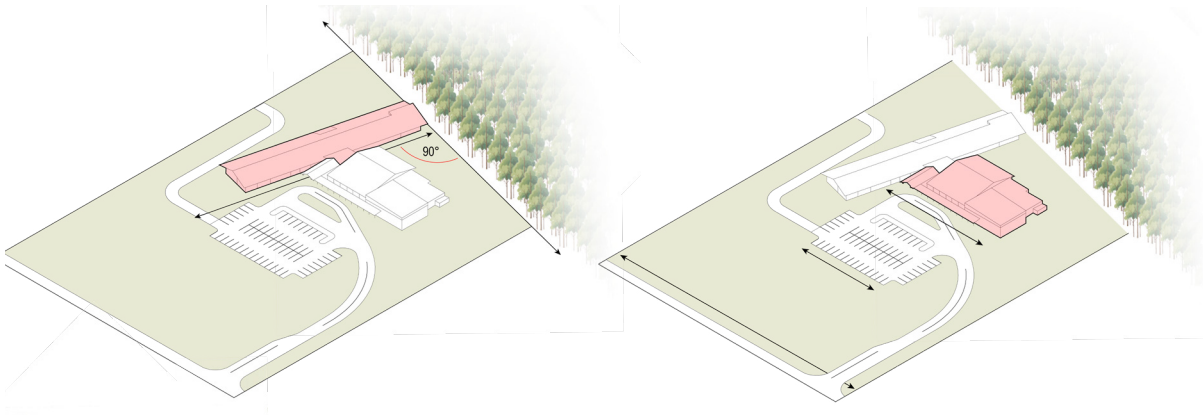
Inclusion through design is evident in features that support neurodiverse learners, including quiet zones, visual wayfinding, and acoustic control, while encouraging interaction and connection among students, teachers, therapists, and families. Finally, opportunity through equity is made possible through donor-supported tuition assistance and a clear investment in underserved communities, ensuring that students from all backgrounds have access to the same high-quality educational environment.



SITE CONTEXT

To reduce environmental noise, the school was placed as far from the road as possible—tucking it into the pine forest and opening up unique design opportunities and scenic views. Its exterior walls use insulated concrete forms (ICF), a system that combines mass and insulation to provide superior soundproofing over traditional construction.

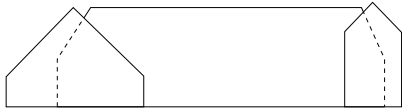
Magnolia sits where rural and suburban landscapes meet, surrounded by pine forests, churches, and family homes—fostering a sense of openness and community.



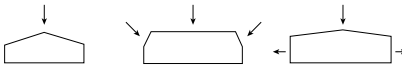
EXISTING HOLY TRINITY ANGLICAN CHURCH



THREE FORMS



RE-ARRANGE



SCALE TO PROGRAM



LEARNING WITH NATURE

Integrating visual and physical connections to the surrounding landscape throughout the building promotes health and resilience as a foundational priority within the Magnolia community. Large windows, strategically placed courtyards, and seamless transitions between indoor and outdoor spaces foster a constant awareness of and engagement with nature. By incorporating principles of biophilic design, forest integration, and dedicated outdoor learning environments, the architecture actively nurtures mental well-being, sensory stimulation, and cognitive development. The adjacent pine forest and nature trail serve as a vital extension of the classroom experience, forming an essential and enriching part of the school's daily curriculum and educational philosophy.

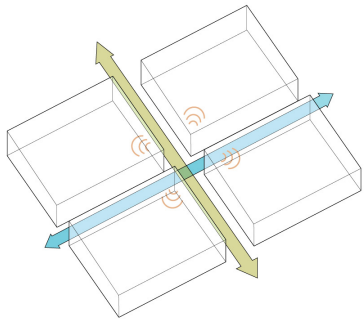
“Mental Health for both students and staff has been improved dramatically due to playground, windows, walking path and nature walk.”

