



All Means All

THE GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY
CASA BLANCA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

THE ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
2026 JAMES D. MACCONNELL AWARD

JCJ ARCHITECTURE

1. Executive Summary

At the Casa Blanca Community School, 'All Means All' is not a slogan; it is a daily educational practice. It describes a learning environment where culture, language, land, and community are fully integrated into the daily educational experience; where students with developmental and learning differences are fully included; and where education helps rebuild connections among generations, identity, and place.

Developed by the Gila River Indian Community, Casa Blanca Community School represents a new model for educational delivery in Indian Country – one that combines Tribal agency, culturally-grounded curriculum, inclusive design, and community-centered learning within a highly adaptable educational environment designed specifically for the needs of its students, families, and Tribal community.

Designed and constructed in just 16 months through an innovative 105(l) funding and delivery structure, the project demonstrates how Tribal Nations can take direct control of educational

environments in ways that support self-determination, cultural preservation, wellness, and future opportunity.

Today, Casa Blanca has become:

- A center for cultural regeneration,
- A hub for community life and services,
- A model for inclusive education,
- And a nationally recognized example of Tribal-led innovation that is influencing educational conversations across Indian Country.

The Casa Blanca project was made possible through groundbreaking negotiations in 2017/2018 with US Department of the Interiors Bureau of Indian Affairs/Bureau of Indian Education (BIA/BIE). Spearheaded by the GRIC, these negotiations enabled a first-of-its-kind agreement whereby the Community would have control over the design and delivery of a BIE educational facility. The success of the Community's first project - the Gila Crossing Community School (GCCS) - convinced Tribal leaders to immediately undertake replacement of the Casa Blanca school.

The Community sought a facility that would provide a dynamic platform to engage students, families, the Community and to create a place to deploy a place-based curriculum centered around agriculture, indigenous wisdom, and a direct and meaningful kinship with the land. The GRIC envisioned an inclusive and dynamic educational environment that would enable exposure to the unique language, culture and traditions of the O'otham and Pee Posh people; a place that would welcome all learners, regardless of their abilities, and a place that would prepare students for a global future.

Given the deadline of 16 months to complete the project, each phase - planning, programming, consensus building, design, documentation and construction - was undertaken with extraordinary focus and urgency. The Community retained design professionals with whom they had worked and built trust on design for the GCCS. This partnership was key to achieving the fast track schedule and incorporating many thoughtful elements so important to design of this facility.

Despite a compressed timeline, there was meaningful involvement by Community stakeholders - Tribal Council, students, families, educators, Elders, and Community members - at the outset. Select stakeholders remained engaged with the team throughout the project, providing feedback and keeping their constituents informed on progress. The non-Native design team sought to be aware of their own biases and, through a process of careful listening, to translate the Community's unique aspirations, goals, traditions and stories into built form.

After 4 years of operation, Casa Blanca has become a place of incredible creativity and enrichment. There is a palpable excitement in the air as students, teachers and the broader Community continue to explore the limits of what is possible.

2. Scope of Work & Budget

Gila River Indian Community
Owner

600 Students, Grades K-6
Program

New Construction
Type

102,400 SF
Size

10 Acres of Reservation Lands
Site

Self-financed, lease back
Project Model

CMaR
Construction Delivery

Confidential
Budget

LEED® Silver Certified
Sustainability

16 Months
Schedule, kick off - completion

May 2020
Kick-Off

August 2021
Occupancy

Context

"The long-term prosperity of Tribal Nations like the Gila River Indian Community depends on the education and retention of their citizens/members. Adequate education on or near their homes, located on Tribal lands, is an essential component for them to become a part of the Community workforce and be productive Community citizens and leaders.

Having members leaving the Community, relocating for education or economic opportunity, is part of the downward spiral that many Tribal Nations struggle with on a daily basis.

This exodus undermines the viability of Native groups, irreparably eroding of strong family and community connections, damaging the perpetuation of language, cultural practices and traditions that are the fundamental fabric to these communities."

extract from testimony given by Governor Stephen Roe Lewis to the US House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. May 10, 2018

The Gila River Indian Community is collective home to members of the Akimel O'otham (Pima) and the Pee-Posh (Maricopa) tribes. The Community currently has 21,300 enrolled members. Approximately 14,250 live on 584 square miles of reservation lands.

There are a number of conventions currently accepted when referring to Indigenous populations in the US including American Indian/ Alaskan Native (AI/AN), Native Nations and Tribal Nations.

This submittal will use the term Tribal Nations and will use conventions the Gila River Indian Community has established to refer to itself and it's sovereign citizens. The phrase "Indian Country" is a widely accepted phrase used to refer to the totality of Tribal Nations across the US.



Context

A History of Repression and Trauma

The economic, social, educational, and health inequities affecting Tribal Nations are rooted in the long history of harmful policies that included uprooting communities from homelands, disruption of social structures and bans on cultural practices and language.

The Indian Civilization Fund Act of 1819 ushered in the profoundly destructive Indian boarding-school era, 1810-1969. Under this policy Native children were taken from their families systematically stripped of their culture, language, history and identity. Subjected to physical, sexual, cultural and spiritual abuse, many of those who survived live with chronic disease, depression and unresolved grief. Communities across Indian Country and generations of individuals were impacted.

Today, Tribal Nations continue to grapple with the legacy of colonization and the generational trauma that has resulted in disconnection from cultural knowledge, identity, culture and devaluation of Indigenous ways of knowing.

A System in Crisis

While approximately 95% of Native students are educated in public schools, the US government adopted the Indian Education Act (1972) established the Office of Indian Education Programs (later the Bureau of Indian Education, a subordinate to the Bureau of Indian Affairs). The BIE implements federal education programs for roughly 46,000 students at 183 schools across the US, including schools for the Gila River Indian Community. **Nearly half of all BIA facilities are in poor condition with no funding planned or years, perhaps decades, before inadequate or unsafe facility conditions are addressed.**

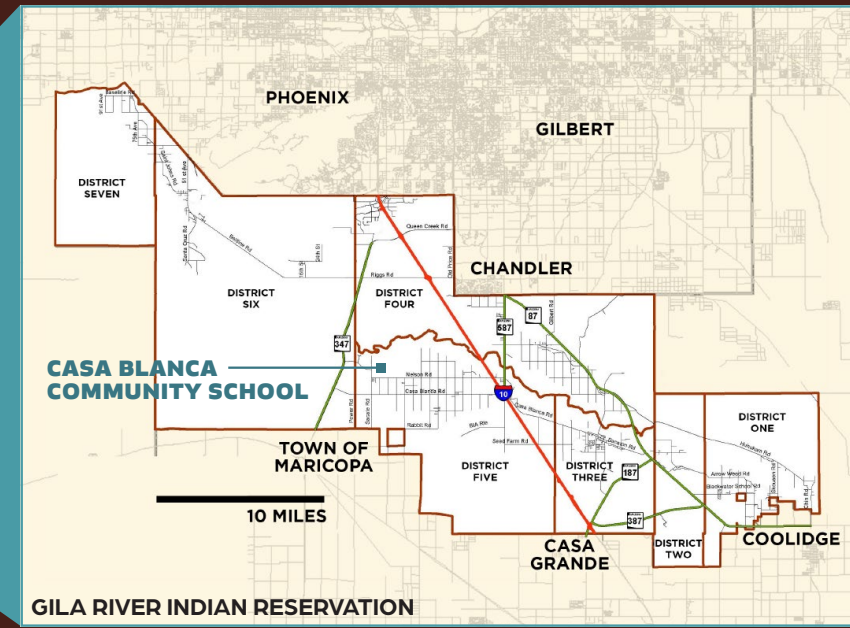
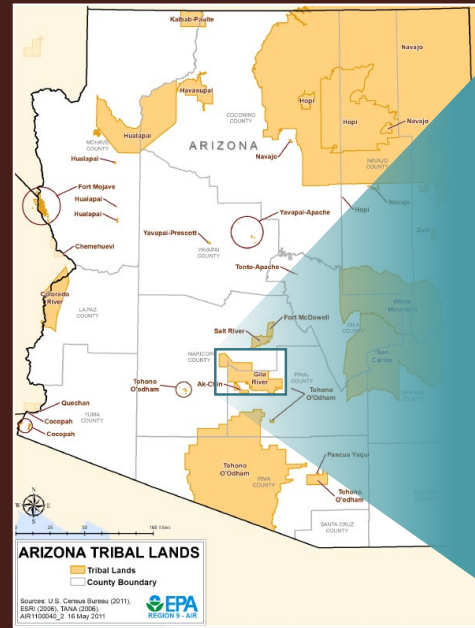
The BIA is the only education system in the country that hasn't implemented a plan to hold schools accountable for student performance. **The school dropout rate for 16-24-year-olds in Native populations have consistently been the highest of any ethnic group in the nation.** The U.S. Department of Education has been issuing warnings to the agency since 2007 that it is under performing.

The design and operation of Casa Blanca Community School presents a model for empowering agency in delivery of educational services to one of the nation's most vulnerable and marginalized communities.





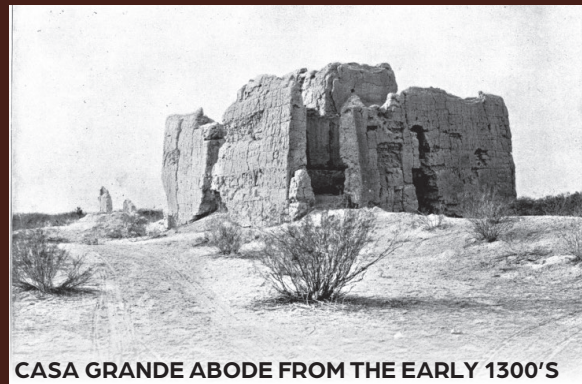
THERE ARE CURRENTLY 37,000 ACRES OF RESERVATION LANDS UNDER CULTIVATION



3. The Community: Research and Engagement

The Gila River Indian Community is an Indian reservation located in Arizona's Phoenix metro area. The Community is home for members of both the Akimel O'otham and the Pee-Posh tribes.

disease, systematic cultural erasure and a severe lack of economic opportunities. The resiliency of these communities is a testament to their resourcefulness, resilience, and endurance.



