

# HARRIS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

AUSTIN ISD | AUSTIN, TEXAS

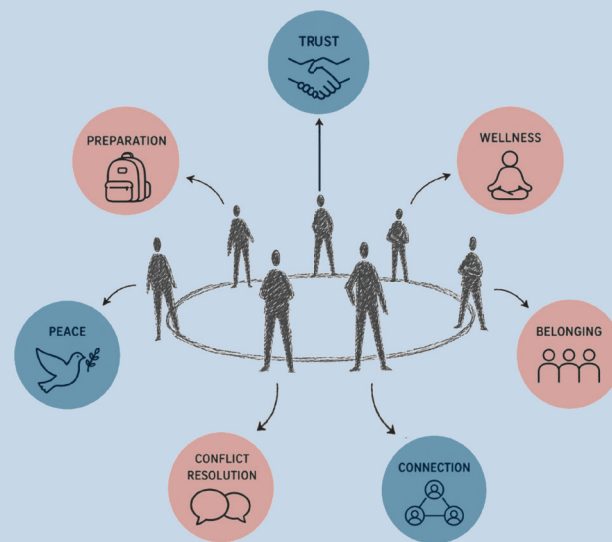


## AN OVERLOOKED COMMUNITY

Harris Elementary school, located on a historically overlooked area of east Austin, captures an “at-risk” student population. A staggering 95.3% of the student body is Economically Disadvantaged. Its economics are so severe that it is eligible for the federal Community Eligibility Provision - 100% of students are offered free breakfast and lunch without even needing to apply. **Three out of four students are identified as “at-risk” of dropping out**, 70% are bilingual and there is 26.9% absenteeism.

## DESIGNED TO HEAL

This project was not simply about replacing a failing structure, but about addressing the physical, emotional, and social conditions that were preventing students from feeling safe, seen, and supported. The design response is rooted in the school’s cultural practice of **“circling time” a daily ritual in which students and teachers gather as equals to build trust, regulate emotions, and strengthen community.** This principle of equity, transparency, and shared ownership became the organizing logic for the campus. Through an inclusive engagement process—including student-led design exercises that directly informed the U-shaped site plan—the architecture translates this mindset into space: open and connected learning environments, visible relationships between indoors and outdoors, and carefully integrated elements such as peace corners that support individual regulation within a collective setting.



## RESTORING TRUST

The result is a learning environment that restores dignity and belonging while supporting diverse ways of learning and being. **The new campus is a transparent, welcoming, and adaptable school that functions as a resource for both students and the broader community.** It provides a clear identity for the dual-language program, invites neighborhood use beyond school hours, and reflects a commitment to honest materials and healthy design. More than a new building, Harris Elementary represents a renewed relationship—one that communicates to every student and family that they are valued, supported, and meant to thrive here.





“ THIS IS A SCHOOL THAT WHEN YOU WALK IN, YOU FEEL A CALM, SOOTHING, WELCOMING FEELING. EVERYONE IS WELCOME HERE.

SONYA WYATT, PRINCIPAL

**AUSTIN  
INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT  
OWNER**

**PK - 5  
GRADES  
SERVED**

**522  
STUDENT  
CAPACITY**

**8 ACRES  
SITE AREA**

**96,037 SF  
BUILDING AREA**

**183 SF  
SF/ STUDENT**

**\$479  
COST/ SF**

**46 MILLION  
COST**

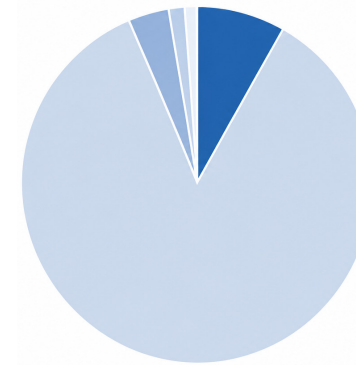
**DECEMBER 2025  
OCCUPANCY DATE**

# AUSTIN AND THE WINDSOR PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

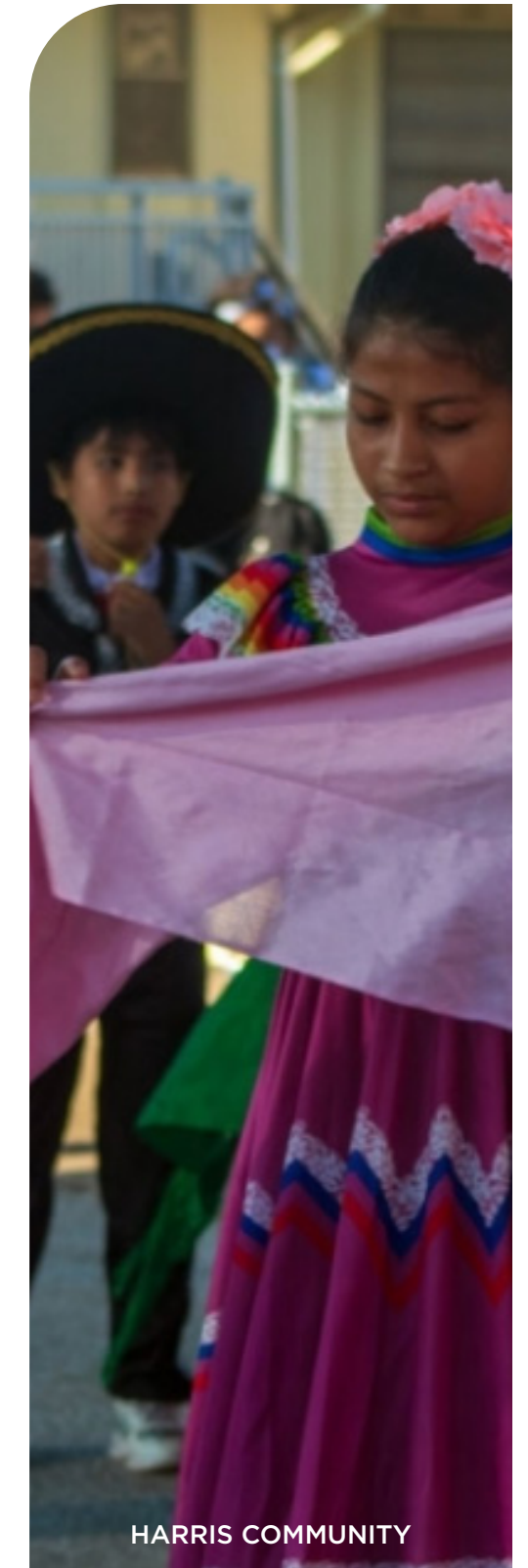
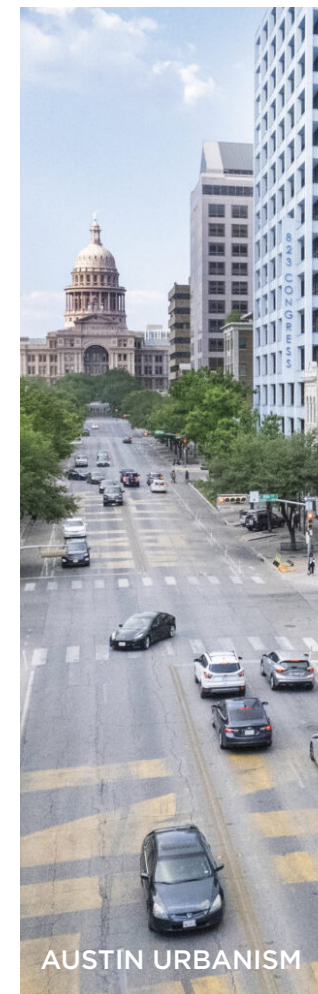
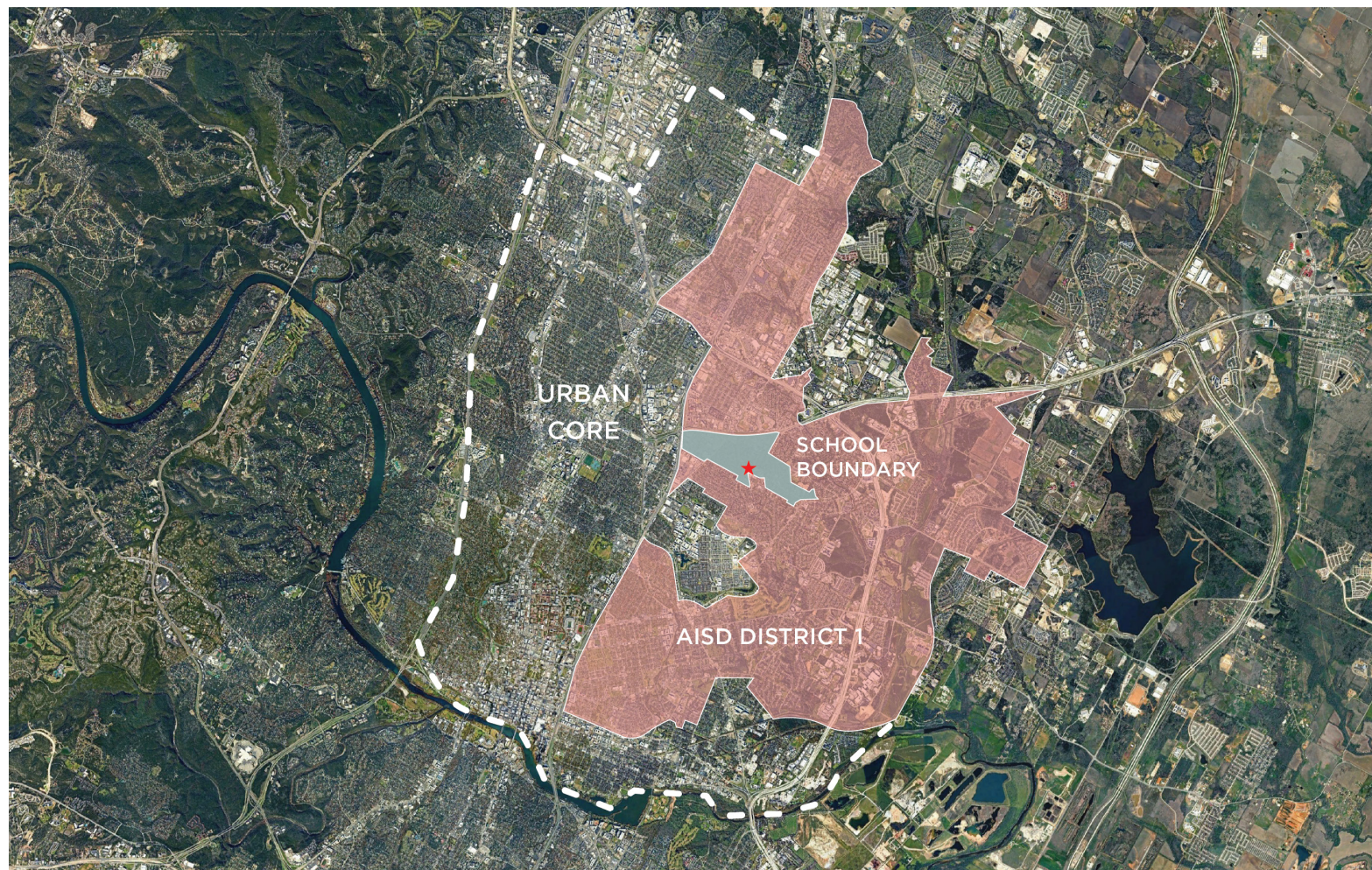
Harris Elementary is located in Austin, Texas—a rapidly growing and economically diverse city. In East Austin specifically within the Windsor Park neighborhood surrounding the campus, communities continue to experience the effects of long-standing economic disadvantage despite the city’s overall wealth expansion. Every year the contrast becomes greater.