– Joshua Friedel, Capital Campaign Manager

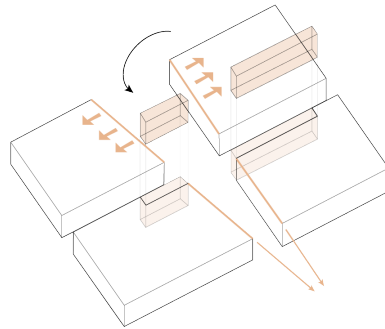


INSPIRATION & INNOVATION

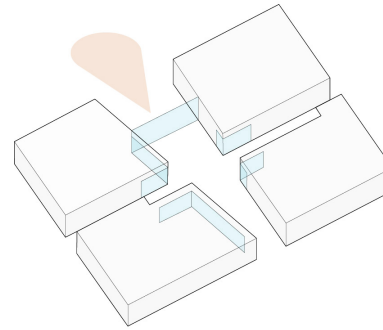
Clear sensory cues in transitional spaces help children understand expected behaviors throughout the building. Beyond typical design elements like lighting, acoustics, and finishes, we used scale and geometry to provide intuitive guidance. Corridors leading to outdoor play areas widen and brighten with ample glazing, inviting movement and energy. In contrast, paths back to classrooms narrow, ceilings lower, and daylight dims—offering calming signals that naturally slow transitions and reduce stress. These subtle cues reduce behavioral challenges, ease transitions, and support emotional regulation—key for children with sensory and developmental needs.



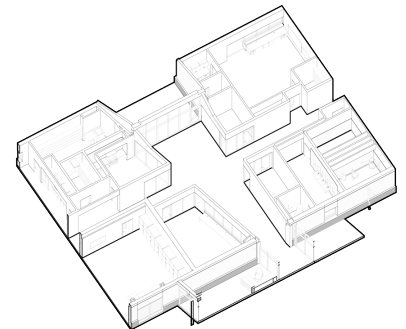
INTERSECT



WIDEN



VISIBILITY

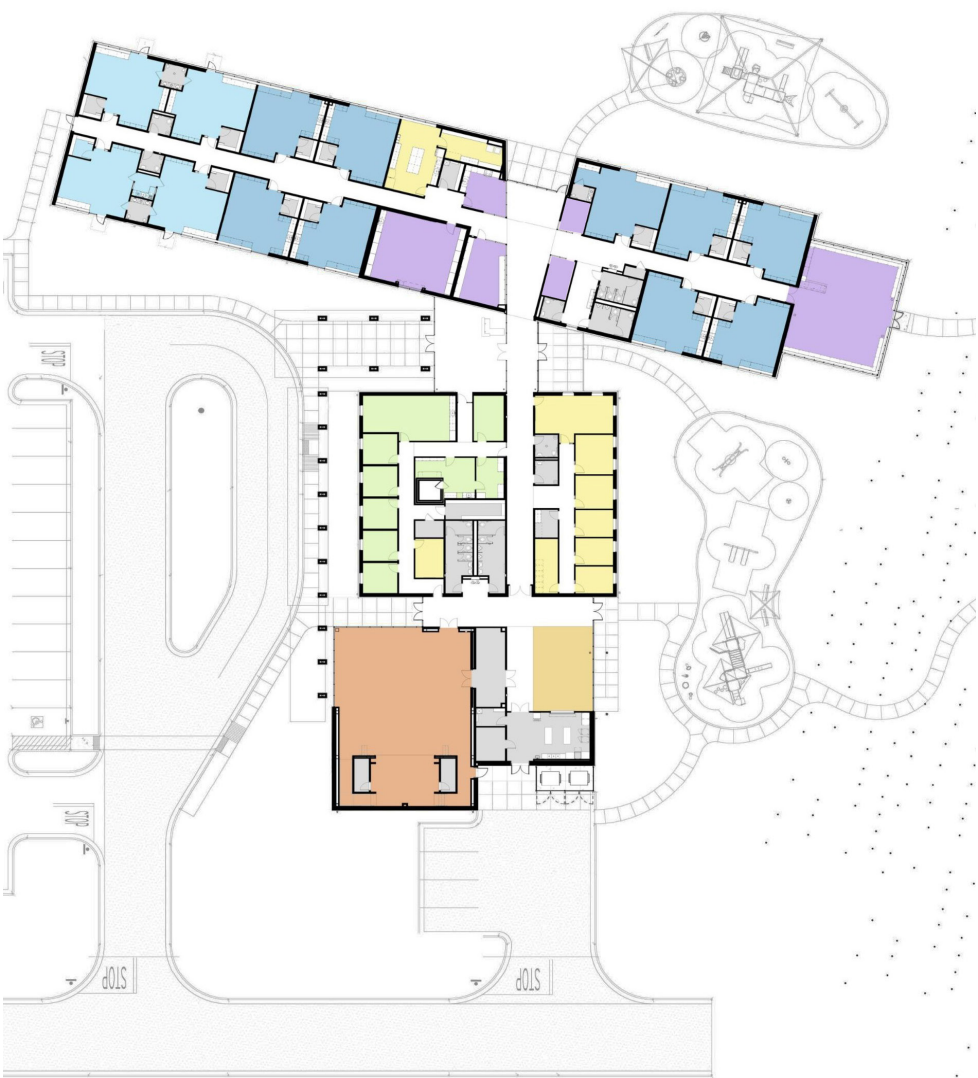
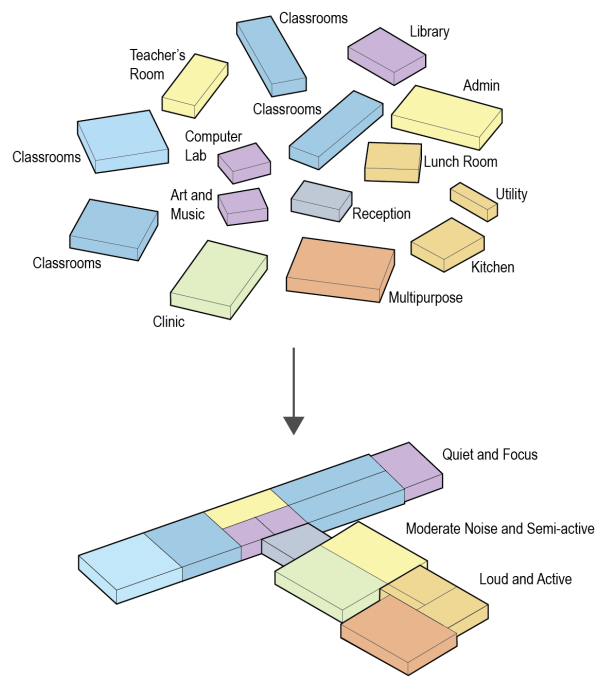