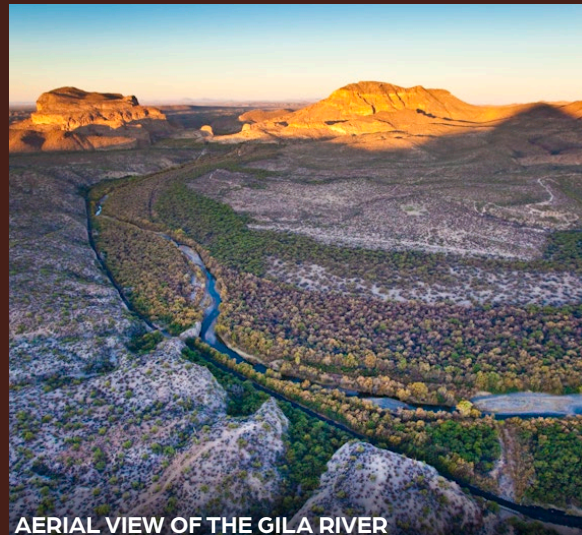
CASA GRANDE ABODE FROM THE EARLY 1300'S



TRADITIONAL SANDWICH HOUSE



TRADITIONAL SANDWICH HOUSE



AERIAL VIEW OF THE GILA RIVER



THE GRIC CONSERVE 125,000 ACRE-FEET OF WATER ANNUALLY



TRADITIONAL OUTDOOR COOKING AREA

Today's Tribal members are descendants of the region's early inhabitants whose settlements in the Sonoran Desert have been dated to 300 BCE. Over hundreds of years, miles of large canals were engineered to channel water from the Gila River and the desert was transformed into productive and abundant gardens. Whether through cultivation, hunting or gathering, the practice of stewardship and reciprocity enabled a constant bounty of food, medicine and materials for everyday life. The Native people were able to thrive through a system of knowledge about the land, animals and the passing seasons.

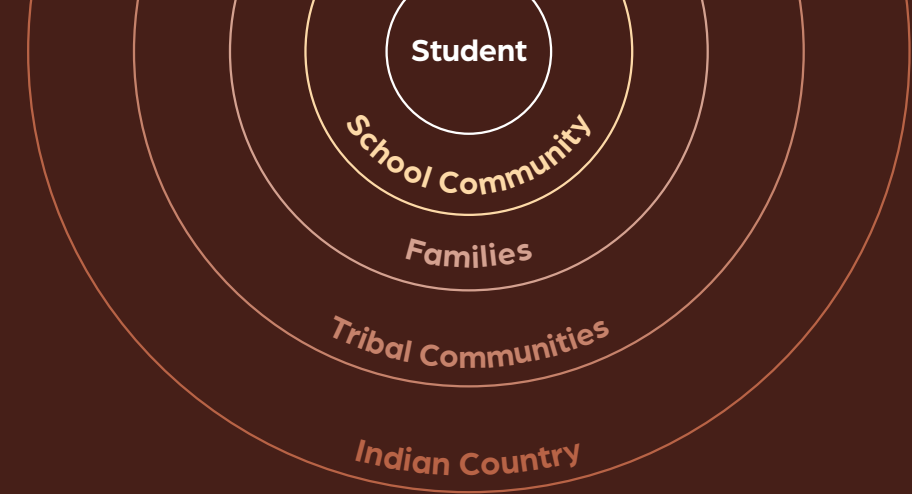
The Community's deep roots as an outdoor people who are able to work within a landscape defined by limited resources were qualities that enabled them to turn the tide in the latter part of the 20th century. With a clear sense of purpose and assets resulting from economic development projects, Tribal leaders came together to chart a path toward greater self-determination.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, policies and practices imposed by local and federal authorities left the GRIC, like communities across all of Indian Country, battling the effects of poverty, famine,

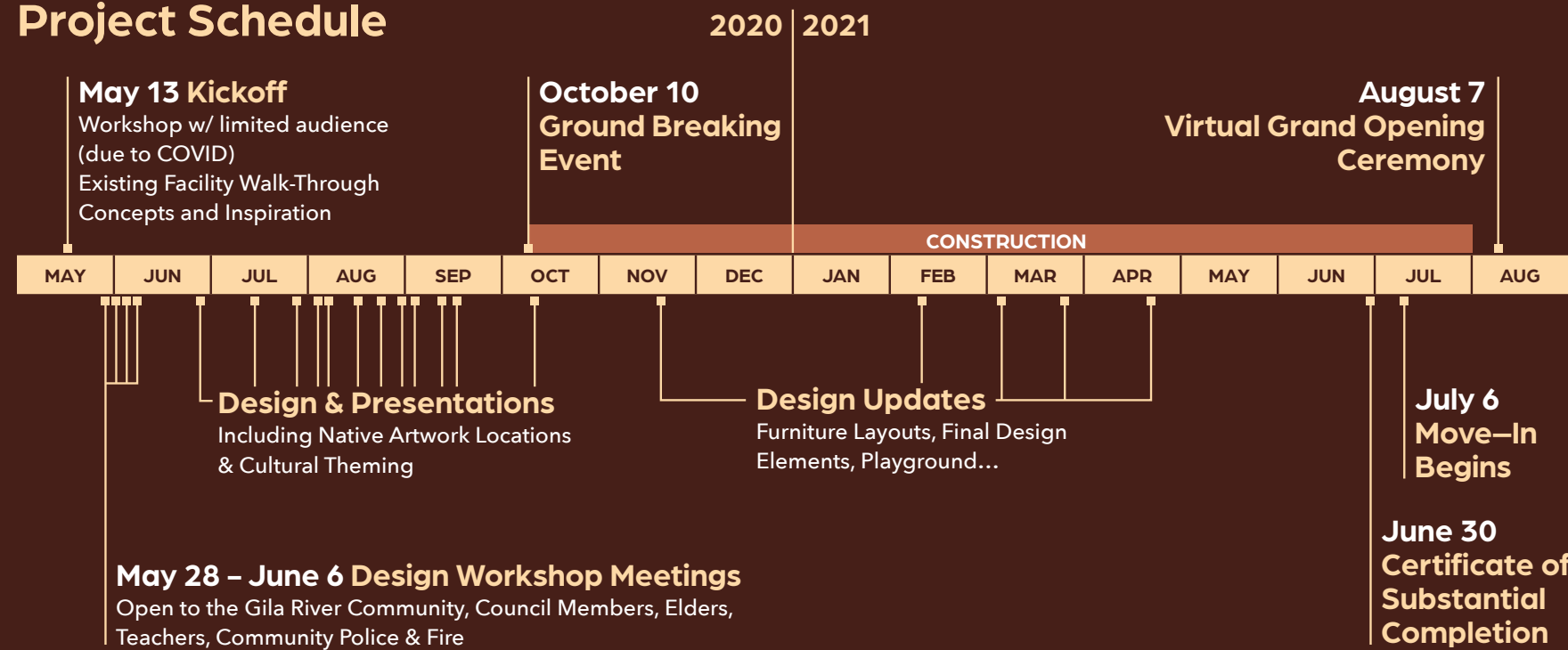
The GRIC specifically targeted improved education outcomes as a crucial component of the larger plan for greater control over their future. In this regard, the entire Community is a key stakeholder in the project. Tribal leaders understood that a process of educational empowerment would uplift all members of the Community.

“Delays to the replacement of structurally-deficient BIE schools has created a dangerous environment that threatens the ability of our students to receive the 21st century education that they deserve. The long-term prosperity of the Community depends on the education and retention of our citizens.

- Governor Stephen Roe Lewis, May 10, 2018



Project Schedule



A New Funding and Delivery Paradigm

The process of funding educational infrastructure projects through BIA and BIE’s bureaucracy is notoriously difficult. Critical projects that serve these communities can take decades to reach the funding list and those that have been prioritized can take between 10-15 years to be realized. To disrupt the cycle of failure, the GRIC sought ways in which to accelerate the pace of design and construction.

Following testimony to US House of Representatives and negotiations with the Department of Interior and BIA, the GRIC proposed engaging an unused provision in legislation passed in 1975, Section 105(l) of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, (ISDEAA) whereby Tribal Nations are able to fund the cost of construction on replacement facilities. This non-traditional lease is an agreement between the BIA and a Tribal government to reimburse costs when a facility is used to carry out programs, functions, services, or activities under the ISDEAA contract or compact. This non-traditional lease structure enables Tribal Nations to make decisions that best meet the needs of their communities and achieve repayment. The GRIC was first Tribal Nation to utilize this provision, first with the Gila Crossing Community School (completed in 2019) and with Casa Blanca Community School, completed in 2021.

The Casa Blanca project was approved to proceed in February, 2020 and a completion deadline set by the BIA for August 2021. The design firm that undertook Gila Crossing was retained for the Casa Blanca project. The team’s experience in working with Community leadership, Elders and stakeholders, their understanding of the preferences that informed design, and experience in delivering Gila Crossing in 12-months were key factors selection. The first stakeholder workshop commenced May 13, 2020 during the early stages of the COVID pandemic.

With completion of Gila Crossing and Casa Blanca, the GRIC have demonstrated that prolonged delays in delivery of appropriate educational facilities is avoidable and the process can be undertaken in a manner that empowers Native voices and communities. While every Tribal Nation does not have the capital in place to advance projects in the same way, the project demonstrates an innovative approach to disrupting the cycle of generational failure. Federal officials, Native American rights advocacy organizations and other Tribal groups are visiting, learning and looking at this project as a new benchmark - for funding, for operations, for curriculum and for design of an educational environment that meets the specific needs of an at-risk population.