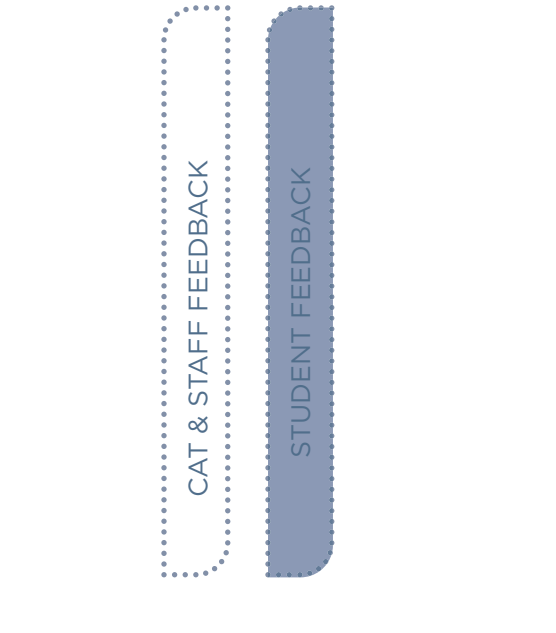
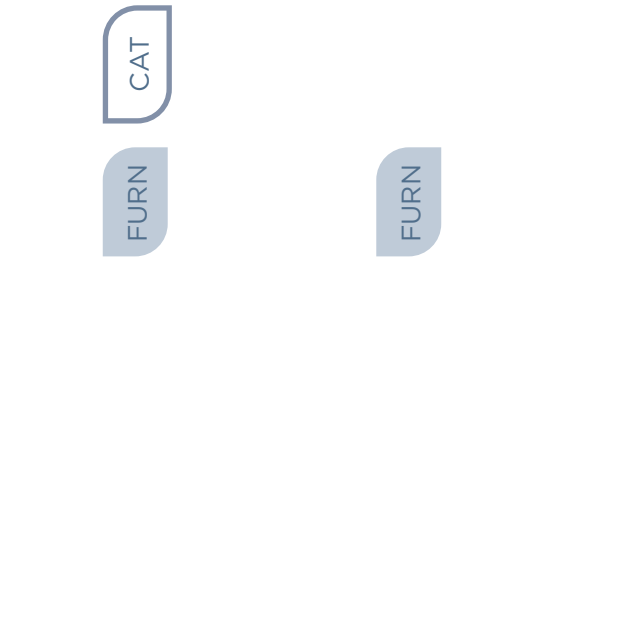
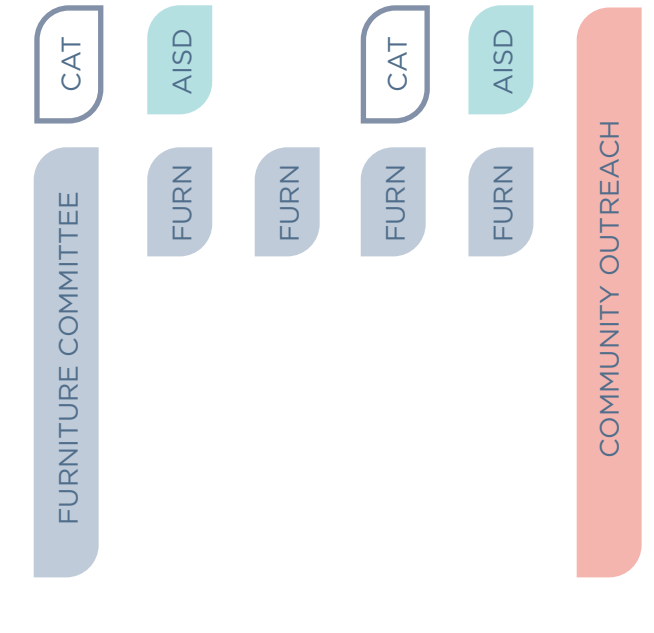
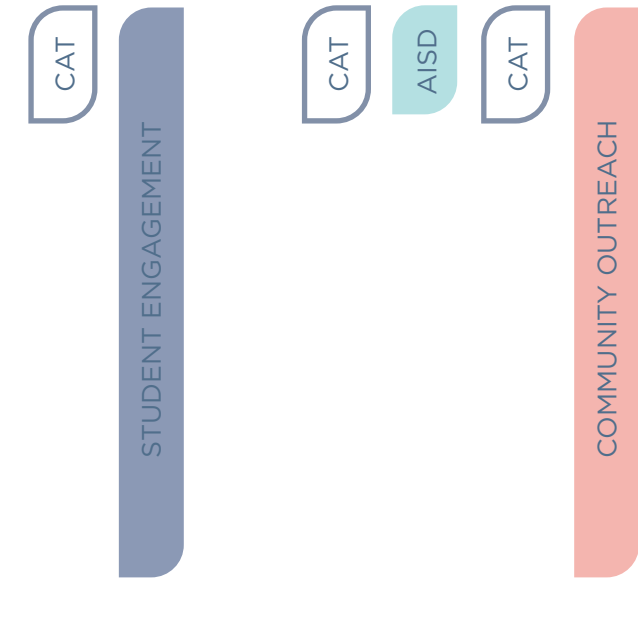
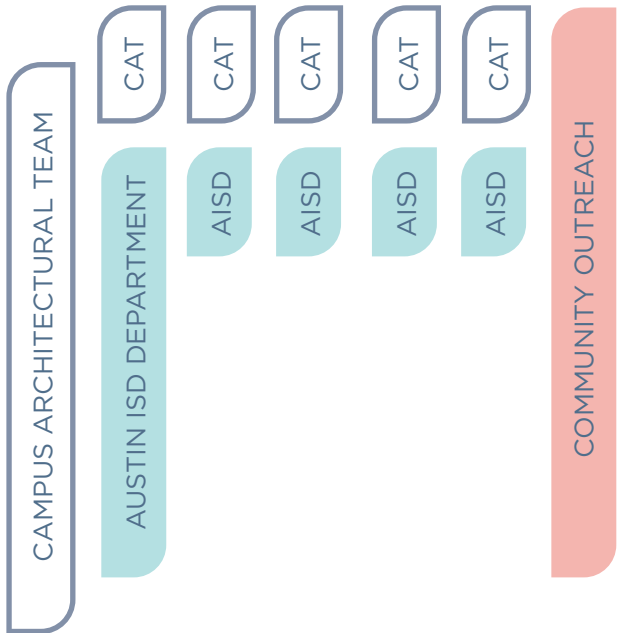
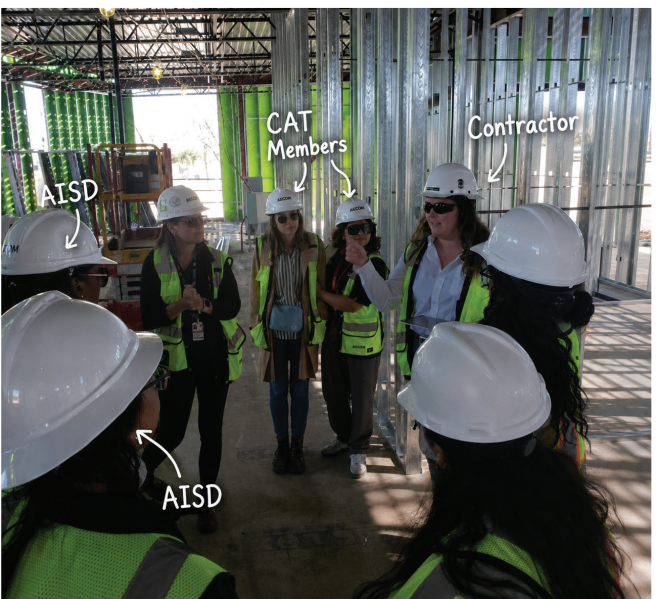
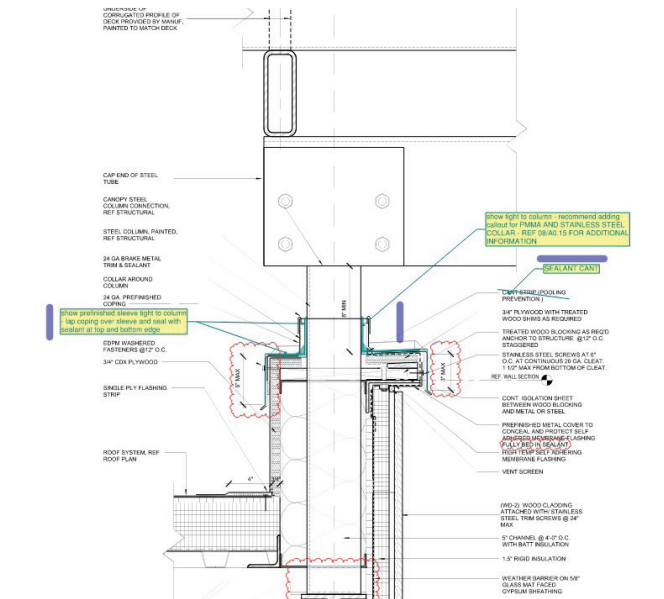
The local neighborhood lacked a strong civic presence—a central place for gathering, organizing, and supporting community needs. **Trust in the school system had declined, with students leaving for charter schools. The existing campus did little to foster community interactions.**