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PROGRAM AND PLAN

Magnolia’s design centers on students’ needs, with three distinct wings—Classroom, Clinic/Admin, and Assembly—organized by sensory activity. This thoughtful layout enhances wayfinding and security while separating quiet learning zones from active spaces, minimizing overstimulation and giving children both calm places to focus and the freedom to move and play. From the drop-off area to classrooms and playgrounds, every space was envisioned as a potential learning environment. Classrooms are filled with natural light, designed to reduce glare and shadowing, and separated by high-performance acoustic walls to support focus and comfort.



- MULTIPURPOSE ROOM
- LUNCH ROOM
- CLINIC
- SHARED SPACES
- LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM
- PRE-K CLASSROOM
- ADMINISTRATIVE
- SUPPORT

WHERE DIVERSITY MEETS WELLNESS & SUSTAINABILITY

Designing for an Inclusive and Supportive Community

At Magnolia, the focus of the design is the diverse student population, and the broader community it serves. Each space is thoughtfully designed with the goal of making learning, communication, and connection more equitable to students with communicative disorders and sensory needs.

By expanding the services of the clinic and creating a multi-purpose room open to the entire community, the school strives to be inclusive of their specialized resources to students, families, and the community.

Prioritizing Well-being and Connection

The founding principles of the school's mission extend far beyond mere physical and environmental considerations of wellness. Magnolia embraces a holistic understanding of wellness that encompasses the many needs of neurodiverse students within an inclusive space.

To support this, the library was designed as a “treehouse in the woods,” providing students a calming space where they can build confidence and be connected to nature.

The clinic extends support beyond the school, offering vital services that contribute to the overall well-being of the community.

Sustainability

Sustainable strategies within the school include high-efficiency mechanical systems that reduce background noise and enhance air quality, energy-efficient LED lighting to ensure even illumination on faces to support specialized teaching methods, and natural daylighting throughout to create a balanced, glare-free environment crucial for this visually dependent student population. Exterior strategies include the use native, child-safe landscaping, insulated concrete form (ICF) walls for superior thermal and acoustic performance, and deep roof overhangs to minimize solar heat gain.



VISION AND GOALS

The vision for this project was to create specialized, purpose-driven environments that holistically supported learning, therapy, and play, tailored to the diverse needs of children across age groups and developmental challenges. By incorporating flexible, user-centered design solutions—such as bespoke teaching walls—the spaces facilitated effective instruction while addressing sensory and developmental requirements through customized design features.