Visioning: Engagement and Consensus Building

The Community rapidly mobilized stakeholders and key constituent groups to participate in kick-off of the project. With many of these individuals having been involved in planning and design for the Gila Crossing school, there was an existing familiarity and a strong level of trust that had been built prior to the start of design.

Casa Blanca began with workshops that brought together **Tribal officials, Elders, administrators, educators, artists and first responders**. The urgent 16-month timeline drove the team to design a compact and intentional engagement process that would quickly advance planning and concept development.

The team began with a confirmation of scope and objectives exercise. Having established a clear baseline, the design team then facilitated sessions including presentation on best practices for **Next Generation Schools and 21st Century Learning**; a **Tour Of Gila Crossing** where meaningful discussion around features and organization helped to clarify aspirations for Casa Blanca; a **Visit To The Casa Blanca Site** supported further discussion opportunities and challenges, functional and programmatic objectives, environmental, historic and cultural concerns; a discussions on **Social Context, Cultural Characteristics And Practices** where Elders and Community members shared insight into the context that surrounds the Community and students, including a range of O'otham practices and traditions.

This two day workshop significantly advanced the project.

The team worked with a standard BIE program area and space allocation template. A formal educational specification was not provided however the 2019 Casa Blanca Community School Program Request User Document helped to create context and shape dialogue around key qualities and design features. Educators also shared "a brown paper" exercise where the dreams and wishes of teachers, student and families had been recorded. These documents provided information on enrollment, core and non-core programs, and elements essential to the existing school culture including strong parent engagement and commitment to GRIC culture, language and history.

The non-native design team understood their position guests and advisors to the Community and that deep and respectful listening was necessary to facilitate realizations of the Community's vision. With a strong relationship in place, built on mutual respect and trust, the team was able to take effective action on design that met the client's needs and preferences. After kick-off, the team conducted 4 additional (virtual) workshops over the next 4 weeks and solidified the direction for design. Select individuals who participated in engagement process continued to track the progress, to provide feedback and advice and to keep their stakeholder groups informed.



Project Vision: Prepare Students for global readiness, maintaining the Community's Akimel O'otham Ñeo'ok and Himdag cultures.

"Akimel O'otham is the name the people of Gila River call themselves. Ñeo'ok is the word for language and the meaning language carries. It is the power of words to create the world in which we exist. The language carries more than just information. The language is the vehicle for Himdag.

Himdag is the way of being in the world. What is valued and precious. The way of life. In English we would say culture. But it carries a much deeper and more philosophical meaning. Himdag includes all relationships a human may have... with family, the desert, the animals, the crops, the weather, water, food. It grounds a child in how to live in the world, expressing generosity, gratitude, care for others. It describes who and what are family and what that means. It is all the roles and relationships and guides how those interactions should take place. It is the history, the stories, that are used to ground a child.

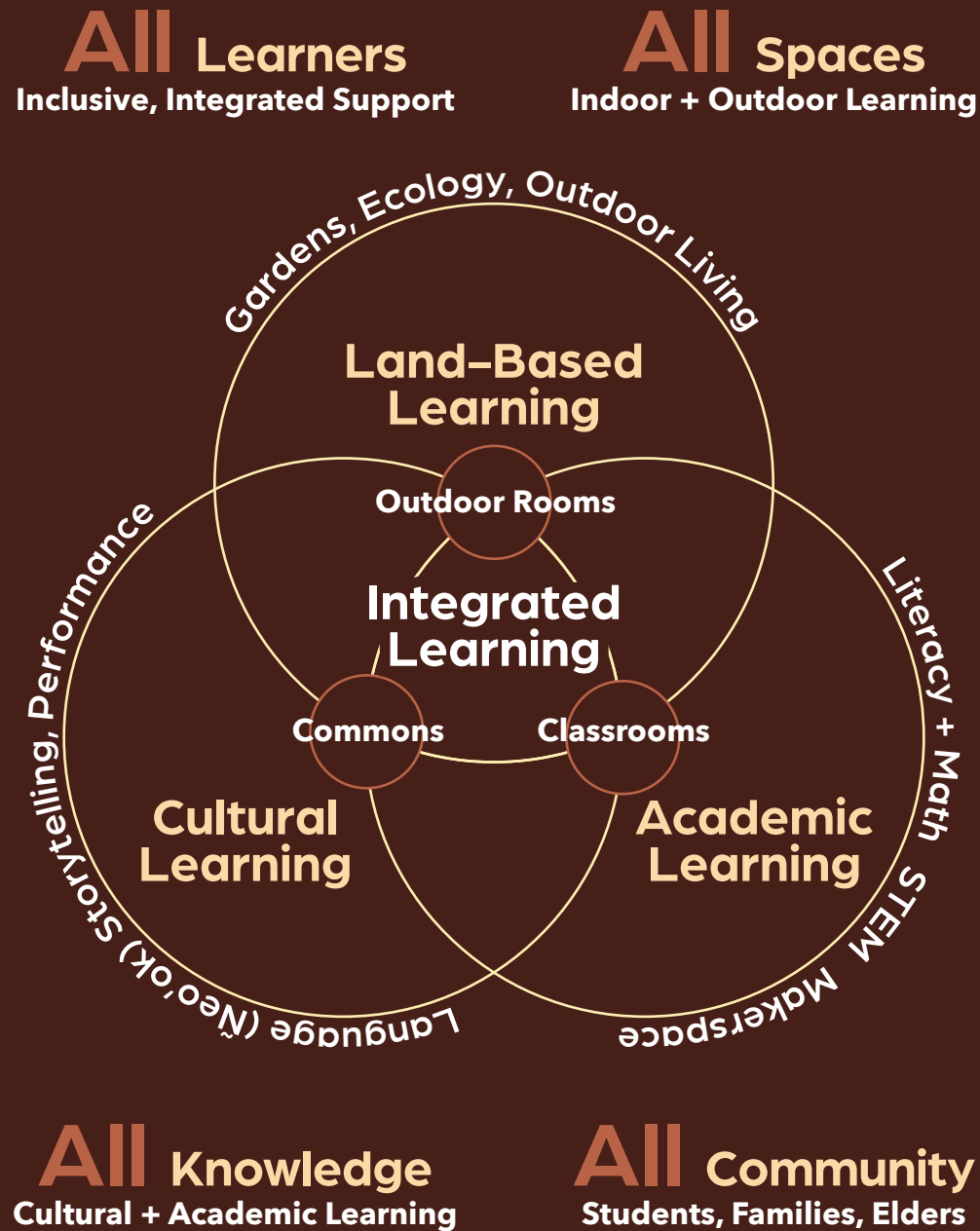
To maintain these cultures and identity is to build resilience. Resilience is key to Gila River overcoming historical and economic trauma and being the thriving, sovereign people they are."

- Kim Franklin
Principal, Casa Blanca Community School

A Cultural- and Community-Based Education Model that normalizes enriching cultural experiences, promotes social and emotional development, and builds pride in Indigenous identity and the skills needed to thrive and become active citizens in the 21st century.

All Means All

A Learning Model Rooted in Land, Culture and Community



Vision and Aspirations

Educating students in Grades K-6. Serving families, predominately Akimel O'otham, in Districts 3, 4 and 5 of the Community.

Project Vision: Prepare students for global readiness, maintaining the Community's Akimel O'otham Ñeo'ok and Himdag cultures.

Key Qualities: Welcoming, inspiring, connected, unique, culturally aware, flexible, dignified and awesome!

The physical environment will

- Be an active and supportive element in the delivery of education
- Include a rich program of artistic expression from students and GRIC artists
- Maximize resources including energy, water and habitat
- Prioritize display and usage of the O'otham language and culturally relevant stories
- Welcome interaction with and support for the Community

Pedagogy and Curriculum

- Deliver hands on and highly integrated curriculum organized around on agriculture, cultural knowledge, and place-based and land-based educational experiences
- Provide an outstanding and family-inclusive special education program
- Support the wider Community and demonstrate responsiveness to the needs of families, extended families and Elders

Delivering content using a flexible and multi-tiered approach to teaching

- Interconnected systems of knowledge
- Integration of cultural and mainstream subject matter
- Hands-on and experiential learning
- Land- and place-based learning
- Interaction with Elders
- Interaction with the Community

Mastery that comes from the integration of content, validation of indigenous wisdom and connection to cultural practice

- STEM and sustainability - agriculture, ecology and environment, materials, health, nutrition and wellness
- Culture: craft, tradition, stories, song, dance
- Language - O'otham and English
- Technology - hand tools to digital tools
- History

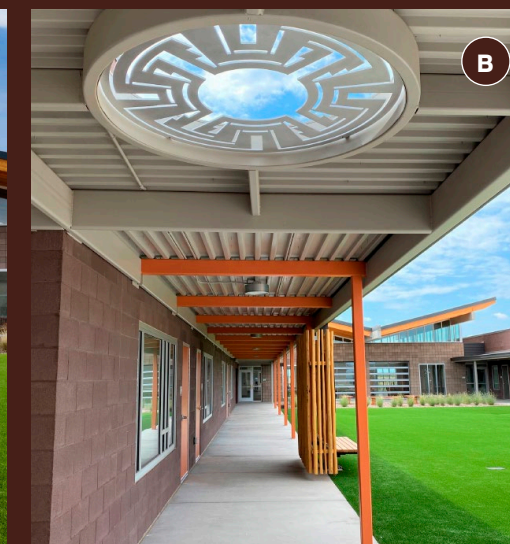
4. Physical Environment The Project Site

Many Tribal Nations have deep, specific relationships with the land they occupy. Certain directions carry meaning. Certain landforms are sacred. Water features, ridge lines, and cardinal orientations may all carry cultural and ceremonial significance that must be considered before a site plan is developed.