The existing Harris Elementary campus had become a physical reflection of broader community challenges. Aging infrastructure, poor indoor air quality, and limited resources impacted student wellbeing, while the overall environment reinforced a sense of disinvestment. **Many students arrive each day carrying significant emotional and environmental stressors, yet the campus lacked spaces that could support these needs.** The community needed a school that could rebuild trust, support student wellness, and reestablish the campus as a source of pride and connection.



- 8.9% African American
- 3.4% White
- 1.1% Asian
- 1.1% Two or More Races
- 0.6% American Indian
- 84.9% Hispanic





**CAMPUS ARCHITECTURAL TEAM**  
 The design team used an online voting tool to build consensus and ensure every voice was heard.

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**  
 Activities included drawing and envisioning new spaces in the school from an elementary student's perspective.

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH**  
 All community meetings were held, recorded, and shared online in both English and Spanish with support from bilingual team members.

**AUSTIN ISD DEPARTMENTS**  
 In addition to meetings, the district provided feedback through Bluebeam sessions at each design phase, ensuring alignment to district standards.

**POST OCCUPANCY**  
 Surveys, conversations, and observations were used to evaluate how well the building aligned with CAT goals.

## INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

To reflect the community it serves, the design process prioritized inclusivity. A Campus Advisory Team (CAT) composed of educators, district representatives, staff, parents and community members were the decision makers for this project - entrusted to shepherd the design team through the budget, educational specifications and cultural sensitivities of this project. **Workshops were conducted in both English and Spanish to reduce barriers and broaden involvement across the community.**

The CAT team visited other elementary schools together, helping stakeholders better understand educational possibilities and define priorities for Harris Elementary. Over two specific sessions, students also provided insight into what kinds of spaces would make them inspired to learn by making drawings of spaces they'd like to see in their new school.

**Through this engagement process, clear priorities emerged.** The goals shown below directly shaped the final design and established a shared vision for a school. A "Design Your Own Campus" exercise reinforced this alignment. Multiple stakeholder groups each arranged the building as a U-shape to provide a secure courtyard. This directly informed the final design.

CREATE A FEELING  
OF SAFETY

ENGAGE THE  
COMMUNITY

BUILD TRUST

SUPPORT DIVERSE  
LEARNING

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT



“THE ARCHITECTURAL TEAM WAS ENGAGED AND INTENTIONAL IN GATHERING FEEDBACK. WORKSHOPS, PRESENTATIONS, AND COMMUNITY MEETINGS SHAPED A SCHOOL THAT WILL SERVE THE COMMUNITY FOR YEARS.

LUCIA MANTERO,  
AUSTIN ISD PROJECT MANAGER

## SITE TRANSFORMATION

The original 1954 campus was organized as a series of disconnected building wings, leaving fragmented outdoor areas. The new campus consolidates the building footprint around a central, protected green space. Outdoor space supports visibility, safety, and meaningful outdoor use.

