

A4LE 2026 JAMES D. MACCONNELL AWARDS

MALIBU HIGH SCHOOL

SANTA MONICA-MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
MALIBU, CA

NAC + KoningEizenberg

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Malibu High School project was shaped by a series of extraordinary challenges that extended far beyond conventional campus design. In November 2018, the Malibu community passed its first-ever “Malibu-Only” bond to rebuild the high school. Just days later, the Woolsey Fire burned over the hills, destroying 670 homes and advancing to the edge of the campus. **Developed during post-fire recovery and at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project demanded a fundamental rethinking of how educational environments can support new ways of learning, foster student belonging, and embody long-term resilience.**

While Malibu is often perceived as an affluent community, Malibu High School serves a diverse student population, including **families facing economic hardship and uneven access to resources.** Equity, accessibility, and inclusion became central drivers of the design vision.

Resilience was tested again in January 2025 when the Palisades Fire destroyed 720 homes and structures. With Pacific Coast Highway closed and power shut off, construction continued. When the school opened, it offered a moment of renewal for a community that had endured repeated loss. **Like a phoenix rising from the flames, the new Malibu High School stands as a symbol of resilience, survival, and hope.**

KEY CHALLENGE:

Design a building that answers three questions:

- **What does Project-Based Learning look like in a new building?**
- **How can a building support student belonging?**
- **How can school architecture create resiliency?**



SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET

The project scope included the design and construction of a dedicated high school facility on a shared middle and high school campus. The building establishes a distinct identity aligned with the Project-Based Learning instructional model and includes general classrooms,

science laboratories, art and project studios, administrative spaces, food service facilities, and integrated collaboration areas. The project was completed on schedule and opened for student use in August 2025.

1. Design Capacity: **525 students**
2. Building Area: **67,500 sf**
3. Construction Cost: **\$98,700,000 Total**



The School Community

Malibu High School serves its diverse students within a close-knit coastal community deeply connected to its natural hillside setting. The community places a strong emphasis on environmental stewardship, safety, accessibility, and educational excellence, shaping expectations for both process and outcome.

Stakeholders included students, educators, school district leadership, advisory committees, parents, local residents, and environmental agencies. Given the campus's proximity to an Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA), regulatory and environmental partners were also engaged throughout the process.



“I look forward to cultivating and fostering a collaborative environment which focuses on supporting our schools so that our students benefit from a collective focus to provide a 21st-century learning experience.”

— Isaac Burgess
Executive Director, Secondary/Malibu Pathway

Key challenges:

- Implementing a new educational model
- Addressing wildfire and wind exposure
- Significant grade changes impacting accessibility
- Sensitively integrating development within a constrained coastal site
- Renewing aging infrastructure while maintaining campus security and continuity of operations.

Project Assets

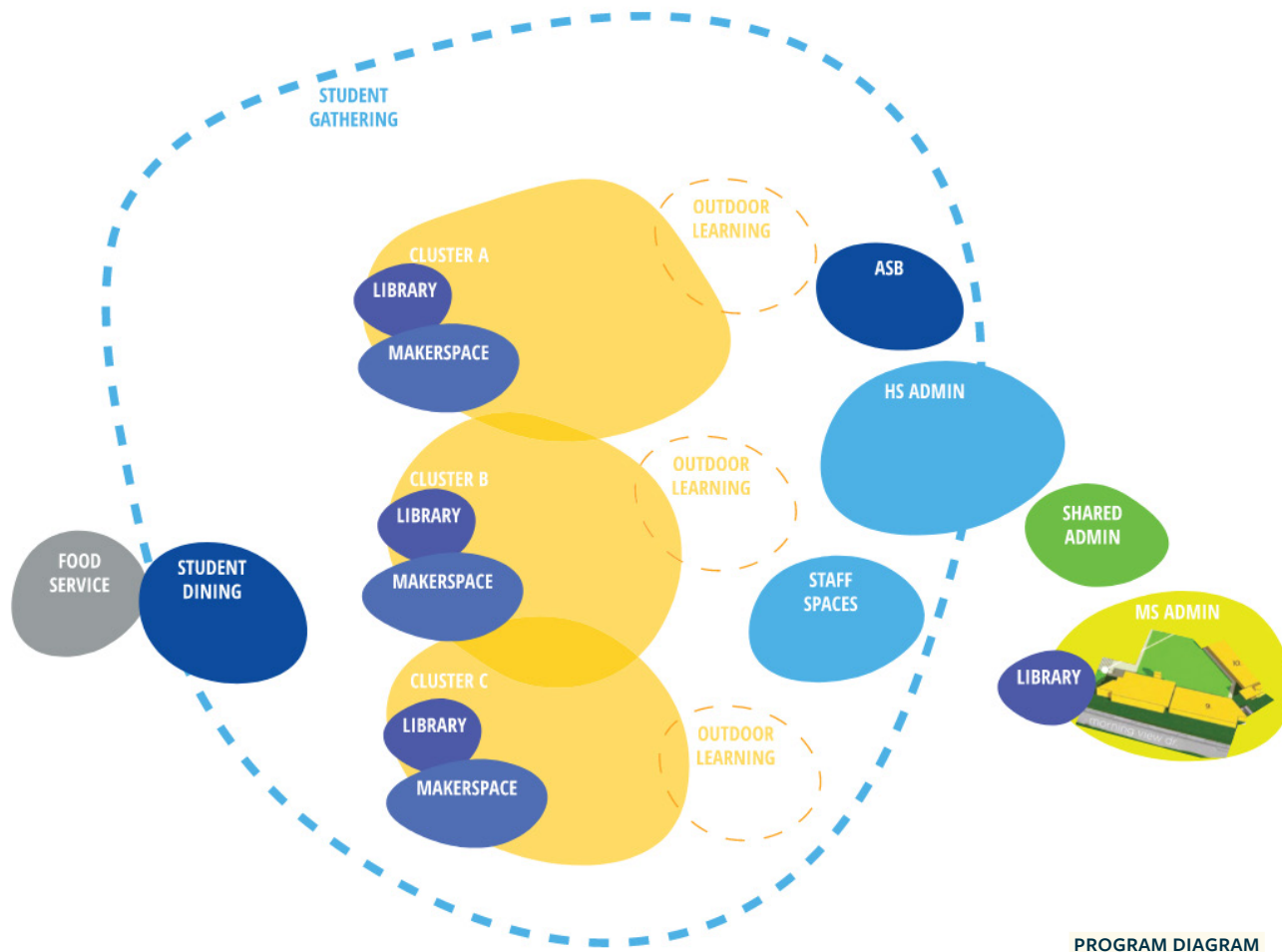
- Strong district leadership
- An engaged community
- Active student and faculty participation
- A shared commitment to sustainability and resilience.