As visitors and guests in this community, the design team's task was to translate the preferences and needs of this client and Community into built form and to be aware of injecting personal and professional bias into the design. Demonstrating respectful listening, responsiveness to specific direction and avoiding assumptions was key in showing respect and maintaining trust.

The project's design incorporates a range of organizational and cultural principles including orientation of entries, sensitivity to colors and patterns, establishing view corridors and vistas, connection to the outdoors, the need for spaces to support hospitality and the variety of ways the Community gathers.

With Elders playing a significant role in the Community and many students living in multi-generational households, providing universal accessibility and spaces to support mutual connection across generations was key. Shade structures and benches were positioned throughout the campus so individuals, particularly Elders, can rest and find refuge from the Arizona sun.



Campus as Learning Landscape

Interconnected indoor and outdoor learning environments support visibility, movement, gathering, and hands-on educational experiences. Using a village-inspired organization, the school is composed of a series of interconnected buildings organized around a central green space. Rather than separating educational activities into isolated zones, the campus was designed to support relationships between community gathering, indoor and outdoor learning, land-based learning, and integrated educational experiences, creating a connected learning landscape across the campus.

Casa Blanca's core learning and community spaces are internally connected and extend into courtyards, outdoor classrooms, gardens, and gathering spaces. Grade-level learning clusters open directly to smaller outdoor rooms that support learning, play, and informal interaction throughout the day. Operable glass walls and large openings between commons spaces, STEM learning environments, courtyards, and agricultural areas allow integrated learning activities to flow between interior and exterior environments.

The school was designed to be accessible to individuals of all ages and physical abilities. While the campus was designed to be open and welcoming in character, it incorporates many safety and security strategies.

Community / Guests / Public Access:

These interconnected spaces allow the school to host groups and events without impacting student daily activities. Large spaces with internal connectivity and immediate access to the outdoors have enabled the CBCS to host a wide range of activities and visiting groups.

1. Welcome / Entry + Visitor Zone:

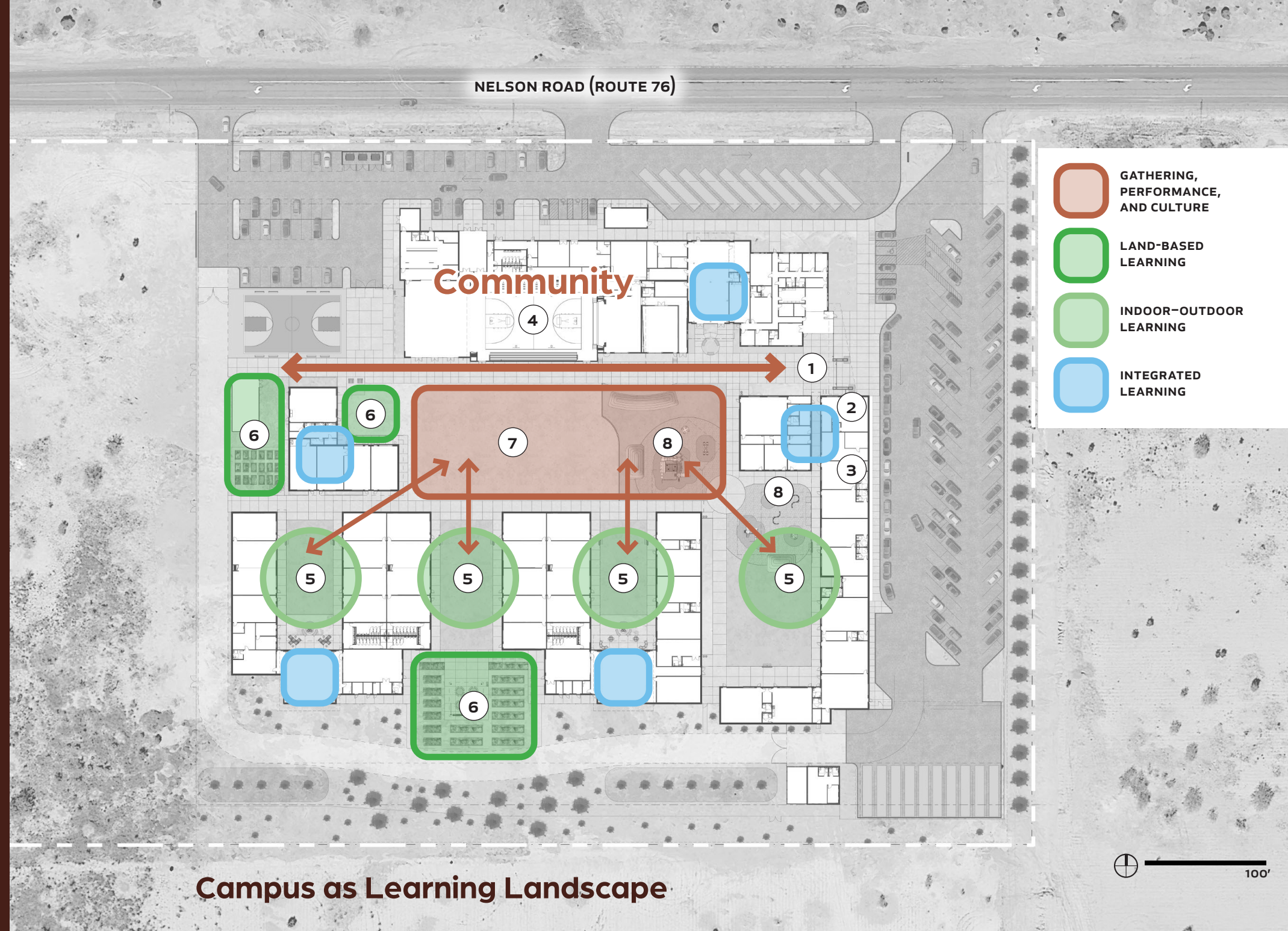
The school's entry faces east in recognition of cultural traditions important to the Gila River Indian Community. A direct view corridor extends west toward the Sierra Estrella Mountains, a landscape feature with deep cultural significance. This arrival sequence reinforces connection to land, orientation, and place.

2. Family and Child Education Zone:

Adjacent to the main entry, this area accommodates a key Community support program serving students and families.

3. Special Needs Resource Zone:

Specialized spaces for sensory support, occupational and physical therapy, and small group learning integrated into the broader educational environment.



4. Community Zone:

Secure access to indoor and outdoor spaces including hardscape play area, cafeteria, gymnasium, library/media center.

5. Outdoor Classrooms:

Dedicated outdoor space for each grade level cluster.

6. Land-Based Learning:

Flexible indoor and outdoor learning environments support agriculture, ecology, language, culture, nutrition, craft, and hands-on educational experiences tied to land- and place-based learning.

7. Central Lawn:

A feature of the existing school, this was a key element in the spatial organization of the school. The central lawn serves as the social and cultural heart of the campus, providing social, play and gathering space.

8. Play Areas:

Two age-appropriate and universally accessible play areas, one adjacent to SPED Resource Rooms and Kindergarten and the other serving Grades 1-6.

Physical Environment – flexible, adaptable, varied and immersive

Designing every space for learning and connection to the outdoors was a key element to augmenting available program area and maximizing future flexibility. Robust technology and covered outdoor spaces allow all areas of the campus to be utilized for teaching and learning in all weather conditions. Flexible fixtures and furnishings, physical connection and strategic adjacencies enable spaces to serve multiple uses, including spaces that support school and Community gatherings.