**“ WE GO TO THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM UNDER THE TREE. ITS NICE LEARNING WHERE STUDENTS NORMALLY DON'T.**

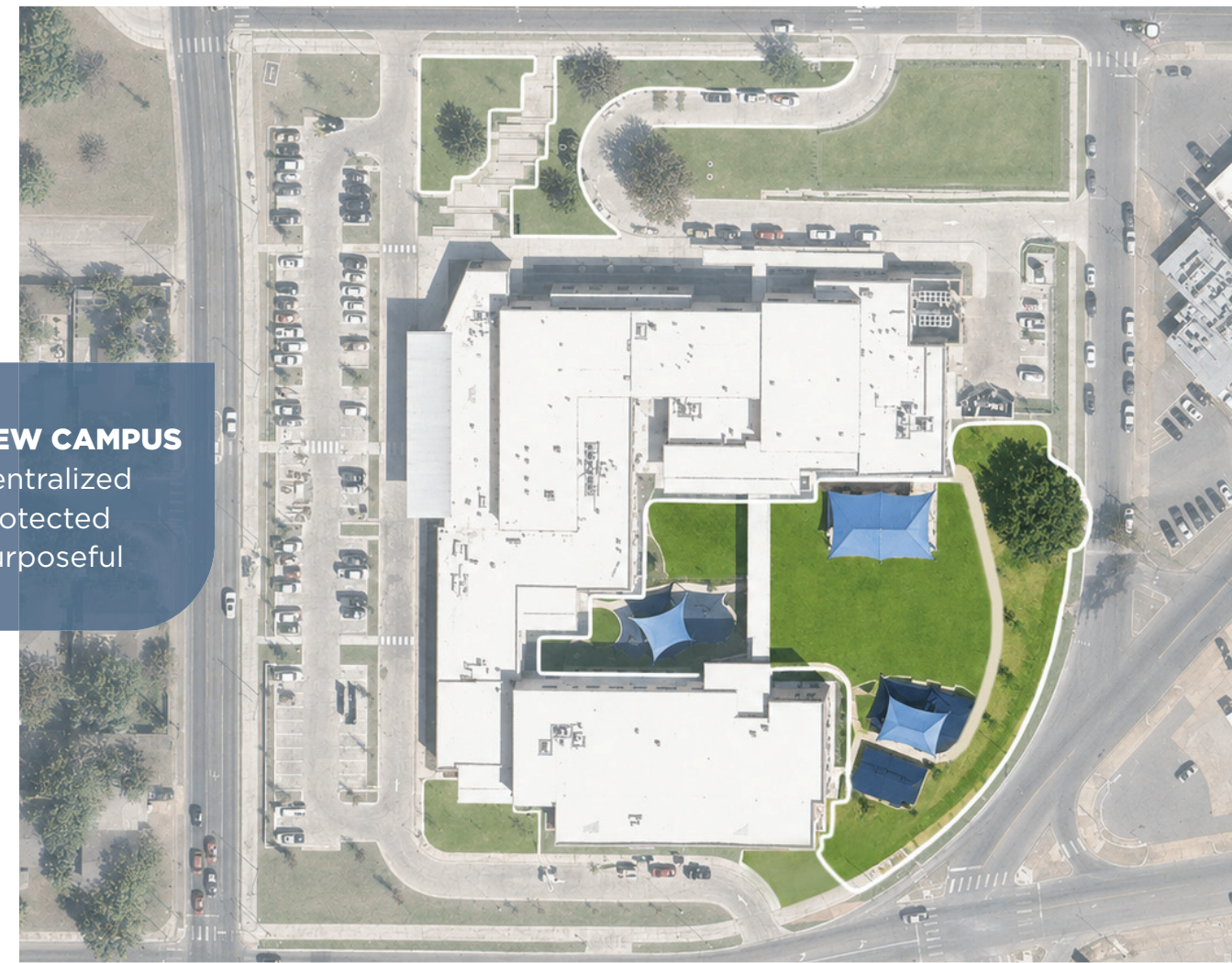
4TH GRADE TEACHER



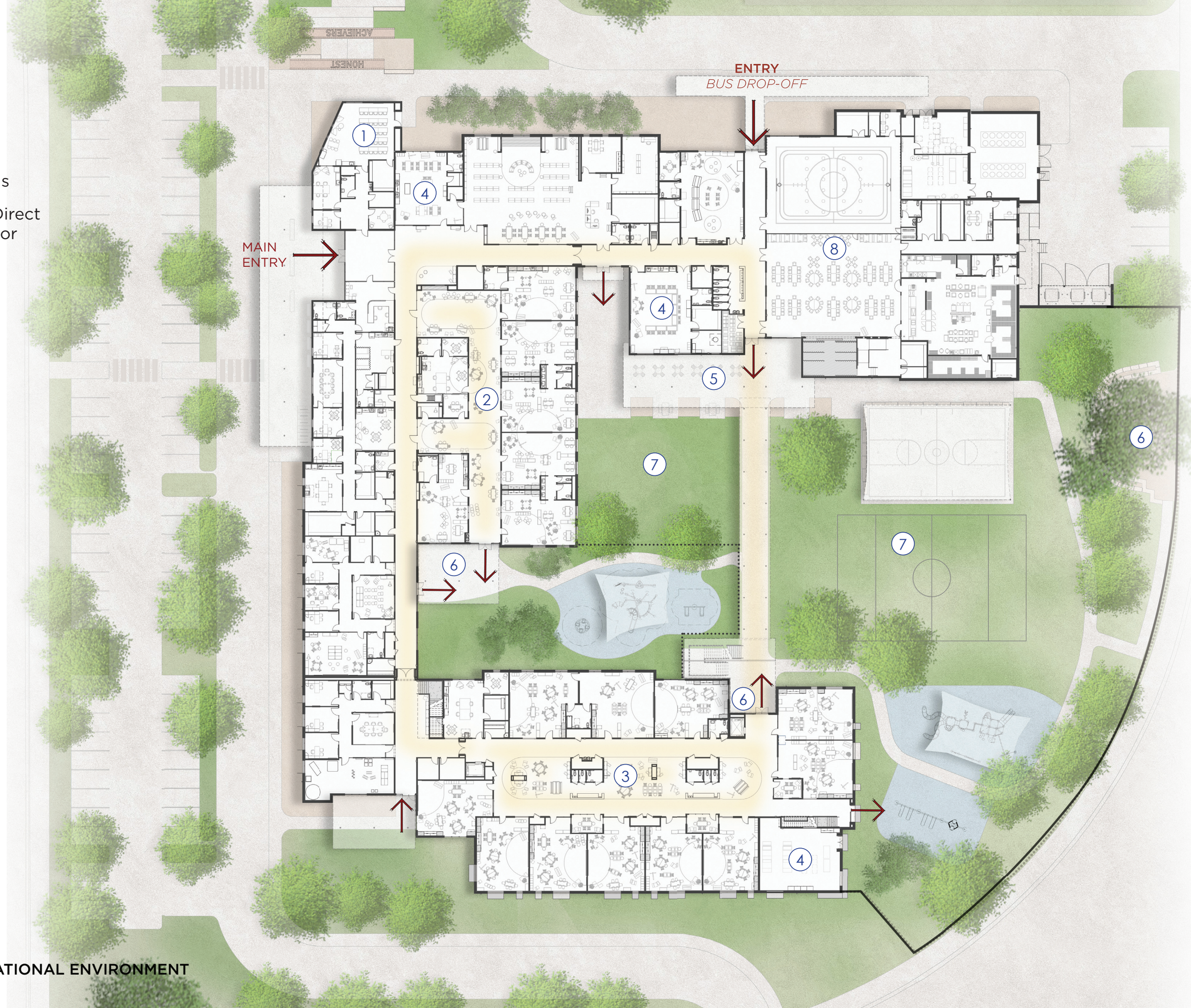
**OLD CAMPUS**  
Fragmented  
Disconnected  
Residual space