Central to the project was a commitment to immersive, collaborative processes that united educators, therapists, and designers, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and innovation. Goals include a design that serves multi-sensory and differentiated learning environments, spaces that achieves acoustic optimization for auditory learning, and school that supports a community-focused atmosphere.

Early Concept Renderings



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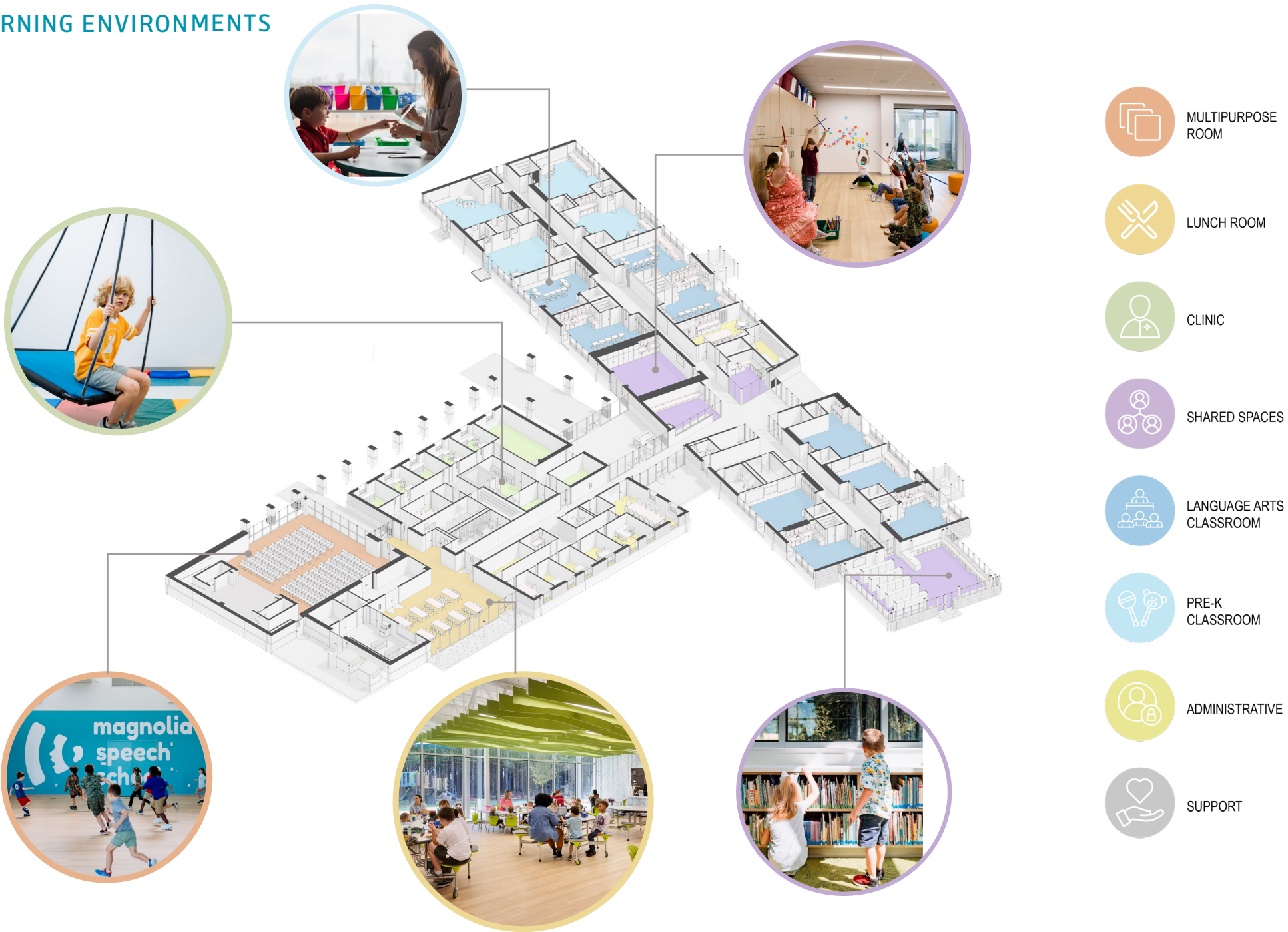


“The number of details that were considered when planning and building this space attributes to our continued success and, quite honestly, elevates us to the next level.”