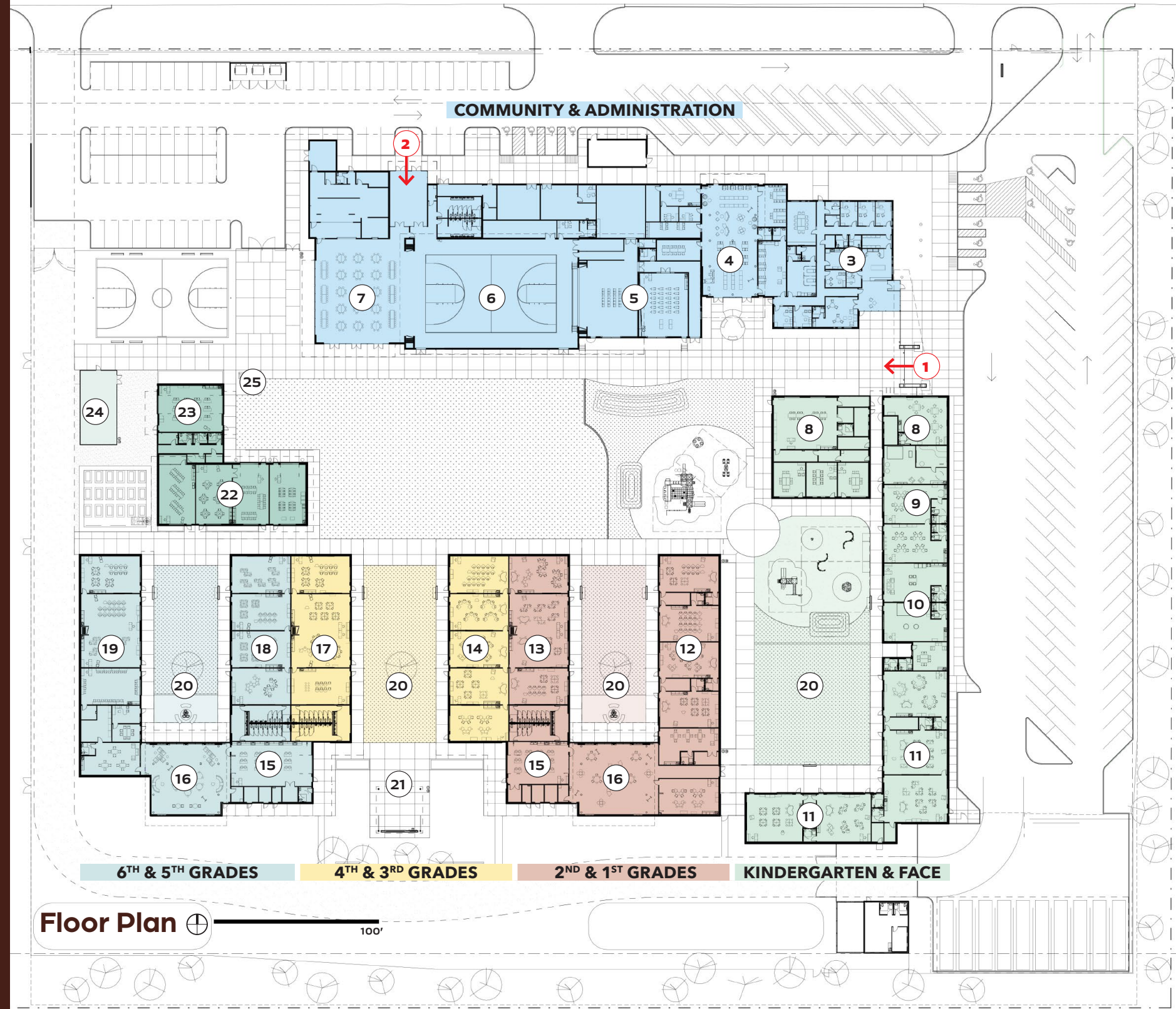
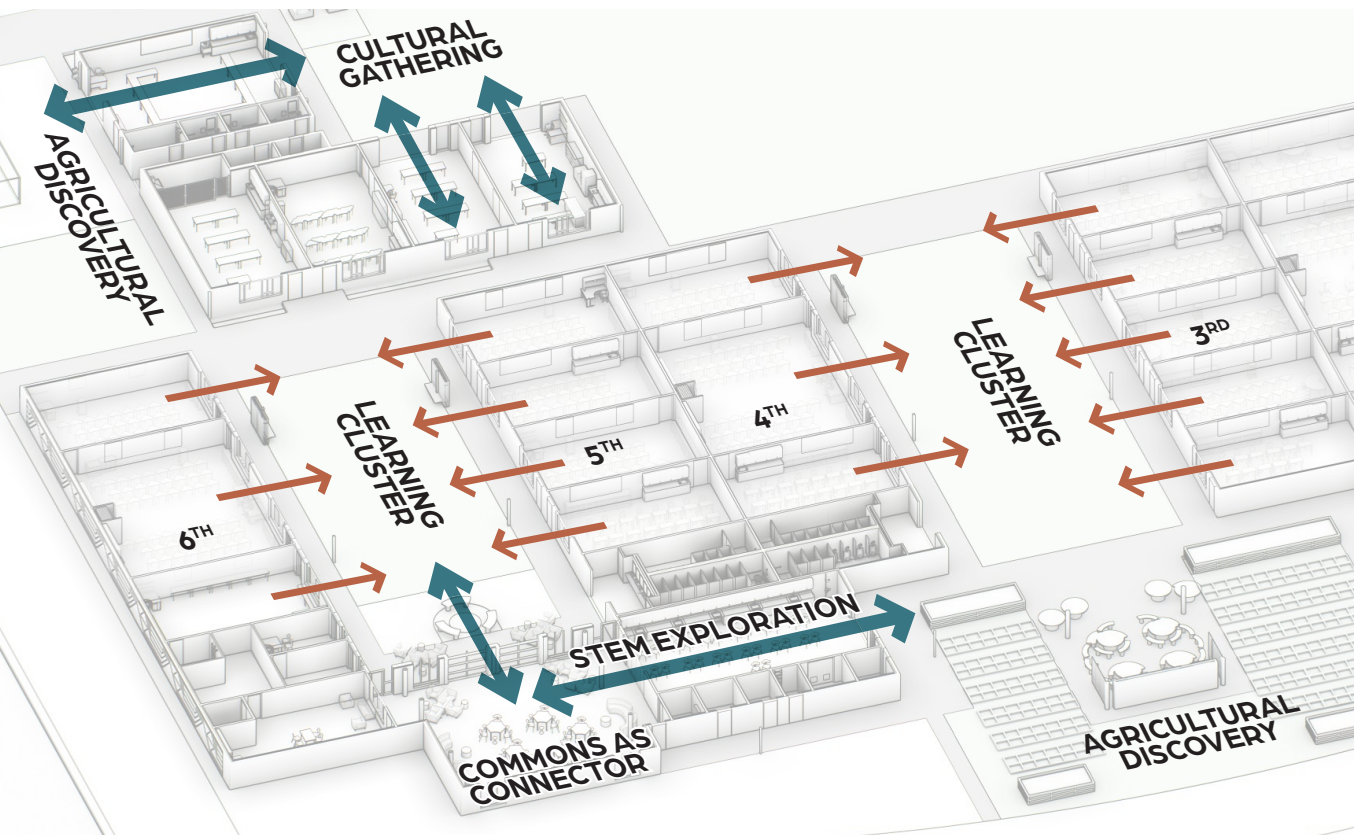
The school incorporates traditional forms and techniques. The Outdoor Classroom Pavilion is reminiscent the front porch of a Vigas, a traditional building form related to Pueblo and Adobe style architecture; all raised planting beds utilize a traditional sandwich panel housing construction technique.

Flow of space

Taking an every-space-for-learning approach, the project has been designed for teaching and learning to flow seamlessly between interior spaces and from inside to the outdoors. The Community and classroom buildings feature operable partitions so spaces can be expanded for large gatherings, assemblies and performances. The campus features outdoor and interstitial spaces at multiple scales that support a flow of educational and social activities. Well positioned areas for rest and repose provide a warm welcome to extended families, Elders and visitors.

Transparency and Connection

Culture, Learning, and Landscape



Floor Plan

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 MAIN ENTRY | 10 OCCUPATIONAL AND PHYSICAL THERAPY | 20 OUTDOOR LEARNING |
| 2 COMMUNITY ENTRY | 11 KINDERGARTEN | 21 OUTDOOR PAVILION |
| 3 ADMIN/MAIN OFFICE | 12 FIRST GRADE | 22 LANGUAGE, CULTURAL & APPLIED ARTS CLASSROOMS |
| 4 LIBRARY/MEDIA CENTER | 13 SECOND GRADE | 23 AGRICULTURE CLASSROOM |
| 5 MUSIC | 14 THIRD GRADE | 24 GREENHOUSE |
| 6 GYMNASIUM | 15 STEM / SCIENCE | 25 OUTDOOR COOKING AREA |
| 7 DINING | 16 COMMONS | |
| 8 FACES - FAMILY AND CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAM | 17 FOURTH GRADE | |
| 9 SENSOY CLASSROOM, SPED RESOURCE AREAS | 18 FIFTH GRADE | |
| | 19 SIXTH GRADE | |

5. Educational Environment



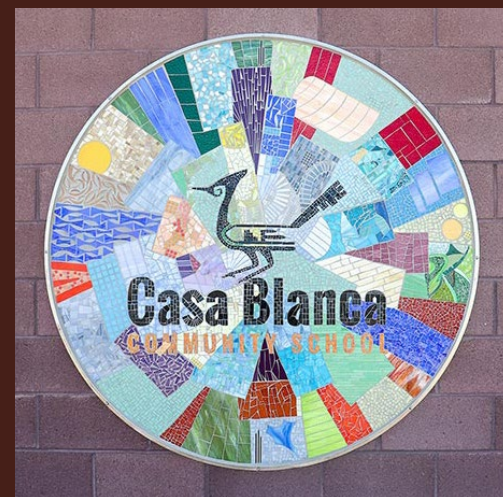
School Entrance – A Warm Welcome

The campus is organized on an east-west axis with the main entry facing east and a view corridor to the west that captures vistas of the Sierra Estrella Mountains.

A large canopy marks the main entry. Providing a generous shade structure, the canopy was designed to express a warm sense of welcome to all and represent an exciting gateway to learning. The fully operable gate, open for morning and afternoon access, features a corn-inspired motif, a traditional O'otham crop. Vertical elements that recall traditional Ocotillo fencing hide structural columns and provide a backdrop for integrated seating where visitors, Elders or family members can rest in the shade.

The school's extensive artwork program begins here with the school's mascot featured on the administration building and an enameled medallion at the gateway with iconography that represents the community, agriculture and the desert environment. Dimensional letters above the entry to the Family and Child Education Program (FACES) delivers a message of welcome in O'otham and English.

A glass cube signifies entry to the main office and presents an open and welcoming presence. The office includes a waiting area and parent resource room large enough to welcome extended families.





Sense of Place – The Campus Character

The design team worked to deliver a facility of lasting quality and educational value despite the fast-track nature of the project timeline. Considerations around the compressed schedule and extensive COVID related supply chain issues drove development of strategies to simplify and expedite construction.

Wherever possible, the team simplified and replicated building details and construction methods. The majority of the campus was built from locally produced and immediately available materials including concrete masonry units (CMU). To create visual interest, gathering spaces, signified by structures with butterfly roofs, wooden ceilings and clerestory windows, were intermixed with simplified building forms. Steel-frame canopies attached to the CMU structures provide shade along walkways within and between the classroom blocks. To add visual interest to several of the school's long masonry walls, colored block patterns, inspired by traditional basketry, were integrated.