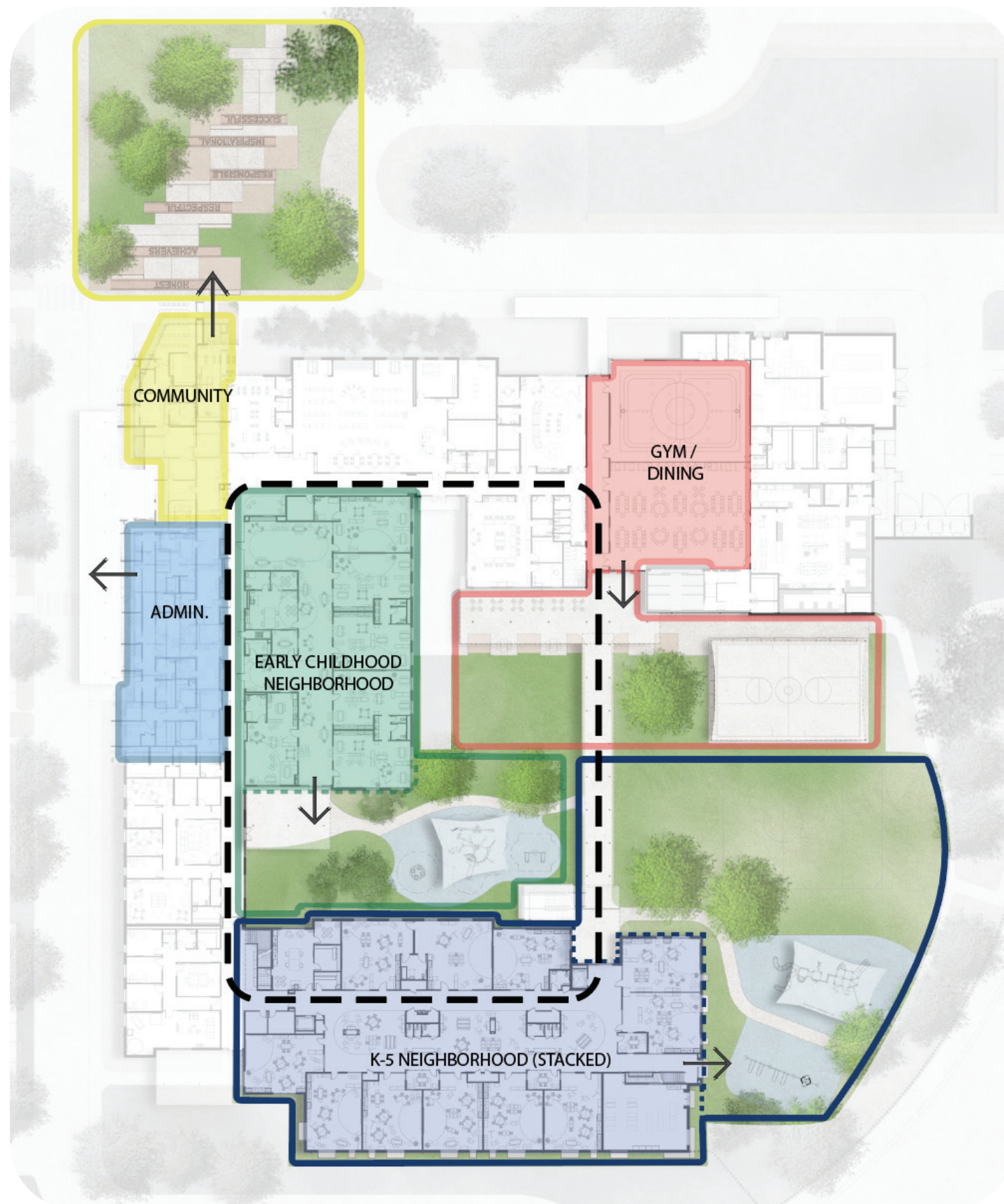


**NEW CAMPUS**  
Centralized  
Protected  
Purposeful



- ① Community Suite
- ② Early Childhood Neighborhood
- ③ K - 5th Grade Two Story Neighborhoods
- ④ Maker Spaces with Direct Access to Outdoors or Learning Spaces
- ⑤ Outdoor Dining
- ⑥ Outdoor Classroom
- ⑦ Secure Central Outdoor Play
- ⑧ Dining and Gym Commons





## A SUPPORTIVE LAYOUT

The campus centers around a protected courtyard that serves as the heart of the school. Learning neighborhoods function as **smaller communities within the larger campus, each with direct access to secure outdoor learning and play spaces.** Indoor and covered outdoor circulation paths support considered connections across campus. A simple but flexible circulation path allows for year round choice to navigate each of these neighborhoods.



Administrative spaces are positioned along the western public edge of the campus to welcome and oversee visitors as they approach the school. The community room **opens to a public plaza intentionally located outside the secured courtyard to remain welcoming and accessible** after school hours. The Dining Commons and Gymnasium have direct access to covered outdoor dining and a native butterfly garden.

“ I FEEL MUCH SAFER HERE THAN AT THE OLD SCHOOL.

SECOND GRADE STUDENT



PLAYGROUND



BUTTERFLY WILDFLOWER GARDEN



SECURE PLAY AREA



OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

“ I WAS BLOWN AWAY THE FIRST TIME I CAME HERE—I AM ALWAYS DRAWN IN.