Visioning a New Model of Learning Through Inclusive Engagement

The engagement process began at a pivotal moment for the community, emerging from the 2018 Woolsey Fire and unfolding during the early months of the COVID 19 pandemic. From the outset, the district and design team recognized that the project required more than a building solution; it demanded **a shared vision for healing, resilience, and a fundamentally new approach to secondary education.**

Rather than starting with a predetermined architectural response, the process was intentionally structured around listening, learning, and co-creation. A robust sequence of engagements, documented through Facility District Advisory Committee (FDAC) meetings, student workshops, departmental meetings, community forums, and sustainability charrettes, allowed the educational model to lead the design. Early visioning sessions focused on understanding how Project-Based Learning (PBL), interdisciplinary instruction, and 21st century skill development could be meaningfully supported by space, site, and systems.

Visual tools, comparative diagrams, and precedent imagery were used to move conversations beyond “yesterday’s education” toward environments that support collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking. This values based framing enabled diverse stakeholders to participate in complex discussions about pedagogy, resilience, circulation, security, indoor-outdoor learning, and long term campus evolution in accessible and meaningful ways.



PROGRAM DIAGRAM

“What radically student-centered learning means, is shifting from teacher-based teacher-driven, to a student-driven learning, students finding their own way, exploring their own way of learning.”

— Carey Upton
Chief Operations Officer Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District

A Transparent, Community-Centered Planning Framework

From April 2020 through early 2021, the project advanced through a highly transparent and iterative planning process. Bi-weekly meetings with district leadership were complemented by regular FDAC forums, ensuring fiscal oversight, accountability, and continuity. Targeted workshops engaged students directly, allowing their voices to shape learning environments, informal spaces, and outdoor classrooms, while meetings with teachers and department heads translated curriculum needs into spatial strategies.

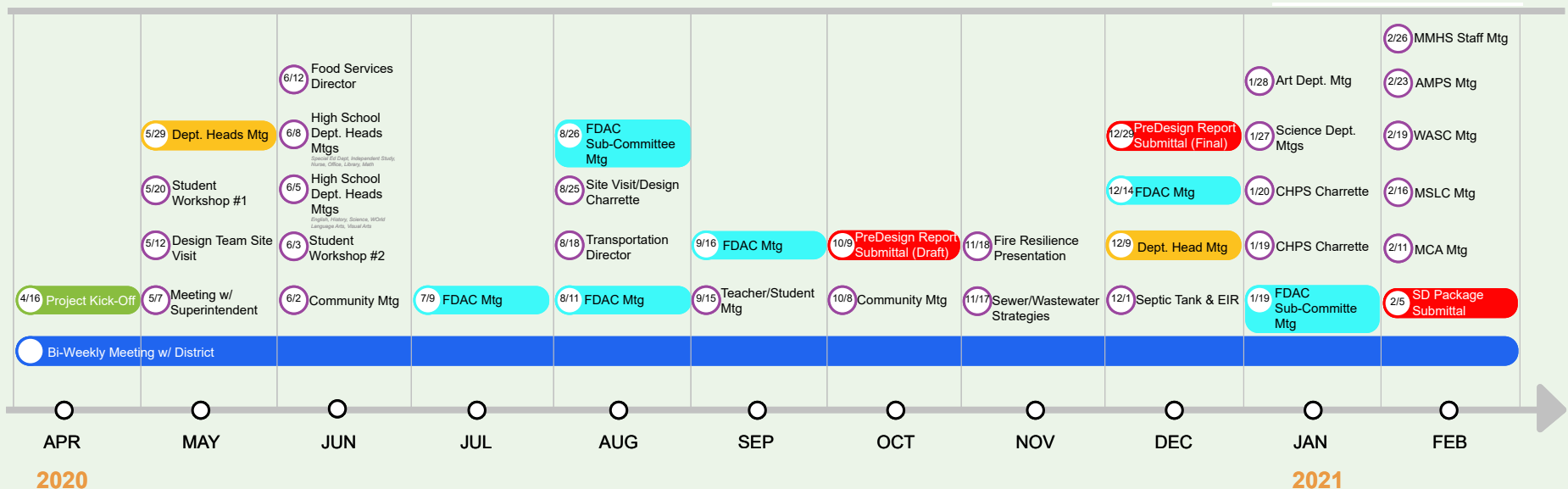
Community meetings created space for broader dialogue about wildfire resilience, environmental stewardship, campus access, and phased implementation. Presentations on fire resilience, wastewater strategies, septic systems, and environmental review demystified technical constraints and reinforced trust by showing how safety, sustainability, and regulatory requirements were being addressed holistically rather than in isolation. This layered engagement model ensured that decisions were not made in silos. Educational priorities, operational needs, environmental constraints, and