– Leatha Phillips, Interim Executive Director

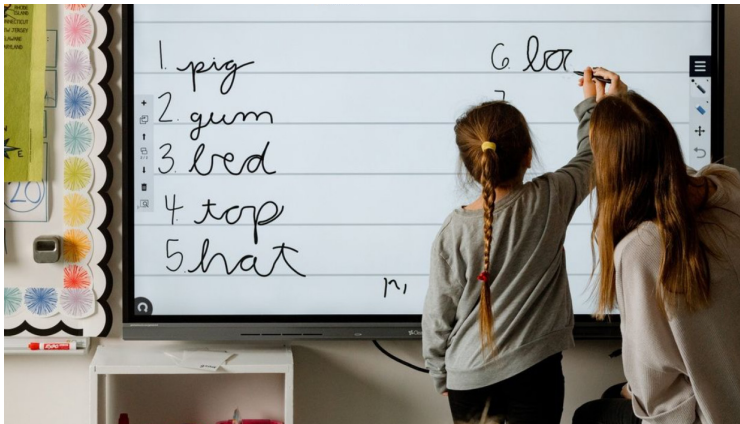


LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

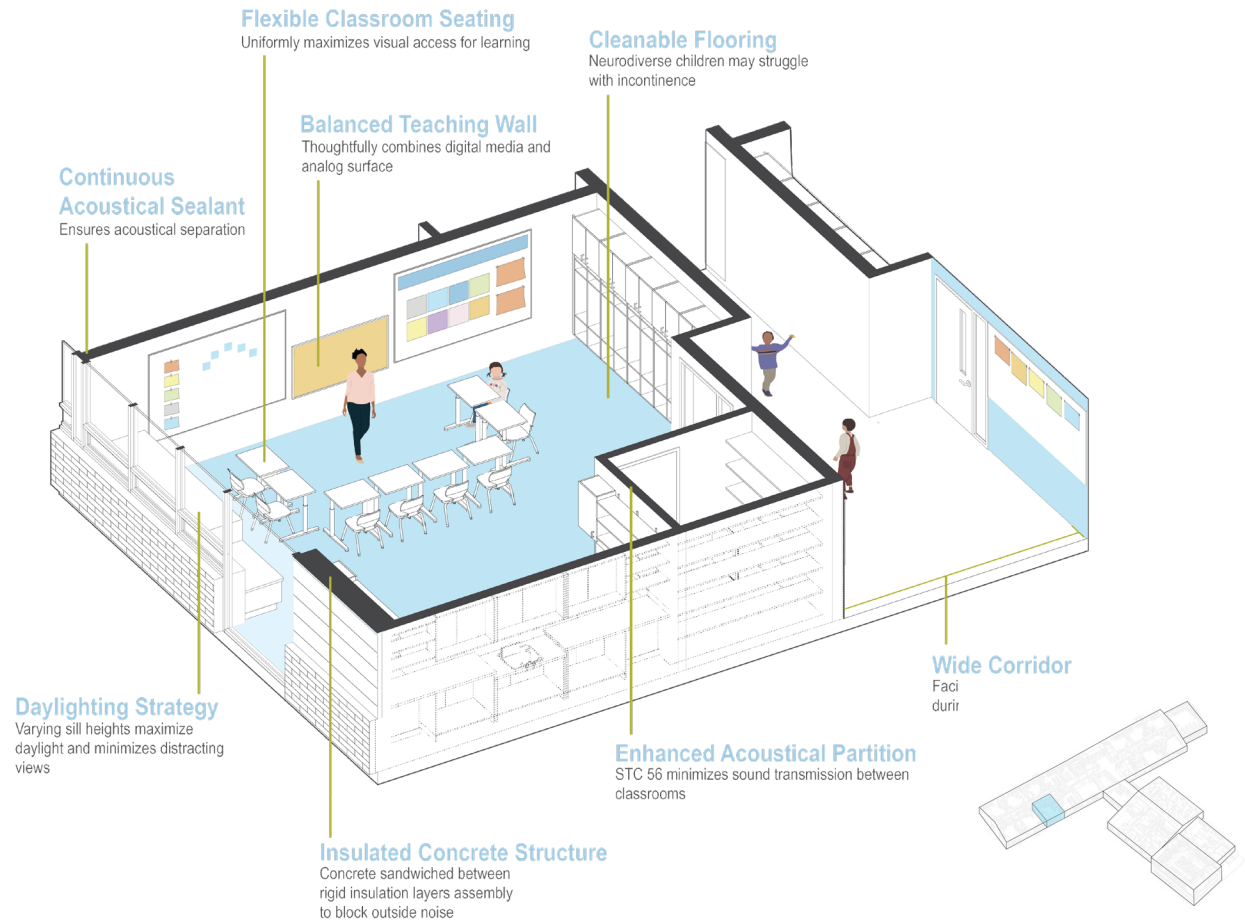


CLASSROOMS

Classrooms are intentionally small in scale to reduce sensory overload, using neutral color palettes, soft textures, and acoustic dampening. Flexible layouts allow teachers and therapists to reconfigure spaces throughout the day to meet the shifting needs of individuals and groups. Breakout rooms and quiet nooks offer students safe places to retreat, reset, or receive one-on-one support. In this way, the building itself becomes a responsive tool—empowering educators to adjust environments in real time and better support each child’s unique learning journey.



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“Smart boards in the classrooms have helped with instruction. These were not provided at the previous school, but all children thrive with technology and are more engaged in learning.”

- Joshua Friedel, Capital Campaign Manager

LIBRARY

Located at the end of the classroom wing, the library projects into the forest, reinforcing a strong visual and spatial connection to the natural surroundings. Floor-to-ceiling glass walls provide unobstructed views and natural daylight, creating a quiet, immersive environment for focused learning. Inside, acoustic panels in soft blue and white tones are suspended from the ceiling to manage sound while contributing to a calm visual atmosphere. Carpet patterns reference natural textures, subtly suggesting pathways through the space and supporting wayfinding within the library's compact footprint.



“Thoughtful placement of spaces like the library, playgrounds, and walking trails—along with mindful lighting and sound—has created a calming environment that supports students with sensory needs and reduces outbursts.”