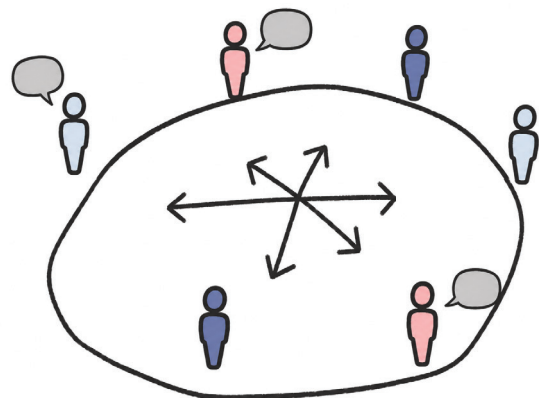
CANDACE HUNTER, AISD BOARD TRUSTEE



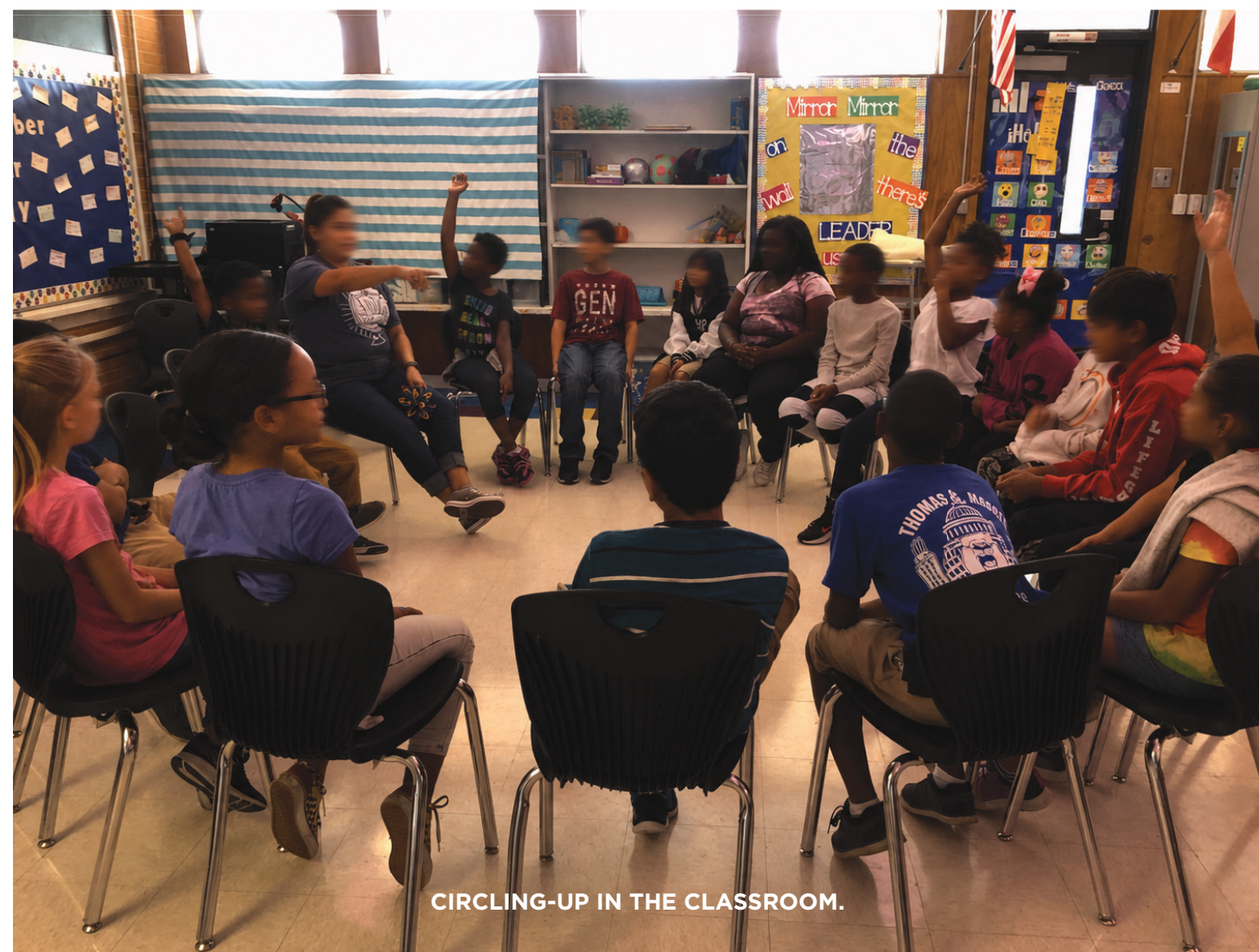
## CIRCLE TIME

According to the Institute of Educational Sciences, sitting in circles “teaches social-emotional learning skills such as listening, respecting others, and problem solving.” At Harris Elementary, each day begins in a circle. **Students and teachers gather with no hierarchy**—every person has a place, and every voice is equal. This daily practice builds trust, supports emotional wellbeing, and creates a shared sense of belonging. Harris’ signature “circle time” gathering approach became the foundation of the design.

**Circular forms appear throughout the campus as an extension of the circle-up practice.** Circular elements are found in windows, seating areas, ceiling forms and painted wall patterns. This uniquely Harris idea became one of the signature design strategies consistent throughout the school, supporting their daily educational vision.



**Circular**  
**Non-Hierarchical**  
**Inclusive**  
**Belonging**  
**Trust-Building**  
**Respectful**





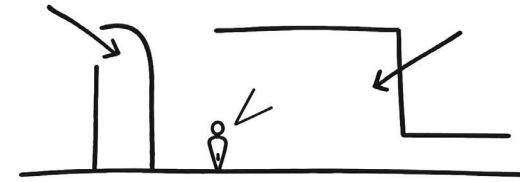
LIBRARY, READING STEPS

“I LOVE THE NATURAL LIGHT. IT MAKES THE WHOLE BUILDING FEEL BRIGHT AND WELCOMING.

FOURTH GRADE TEACHER

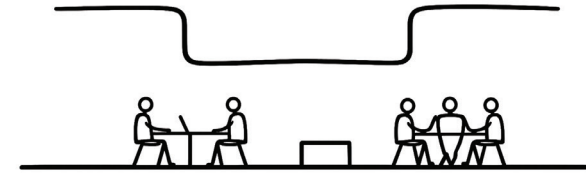


LIBRARY, READING NOOK



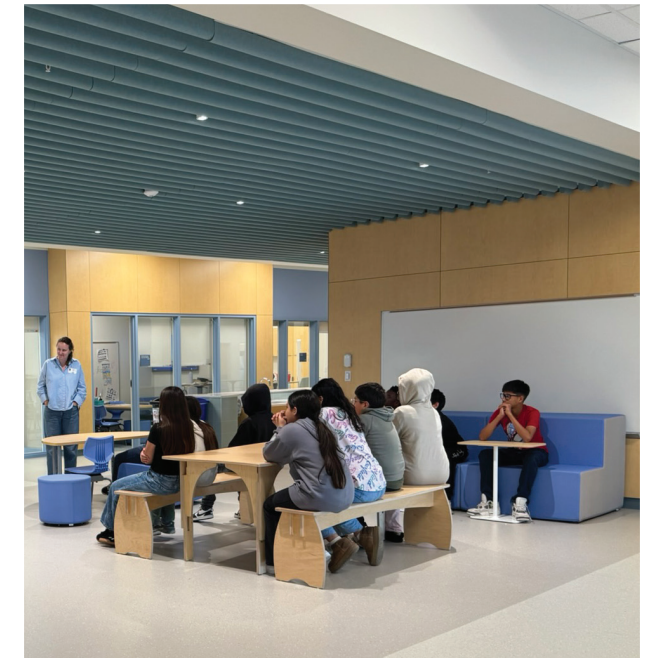
### LOFTY AND INSPIRING

Open, light-filled spaces create clear visibility and intuitive way finding across the campus.



### ENCLOSED AND COLLABORATIVE

Enclosed, human-scaled spaces support focused learning and small-group collaboration.



### PERSONAL AND FOCUSED

Smaller, informal spaces provide opportunities for retreat, independent study, and reflection.



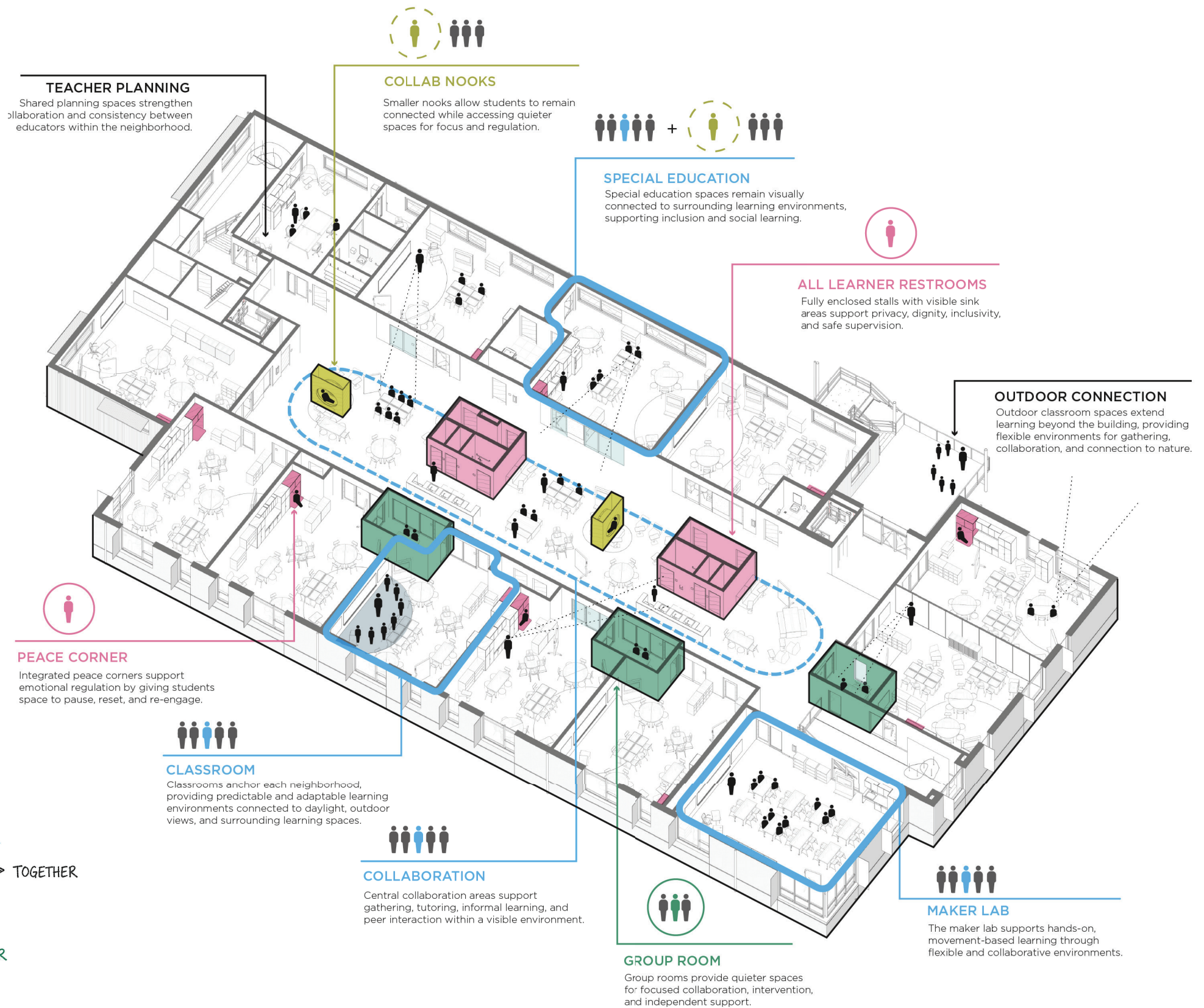
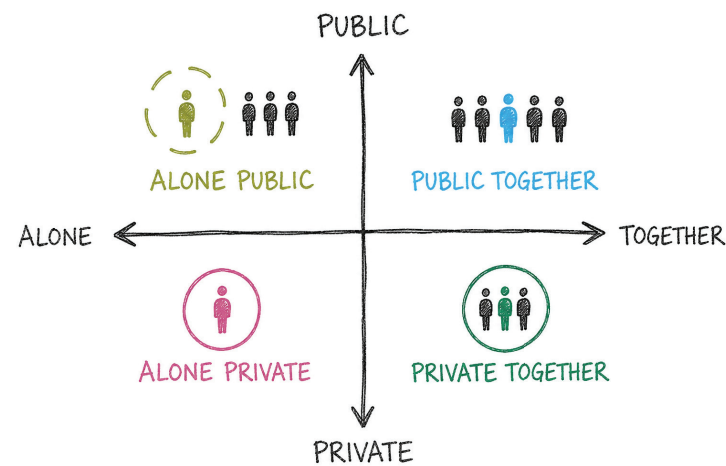
# THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Learning at Harris Elementary extends outside the traditional classroom. Each neighborhood is organized as a connected learning community that supports a wide range of learning styles, sensory needs, social interaction, and developmental stages. The goal is to give students safe opportunities for independence and choice.