Buildings are organized around both the large central lawn and each grade level cluster is organized around a smaller courtyard. The mild climate and operable doors in agriculture, music and each of the grade level clusters supports a constant flow of activity between the indoor and outdoor environments.





Land, Place and Culture-based education

An agriculture-based curriculum and Indoor-outdoor learning opportunities were a central objective expressed by Casa Blanca's stakeholders. The school's flexible and multi-functional language, art, culture and agriculture zone serves as an educational incubator for hands-on and regenerative cultural learning.

From seed-to-seed and season-to-season, students are experiencing an integrated curriculum through the lens of their past, present and future. Students learn about science and stewardship, traditional foodways and nutrition, craft and use of materials at the same time they are learning their language and O'otham's rich vocabulary for desert life.

Positioned adjacent to the school's secondary entrance, central lawn and cooking area, this zone serves as a hub of activity during and after the school day. Students are encouraged to share the program's bounty with their families and the broader Community. The agriculture classroom was designed as a flexible lab with direct access to the outdoors and plenty of space for tools, materials and student projects. The garden is maintained using recaptured rainwater.

As the project was nearing completion, Community members came in to build the sandwich house construction raised beds, the waffle planting beds and cooking pits for the outdoor kitchen.





Classrooms – Hands-On Learning

Casa Blanca's learning environment is made up of a series of interconnected spaces. Operable doors and walls support a direct link between interior spaces and between interior spaces and the outdoors.

The Outdoor Classroom Pavilion is reminiscent of a Vigas, traditional structures with large, peeled log beams seen in adobe architecture of the desert southwest. The structure is a fully functional educational space with shade, tables, a chalkboard, access to water and wireless technology. Surrounding the Pavilion are traditional planting beds with a range of crops under cultivation. Students learn about the cycle of the seasons and the harvest. All plantings are used in the curriculum, whether to teach traditional agriculture, contemporary science, learn about nutrition or to be harvested as materials for student art projects.

All classrooms include wireless technology, flexible furnishings and views to the outdoors; solar tubes minimize the need for supplemental artificial lighting.





Student Commons

Each student commons features an exposed wood timber ceiling, butterfly roofs, generous overhangs, clerestory windows. Operable doors support a seamless connection between the commons, the STEM classroom and outdoor Pavilion. These agile and flexible spaces can be used for project based learning, grade level assemblies, seminars and social events.

Other features include:

- Robust technology supports virtual and in person learning
- Student and Community art installations
- Courtyards fitted with artificial lawn that minimizes water consumption
- Butterfly roofs that feed into a system for capturing rainwater
- Clerestory windows enable daylight to penetrate interior spaces and minimizing solar gain
- Overhead doors that allow activity to flow from inside to the outdoors
- Outdoor patio with rain garden, seating area and native plantings

In addition to use by students, these common areas have been used to workshops and training for groups within the Community and groups visiting the Community.



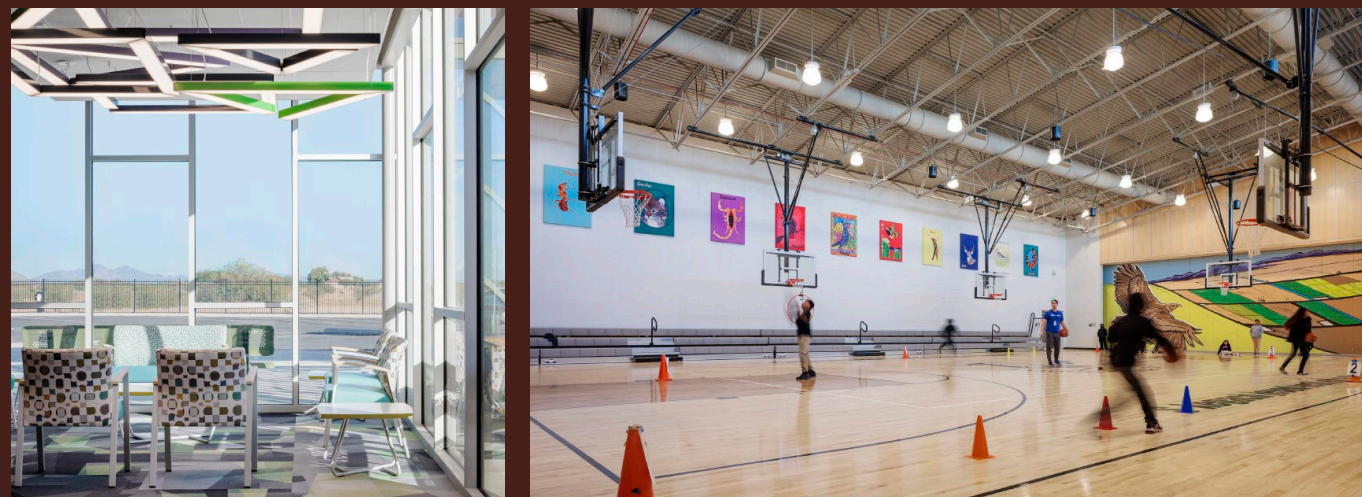


The Community Building

This building establishes the northern edge of the Casa Blanca campus and houses the school's core program spaces - Cafeteria, Gymnasium, Music, Library/Media and the Main Office. Adjacent to parking, a hardscape play area, the central lawn, cooking area and the agriculture classroom, the building is a flexible and multi-functional space that serves students and the broader Community. Creative adjacencies and operable partitions support flow of activities between spaces - the music classroom connects to an outdoor stage, the gymnasium can be converted into an performance space and the cafeteria and gym can be opened up to become one large event space.

The project's stakeholders identified these spaces, with a controlled and secure entrance, as a high priority for design. These spaces have hosted large school and Community events - from festivals, robotics competitions and sporting events to nighttime storytelling, and performances by regional arts organizations such as the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra.

The building has also been designed to serve the Community as an emergency shelter in times of crisis.





When All Really Means All



Integration for Special Needs Population

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Native populations have the highest percentage of students being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act.

Services to students with developmental and learning differences and assistance to the families affected by these issues was identified as a high priority during the engagement and planning phase. The Community sought a school that would provide specialized areas including sensory environments and small group learning areas. They also sought an environment that would allow these students to have access to their peers and a wide range of learning opportunities.

The school provides a therapeutic suite that includes an OT/PT area and multi-sensory room which utilizes soft seating, tactile and visual stimuli to provide a safe and calming environment for students on the spectrum.

Interactive and accessible playground equipment was designed to promote inclusion of students of all physical abilities. Each playground includes features for enhanced motor skill development and sensory stimulation.





A Curated Artwork Program Reflecting a Living Culture

Casa Blanca integrates a wide ranging artwork program that features artists from the Community. Specifically curated to help build pride and understanding of indigenous identity, the program ranges from 3 large scale masonry displays and oculi that draw inspiration from traditional basket patterns to murals featuring the desert landscape and relevant stories; from enamel panels depicting culturally significant plants, animals and motifs to detailed mosaics that express the Community's deep connection to the environment; from sensory walks telling a story while encouraging student movement and focus to informational signage where Elders are connecting students to who they are and where they come from. The campus is enlivened by these expressions.



Health and Wellness

In general, there is a greater range of health challenges in Indian Country when compared to other Americans. Cultural differences, inadequate education, higher rates of poverty, misalignment and discrimination in the delivery of services have resulted in lower life expectancy and the burden of chronic disease. Mortality in these populations is linked at higher rates of chronic liver disease, diabetes, unintentional injuries, assault/homicide, intentional self-harm/suicide and chronic lower respiratory diseases. The Gila River Indian Community has the highest rates of diabetes in all of Indian Country, approximately 50% of total membership. Issues around health and wellness are of urgent and immediate importance.

Interest groups documenting and advocating around equity and access issues recommend a holistic approach to health and wellness that considers perspectives encompassing the notion of connectedness (with the past and with others), strong family bonds, adaptability, affinity with nature, wisdom of Elders, meaningful traditions and a formation of a strong, resilient spirit.