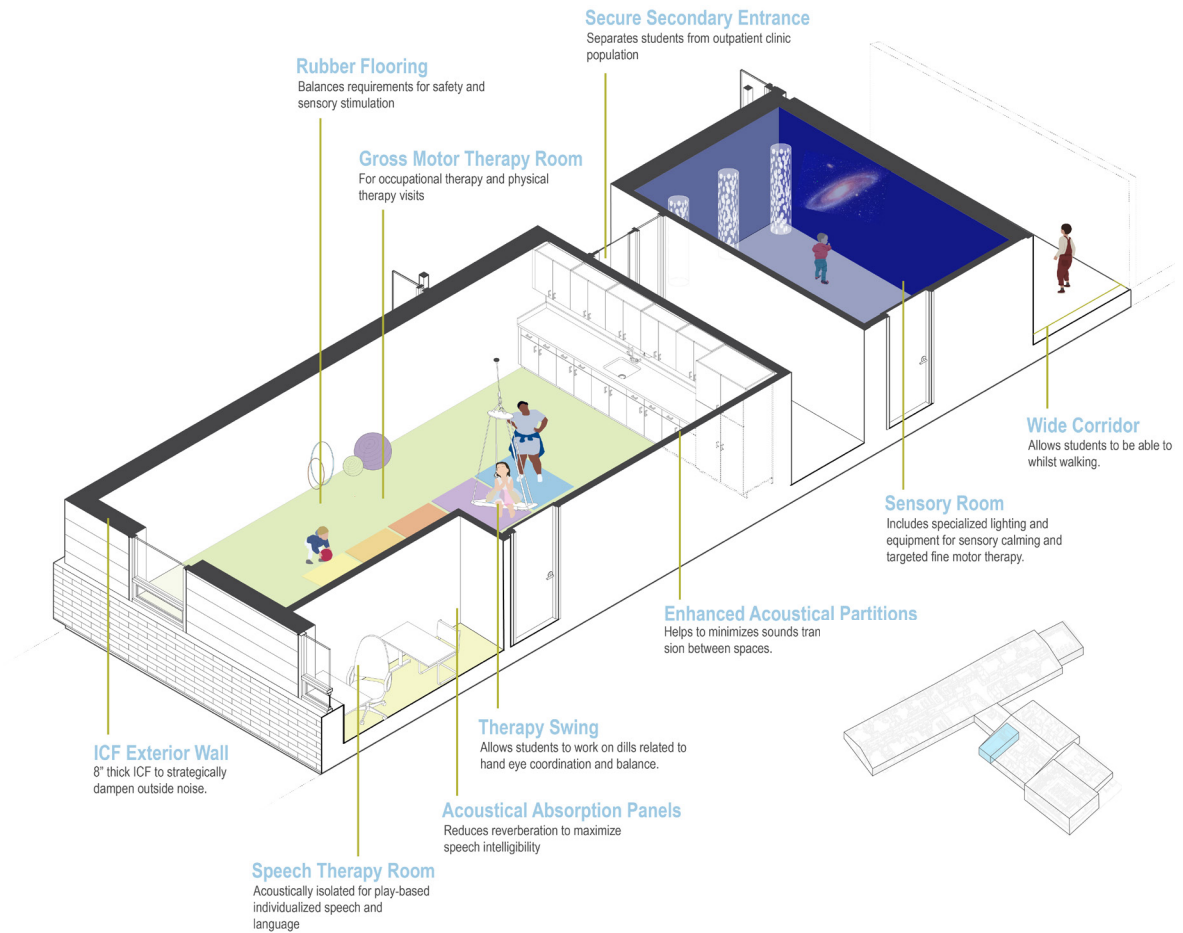
– Nancy Davis, Instructional Specialist



CLINIC

The new clinic offers a welcoming environment where speech, hearing, occupational, and physical therapists work together to provide compassionate interdisciplinary care.

Recognizing the diverse needs of its students, the school includes a dedicated sensory room designed to support self-regulation and emotional readiness. The space offers a controlled, calming environment where children can retreat when overstimulated, helping them re-engage in learning and therapy more effectively.



“No matter where the families come from, whether it be a neighborhood over or thousands of miles, these students return to their communities with the skills they need to succeed in life.”

- Valerie Linn, Former Executive Director

EDUCATIONAL AND COMMUNITY GOALS

The outpatient clinic at Magnolia was developed to expand access to therapy services, including for children on the waitlist for school-based programs. By offering sessions beginning at 3:00 PM, the school extends care beyond the traditional classroom schedule, improving service availability for families with limited options. In alignment with its evolving mission, Magnolia has also added support for students with dyslexia and increased clinical staff capacity to accommodate both rising enrollment and a broader range of learning needs.

“Since moving into our new clinic space at Magnolia, and with our position financially stable for once in the history of the school, we can look forward to having our own clinic run by our hired staff to continue to serve an even larger level of services to our students and community.”

- Joshua Friedel, Capital Campaign Manager



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UNINTENDED RESULTS

Following the school's relocation to its new facility, Magnolia experienced unanticipated but welcome outcomes. The building's close connection to nature has had a measurable impact on student and staff well-being, with improvements in mental health and overall campus climate. Additionally, the flexibility of the clinic's design enabled broader use than originally anticipated—serving children from other schools after hours and streamlining the therapy process across programs. These outcomes reflect the school's ability to adapt and respond to evolving community needs.