The neighborhood model provides a **variety of learning environments that support students working alone and together, both publicly and privately.** Students can collaborate in visible gathering spaces, work quietly in smaller group settings, retreat into more private areas for focus and regulation, or remain independently engaged while still feeling connected to the activity around them. This range of environments supports neurodiverse learners by allowing students and teachers greater flexibility in how learning occurs throughout the day.

Classrooms act as the anchor of each neighborhood while remaining visually connected to collaboration spaces, group rooms, circulation areas, all-learner restrooms, and outdoor learning environments. This transparency allows students greater independence while maintaining visibility and support from staff, **helping prepare learners for the transition into middle school and future learning environments.**

The neighborhood model creates smaller learning communities within the larger campus—helping students feel secure, recognized, and connected



## THE FLEXIBLE CLASSROOM

The classroom is the heart of the learning environment at Harris Elementary. Designed to respond to a wide range of learning styles, sensory needs, and developmental stages, classrooms provide environments that are **predictable, connected, and adaptable.**

Furniture is scaled to the age of the students, ranging from floor-level, informal seating for younger learners to taller, independent work settings for older grade levels. A mix of formal and informal furniture supports movement, collaboration, focus, and student choice throughout the day. Students gradually build independence and confidence as they prepare for future learning environments.

Every classroom has direct views to the outdoors and nature. Access to daylight in 100% of learning environments ties the students to the circadian rhythm of the day. This reduces the demand for artificial daylight.

Integrated into each classroom is a dedicated “peace corner”—**a space built directly into the millwork where students can step away, reset, and return ready to engage.** These spaces normalize pause, reflection, and emotional regulation while remaining part of the everyday learning environment.

**“WE DIDN'T HAVE PRIVACY BEFORE,  
BUT NOW WE DO.**

FOURTH GRADE STUDENT

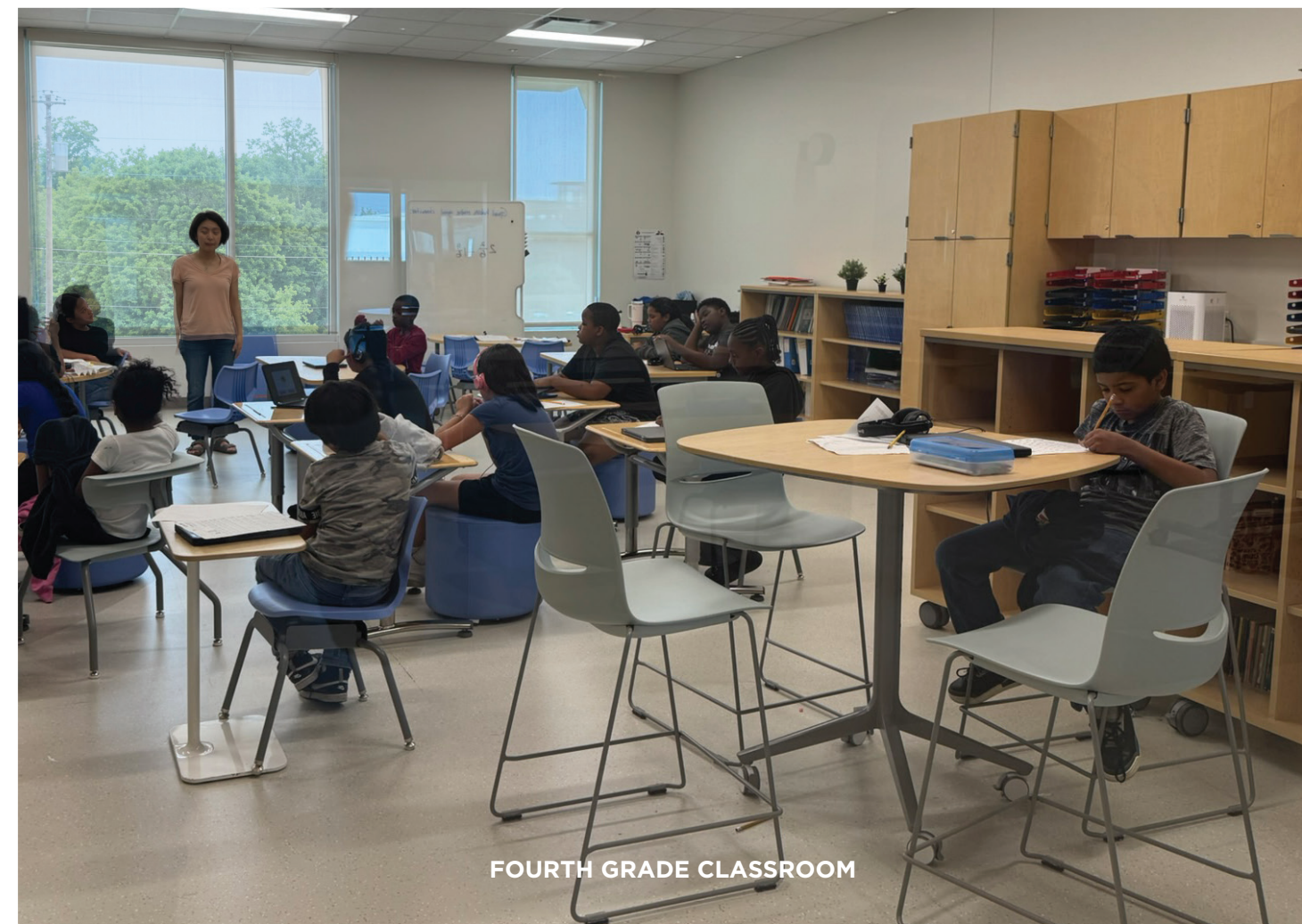
PHYSICAL AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



PEACE CORNER



PRE-K CLASSROOM



FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM



STACKED NEIGHBORHOODS



COLLAB FLEXIBLE FURNITURE



GROUP ROOM



ALL LEARNER RESTROOMS

## NATURAL LIGHT AND QUALITY VIEWS

From the moment a student is dropped off in the morning, they are welcomed with a generous outdoor canopy passively observable from Administrative and Counseling spaces. Clerestory windows bring natural daylight deep into the building. Exterior and interior aligned windows provide quality views for internal spaces. Cost effective canopies and window shading fins block direct sunlight.