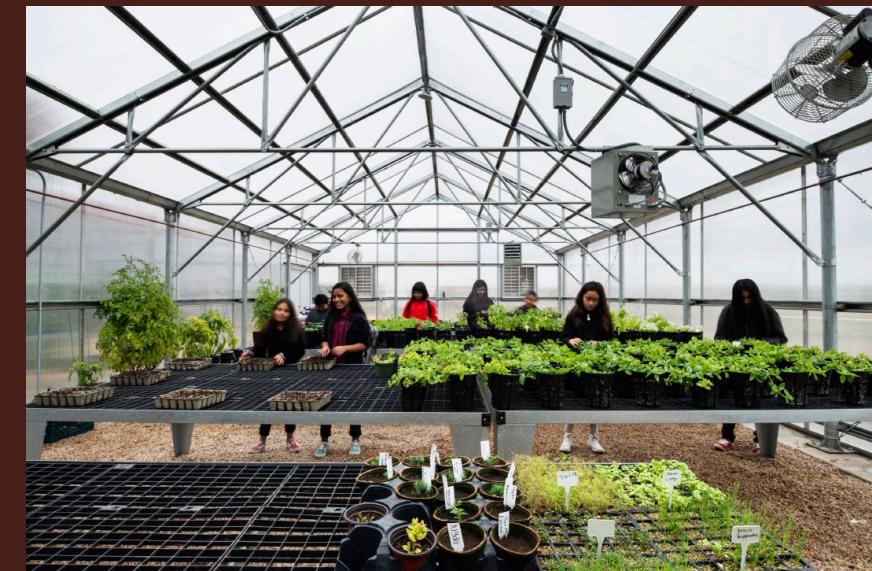
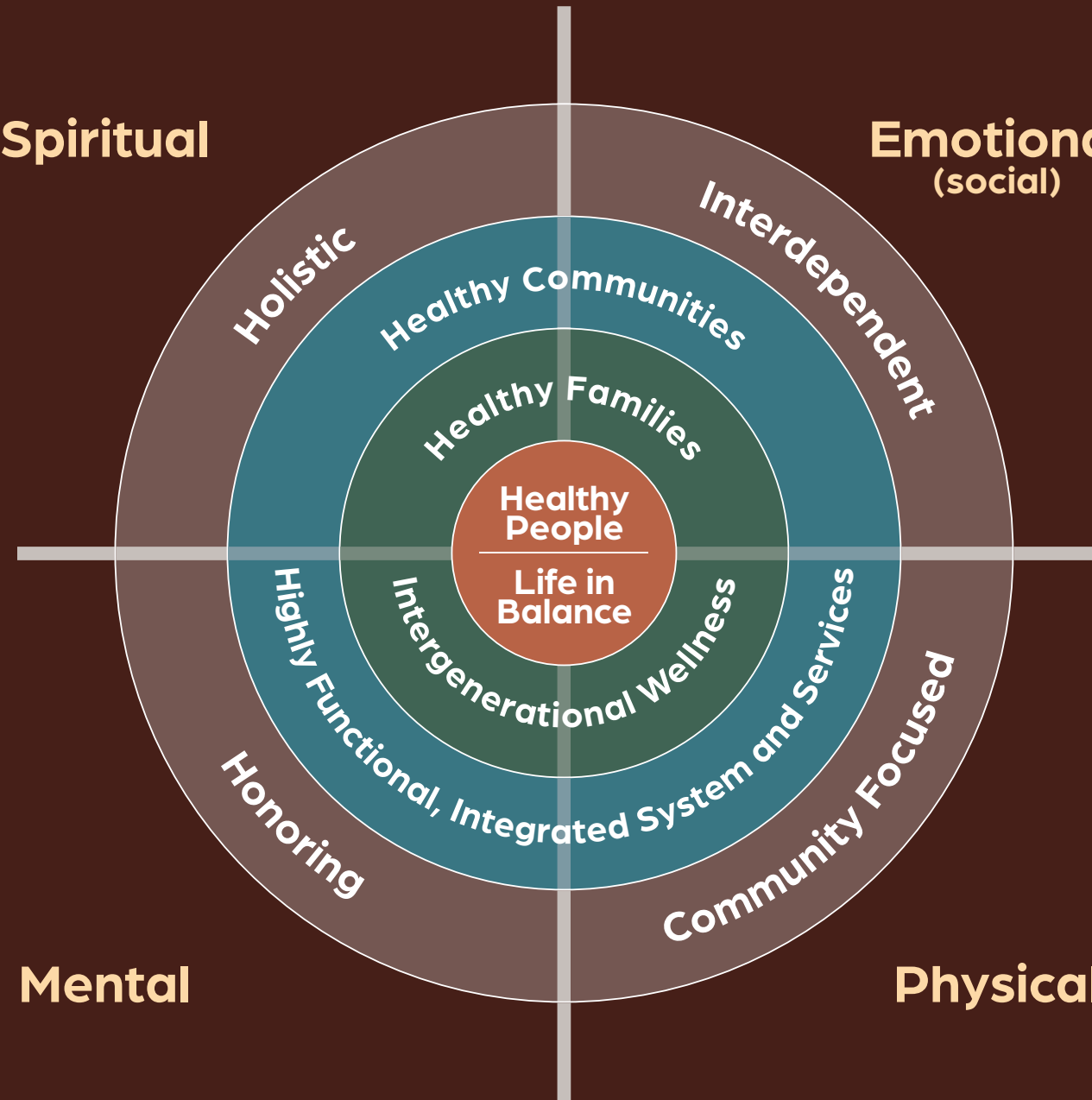
Casa Blanca's focus on agriculture is used to teach traditional and sustainable practices with a methodology that makes learning real and alive for students. Teaching focuses on health, nutrition, wellness, physical activity and traditional meal preparation as a way to instill good habits and self respect. The program supports addressing a range of issues that include obesity, substance abuse, social disconnection and diabetes.

In addition to a wide ranging curriculum, the campus provisions for accommodating vehicle-based/mobile health clinics. This programs and program run in the Community Building provide important dental, eye care and vaccination services to students and families.



Spiritual

**Emotional
(social)**



"...a holistic approach to health and wellness that considers perspectives encompassing the notion of connectedness, strong family bonds, adaptability, affinity with nature, wisdom of Elders, meaningful traditions and a formation of a strong, resilient spirit."



Sustainability and Resiliency

A nuanced and multi-layered approach to sustainability included conventional methodologies and cultural influences.

Ecosystems and Water.

The Community prioritized respect for land and management of water resources.

- Roof water is captured, stored, and used to irrigate planting areas.
- Limited rainwater flow across the site is preserved through a series of channels that redirect water around the site. Limited living lawn area reduced the need for potable irrigation water by over 60% from the baseline.
- Existing native plants were preserved and replanted; all supplemental plantings are native species, many with traditional uses.

Economy, energy and resources.

Passive and active strategies manage and limit consumption.

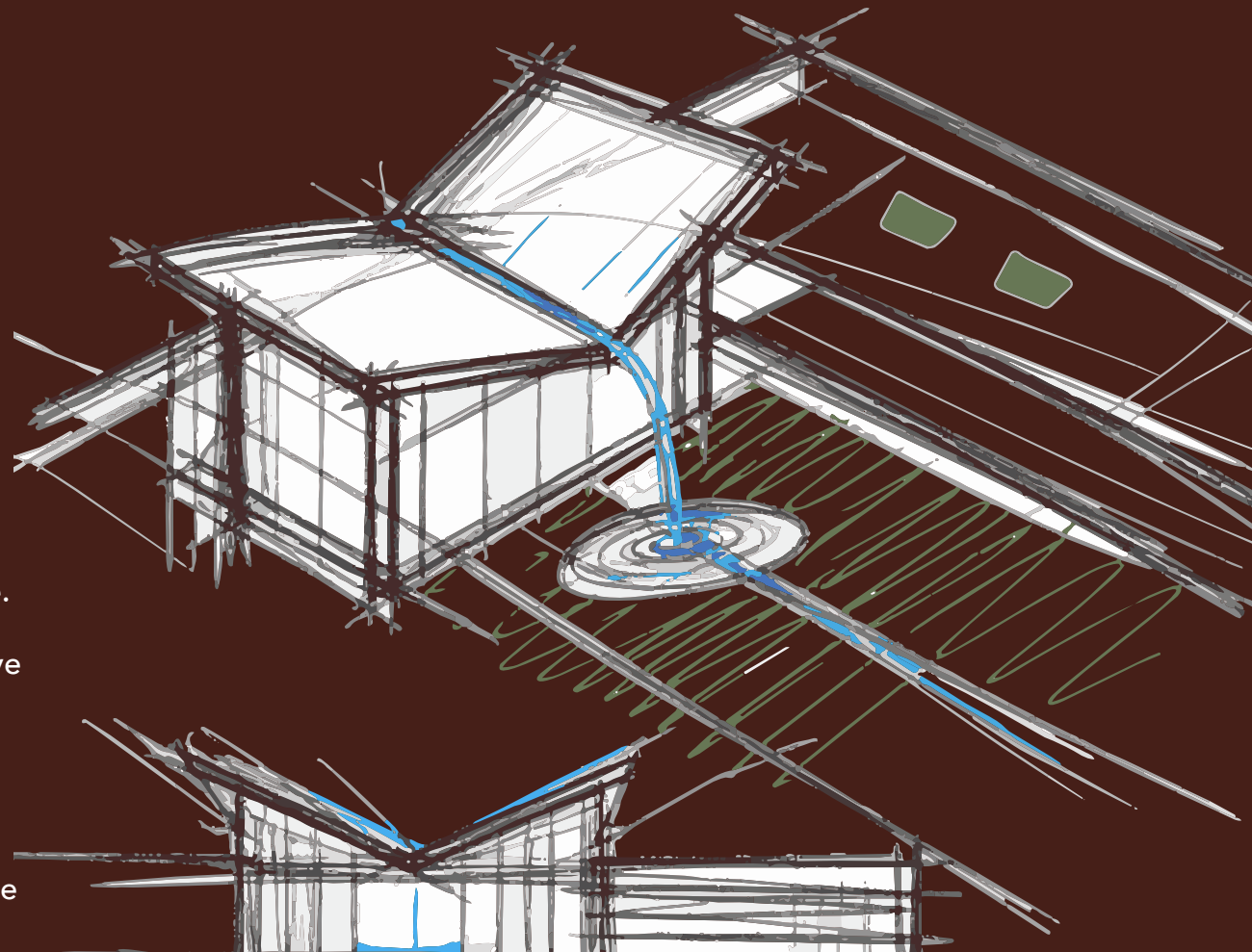
- The school was designed to be highly adaptable and efficient with all spaces available for teaching and learning.
- Building forms were simplified and made from locally available materials.
- Solar tubes bring controllable daylight indoors; walkway overhangs shade east/west facing spaces; clerestory windows provide daylight and limit solar gain.
- PV canopies shade parking and provide approx. 30% of the school's electrical power.

Integration and Equitable Communities.

The school was built to support the preservation of culture and language while preparing students for 21st century careers. Control of the planning and design process enabled the GRIC to exercise agency.

Well-being, change, discovery and resiliency.

The GRIC is an under-resourced community with a significant population of Elders. The school was designed to bring the community together and has been equipped as a place of refuge during weather or climate emergencies, with emergency power, cooling, hygiene and food service capabilities.



During monsoon rains, water collected from the commons and library roofs is directed visibly into a central cistern – transforming a rare climatic event into a shared moment of learning, gathering, and connection to the natural environment.

Rainwater flow across the site is preserved through a series of channels that redirect water around the campus.