VALUE & STEWARDSHIP

The school has successfully paid off the remaining mortgage on its main building and land, eliminating all debt and freeing up budget capacity for program enhancements and expanded clinic services. Over the past academic year, student enrollment has seen a significant increase, reflecting growing community interest in the school's specialized services and its strong success rate in preparing students for their next academic steps. Philanthropic support has also risen sharply, enabling the school to underwrite more scholarships, serve more community members through expanded clinic services, and maintain its current building. Early sustainable design decisions—such as the use of ICF walls for improved thermal and acoustic performance, a durable standing seam metal roof, high-efficiency mechanical systems, and LED lighting—are already reducing long-term maintenance and operating costs, allowing even more resources to be directed where they are needed most: the students.





“Every night before our son goes to sleep, we say we love him and he says “I love you Mom and Dad.” We waited so long to hear those words.”

- Magnolia Speech School Parent



“Our son's frustration with being unable to speak is long forgotten. He is making friends, telling jokes, expressing his feelings, and most importantly, being a talkative little boy.”

- Magnolia Speech School Parent



“Our daughter was diagnosed with apraxia of speech, a condition that makes it difficult to speak. Luckily we found a school built just for children like her — Magnolia Speech School. The specialized classroom instruction and speech therapy services she receives have helped her become a confident, happy girl as well as a great conversationalist!”

**- Scott & Maggie Jones
Magnolia Speech School Parents**



**"Magnolia Speech School gave our child a future.
I look at my son now and he is flourishing.
We believe in Magnolia because they create miracles."**

- Lydia & Eric Balfour, Magnolia Speech School Parents