SAFETY

TRUST



PARENT PICK UP AND DROP OFF CANOPY

ADMINISTRATIVE AND COUNSELING SPACES

CIRCULATION

COLLAB

**“OUR NEW BUILDING MAKES ME FEEL  
EXCITED ABOUT MY FUTURE AND THE  
OPPORTUNITIES TO COME.**

**FOURTH GRADE STUDENT**

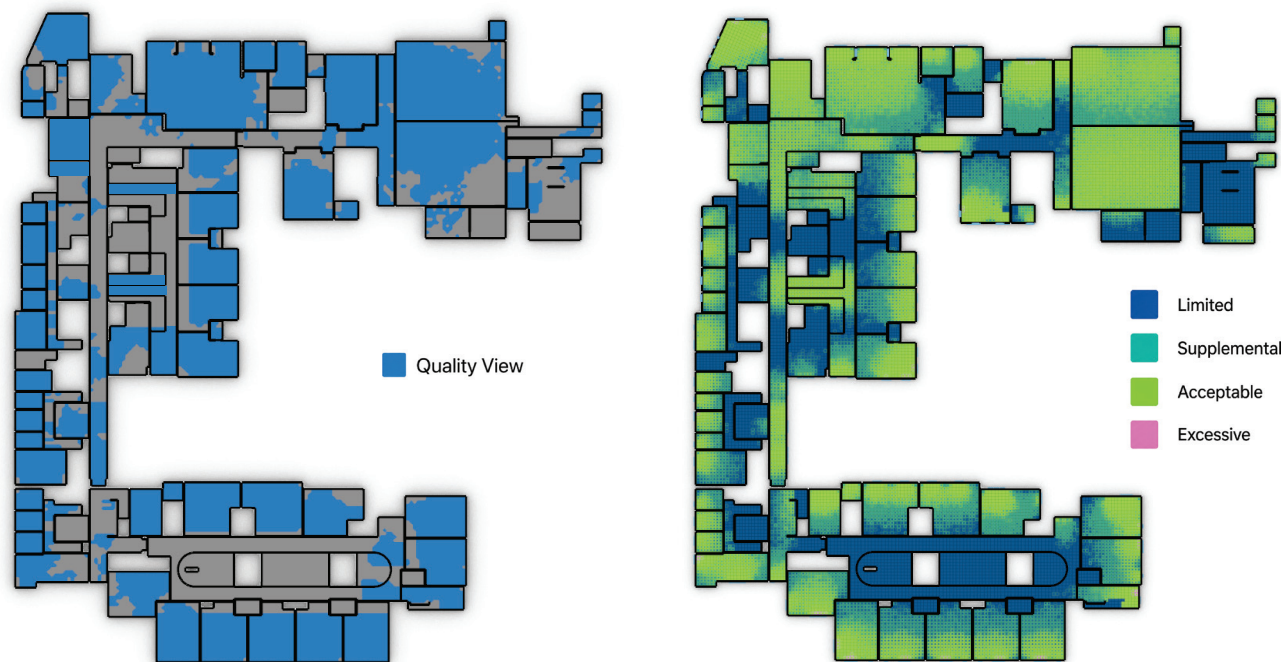


## PERFORMANCE

Harris Elementary, anticipating LEED Gold, strongly aligned with the Districts' goal of an environmentally responsible facility that reduces operational and embodied carbon. An in-house research team helped with selection and research of healthy materials.

Interior finishes were selected to amplify daylight, **improve indoor air quality, and reduce long-term environmental impact.** Light-toned surfaces enhance the reflection and diffusion of natural light, while low-emitting materials support healthier interior environments for students and staff.

The project also embraced a “less finish, less carbon” approach—reducing unnecessary material layers through exposed structure, polished structural concrete flooring, and durable finish systems that minimize maintenance over time. Quality view analysis was used to **evaluate how students and staff remain visually connected to the outdoors from within learning environments**, while daylight analysis tools measured the distribution, intensity, and comfort of natural light throughout the building.



QUALITY VIEW ANALYSIS

DAYLIGHT ANALYSIS

## RESULTS



- Anticipated LEED v4/v4.1 BD+C: Schools Gold Certification
- Pursuing AEG 3-Star Certification
- Over 60 products documented through EPDs, HPDs, and Declare labels
- Low-emitting materials specified throughout interior environments
- Interior daylighting strategies reduce dependence on artificial lighting
- Exposed structure and polished concrete reduce embodied carbon and finish material use
- Construction IAQ Management Plan implemented prior to occupancy

# HOW DID WE DO?

The post-occupancy evaluation engaged teachers, students, administrators, and community members in a conversation about how the new campus was shaping daily life, learning, and community culture. Through interactive discussions and surveys, participants reflected on the differences between the previous campus and the new, **revealing a significant emotional and functional shift in how the school is experienced by all.**

From the perspective of Harris' educators, learning neighborhoods, collaboration areas, small group rooms, inclusive restrooms, and the protected central courtyard support academic and social development. **One hundred percent (100%) of respondents feel that the new school supports collaboration and the broader community.** Student feedback emphasized choice, movement, exploration, and comfort, while leadership highlighted the campus's role as a learning environment and meaningful investment in the surrounding community.

## STUDENTS' MOST LOVED SPACES

- 1 Outdoor Play Equipment
- 2 Collaborative Spaces
- 3 Small Group Rooms
- 4 Dining
- 5 Gymnasium
- 6 Outdoor Classroom



## POST OCCUPANCY SURVEY RESULTS (STAFF)



OLD CAMPUS & STAFF ADJECTIVES



NEW CAMPUS & STAFF ADJECTIVES



Anguished  
Old Austin  
Unsecured  
well worn

future forward  
Safer  
modern  
beautiful  
hopeful  
bright  
open  
nice classroom set up

## A PLACE FOR THE COMMUNITY

Outside of the traditional learning spaces, the community suite has become a pivotal space for the community. It supports a wide range of uses, from parent meetings and workshops to health services and community gatherings, **creating a well loved and used civic amenity.**

Beyond its programmed use, the space has taken on a broader role in connecting students to their community. The room has recently served as a voting site, allowing students to witness civic participation firsthand and reinforcing the school's role not just as a place for learning, but as a center for community life.

“WE HOSTED VOTING HERE AND **THE KIDS SAW IT HAPPEN. THEY WATCHED ADULTS COME IN AND PARTICIPATE. THE SCHOOL'S TRANSPARENCY BRINGS HISTORY TO LIFE, IT SHOWS THEM THE WORLD. THEY COULDN'T EXPERIENCE THAT BEFORE.**”

SONYA WYATT, PRINCIPAL



## UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

The healthy materials strategies implemented throughout the project also generated **broader institutional impact.** When an antimicrobial flooring product was later found to conflict with the project's healthy material goals, **the district wide educational specifications were revised and a safer alternative was selected.** This outcome extended beyond a single project decision, influencing district standards and reinforcing a commitment to occupant wellbeing, material transparency, and healthier learning environments moving forward.



## POST OCCUPANCY EVALUATION FEEDBACK

SAFETY

LEARNING

COMMUNITY

TRUST

### HOW HAS THE NEW SCHOOL IMPACTED STUDENTS? (FROM TEACHERS)

“They’re more excited to be here... there’s a sense of pride in the school... they love being in a place that feels new and beautiful.”

“They can see where they’re going all the time... it feels like one space... they’re more aware and feel safe.”

“We’re able to collaborate more... we’re all closer together now.”

### HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR NEW SCHOOL? (FROM STUDENTS)

(FROM STUDENTS)

“I like just pulling up a chair and sitting with my friends—I couldn’t do that at my old school.”

“I can’t wait to explore all of the school—there are so many spaces that look fun.”

“I like that the restrooms are for everyone.”

### WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU NOTICED? (FROM STUDENTS)

(FROM STUDENTS)

“En mi escuela anterior, las mesas de la cafetería eran muy grandes... pero aquí podemos sentarnos en grupos pequeños con nuestros amigos. También tenemos más espacio para aprender y podemos trabajar en los pasillos... en grupo o individualmente.”



**“HARRIS ELEMENTARY IS PROOF OF WHAT’S POSSIBLE WHEN ARCHITECTURE TAKES EQUITY SERIOUSLY... WHEN DESIGN BECOMES AN ACT OF COMMUNITY CARING... WHEN ARCHITECTURE BECOMES A PART OF MAKING AUSTIN THE BEST PLACE IN AMERICA TO BE A KID.**

Kirk Watson, Mayor of Austin