6. Results

The Backdrop for Incredible Creativity and Extraordinary Work

The new Casa Blanca Community School opened in August 2021. Today, the facility has become the backdrop for incredible creativity and extraordinary work by students, teachers, administrators and families. The school community continues to explore to potential of the school and to leverage the educational environment to accommodate new programs and new learning opportunities.

Bringing Parents and the School Community Together

Today Casa Blanca's families who have children with special needs are referring others to the program including those outside the District 3, 4 and 5 catchment area. With the staff, program and facilities in place, Casa Blanca is bringing parents and the school community together to support the needs of their most vulnerable children.

"Our special education population has more than doubled."

"We can tell you exactly how many kids can introduce themselves in O'otham. Who can sing songs, who can say the Pledge of Allegiance, who can begin to hold a conversation."

"From seed to seed, the STEM cycle but also the cultural cycle."

"Because we have this space, we can do all sorts of things."

"Children are bringing it home. They are saying to their families 'Let's speak O'otham' "



Language Acquisition and Cultural Knowledge

The school's new Culture Jacket program is available to all students and has become a way for educators to motivate and measure progress in language acquisition and cultural knowledge. Each patch acknowledge an achievement and is presented to the student by a Community member. All students, regardless of ability, have the opportunity to participate and have their work recognized.

Contemporary Science Alongside Culture and Craft

Casa Blanca is delivering a highly integrated curriculum where cultural knowledge and contemporary learning operate in balance. Contemporary science sits alongside culture and craft, an endangered language is in daily use and connection to a productive desert landscape has been expanded and enriched.

Serving and Connecting the Wider Community

Today students are running assemblies, leading ceremonies, making traditional objects, practicing historic song and dance, and engaging in programs that serve and connect their wider Community. Students now think it's normal to have a robotics program, to learn coding and to have a makerspace. Whether they are engaged in growing food or deciding they want to create a podcasting studio for Elders, the students are practicing agency and connecting what they learn with their wider Community.

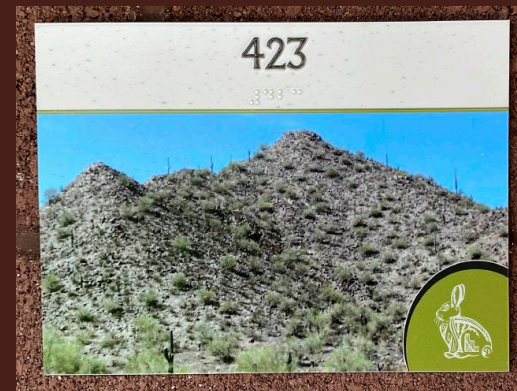
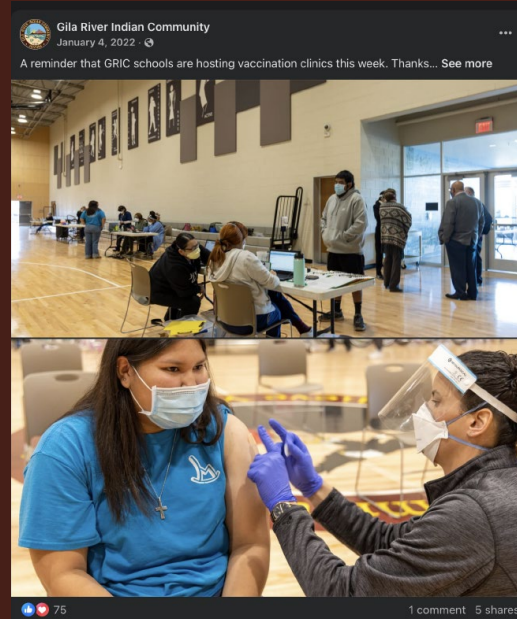
Driving Cultural Regeneration through Student Agency

Casa Blanca is helping to drive cultural regeneration through a process of student agency. Whether students are excited to teach their parents O'otham, or have a conversation with their grandparents who speak the language, they are taking pride in their accomplishments. Students are asking to plant gardens with the seeds they've harvested and the plants they have helped propagate. The cycle of learning and engagement has expanded beyond the school day and the boundaries of the campus – students are educating their families.

The Community

“Helping the community that’s around each student – the more prepared they are to come back every day and the more invested everyone is in what’s happening here.”

The new facility has transformed the daily experience of children but it has also transformed the school’s role within the Community. The impact is visible not only through engagement in school-based educational programming but in the reversal of cultural loss. Whether culture is defined by indigenous knowledge, social structures, traditional practices, language or a sense identity, the process of investment in education is helping to build and rebuild social connections, language, cultural practices and traditions.

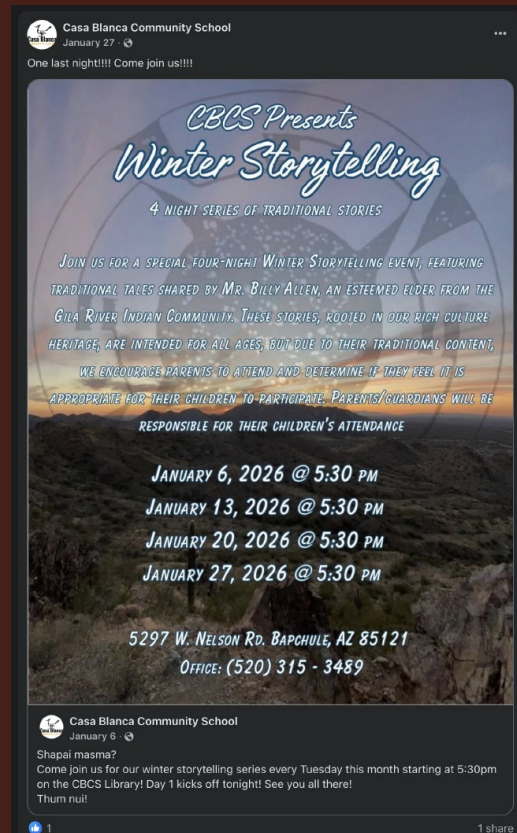


“When you’re given a gift like this, you have to make use of it.”

“I know who asked for that [during design], I know the human being.”

The design team’s initial engagement work was followed by a process of periodic meetings with stakeholders. These meetings enabled the team to share progress and provided an opportunity to hear feedback from select individuals who represented key constituencies. Elders worked closely with the design team on locations and implementation of the artwork program and on a system of campus signage that features historic photos and messages in O’otham and English.

From storytelling nights and music festivals to vaccination clinics and nutrition workshops; from fresh food distribution and the Miss Gila River beauty pageant to the Governor’s annual education summit and language immersion workshops, the school has become a part of the Community’s social, cultural and material infrastructure.



Impact on Indian Country

After visiting Casa Blanca, NCAI President Fawn Sharp said the knowledge and wisdom reflected in the school was timeless, better than what students could achieve elsewhere and NCAI planned to share the example "all across Indian Country."

"That's the power of the 105. Always in the hands of a community and it centers the conversation within the community."

Governor Lewis framed the project as a "success story for other Tribal Nations" because it shows how 105(I) leases and Tribal ownership can help Tribes build schools that fit their own educational goals. The Governor said the project demonstrates an innovative approach to building world-class facilities and described it as a success story other tribal nations could use in "nation building".

The 105(I) lease program has experienced explosive growth, expanding from 2 tribes in 2019 to nearly 1,900 leases in place by early 2026, serving as a key funding source for tribal facilities ranging from schools and police stations to health clinics.

There has been significant interest in the Casa Blanca project. The school has been visited by State of Arizona elected officials and has hosted officials representing the federal government as well as Tribal delegations from across the US. Stakeholders in Indian Country are eager to learn about the educational program and environment at Casa Blanca and how the Community leveraged Section 105(I) to fund school construction.

Tribal delegations have included individuals and delegations from the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, Navajo Nation, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Pechanga Band of Indians, Pueblo of Laguna, San Carlos Apache Tribe and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

The school has been visited by the Arizona congressional delegation and federal officials including Jason Freihage, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Management Indian Affairs and Judith Wilson, Director Office of Facilities, Property and Safety Management; Ambassador Susan Rice, Director of the U.S. Domestic Policy Council; Jaime Harrison, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee; Scott Davis, senior advisor to the Secretary of the Interior and Bryan Mercier (member Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon), Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

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While this funding has not been used exclusively to deliver educational facilities, it demonstrates how the Gila River Indian Community was able to unlock the wide ranging potential of a funding mechanism that may help to reverse "the downward spiral many Tribal Nations struggle with on a daily basis."



Casa Blanca

COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Despite the speed at which the Casa Blanca project was delivered, the Community and the project team did not compromise the quality of design or the final product. The 16-month schedule enabled the GRIC to place students in an appropriate environment at the earliest possible moment. Alignment of design and delivery, advocacy by Community leaders and educational professionals demonstrates that extraordinary things are possible.

Agency by the Tribal Nation was key - key in defining the parameters for design and in the success of the completed project. This project sets a benchmark for the possibilities across Indian Country and exemplifies a learning environment was shaped by community values, cultural knowledge and inclusive design.

“The Community truly believes. And this is something that was the foundation of design of this place. That all means all.”



Owner: The Gila River Indian Community
Owner's Representative: Steven Heeley, Esq.
Architect and Designer: JCJ Architecture
MEP/FP: G2 Consulting Engineers
Structural: Caruso Turley Scott
Site/Civil: DOWL Engineering
Landscape Architecture: Neill + Young Associates
Food Service: AZ Restaurant Supply
Geotechnical: RAMM
Construction Manager: CORE Construction

The design team wishes to express our deepest appreciation to the Gila River Indian Community leaders, stakeholders and Elders. We also wish to express our gratitude to Kim Franklin, Principal of the Casa Blanca Community School. Without her support this submittal would not have been possible.