community values informed one another simultaneously, with collaboration through the entire design process, resulting in a cohesive vision shared across stakeholder groups.

Advisory Team Criteria for Measuring Design Success:

- Restorative and Supportive
- Celebrates and Encourages Reading
- Facilitates Community
- Contains a Tapestry of Spaces
- Feels Non-Institutional

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT SCHEDULE



Advancing Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Through Process

- Equity and inclusion were embedded in the Malibu High School process not as an add on, but as a guiding principle. Engagement intentionally included voices often underrepresented in traditional planning, students, special education representatives, independent study programs, nursing and student services staff, and food services personnel, ensuring the campus supports a full spectrum of learner needs.
- By organizing discussions around learning styles, accessibility, flexibility, and student choice, the process emphasized equitable access to opportunity rather than one size fits all solutions. Distributed learning models replaced rigid academic hierarchies, and campus connectivity studies addressed physical pinch points that historically limited movement, visibility, and inclusion.
- The emphasis on outdoor learning, informal gathering spaces, and visual transparency further supports social equity by offering multiple ways to engage, collaborate, and belong. The campus was envisioned as a place where students of different abilities, interests, and backgrounds can find spaces that support their success—academically, socially, and emotionally.



Vision, Values & Priorities of the District

1. **Student-Centered:** We make decisions and allocate resources with “students first” in mind.
2. **Equity:** We meet our students where they are and provide the necessary resources and attention to make all students successful.
3. **Engagement:** We engage students in meaningful, rigorous and relevant educational experiences where they are inspired, supported, challenged and motivated.
4. **Collaboration:** We are stronger when we work together, dialogue and listen to each other in a civil, productive way, to improve outcomes for our students.
5. **Diversity:** We respect and value our diverse student and staff population as an integral part of our learning community.
6. **Civility:** We work and dialogue with each other in a respectful manner, setting the example for our students of how civil discourse leads to positive outcomes.

Addressing Challenges Through Collaboration

The value of the Malibu High School project lies as much in how it was shaped as in what was ultimately built. Through sustained, inclusive engagement, the campus emerged as a shared community endeavor grounded in a central goal: creating a school where every student feels a deep sense of belonging. The planning process prioritized listening, trust-building, and adaptability—mirroring the collaborative, real-world problem solving at the heart of Malibu High School’s Project-Based Learning (PBL) model.

Student voice was not treated as symbolic, but as a guiding force. The process empowered students to help shape spaces that reflect their identities, support diverse ways of learning, and foster connection—between peers, between disciplines, and between the campus and its broader context. This emphasis on agency and inclusion strengthens resilience at the human scale, ensuring the campus feels safe, welcoming, and familiar even in times of disruption.

By restoring natural systems, creating publicly accessible pathways and shared amenities, and integrating educational signage throughout the site, the campus dissolves traditional boundaries between classroom, landscape, and community. These features extend PBL beyond interior spaces, turning ecological systems, infrastructure, and resilience strategies into lived learning experiences. At the same time, they reinforce a sense of ownership and pride, helping students feel rooted in place and recognized as contributors to a larger community.

Ultimately, the process delivered more than a high-performance campus—it cultivated a resilient, inclusive, and deeply student-centered learning environment where belonging is reinforced through daily experience. Malibu High School stands as a model for how thoughtful, community-driven engagement can transform adversity into opportunity, creating educational environments that support student identity, foster resilience, and prepare young people to thrive in an uncertain and interconnected world.



2.5 Acres (ESHA) Environmentally Sensitive Habitat

- Removal of invasive species, weeds, and non-native engineered soil
- Re-sloping of existing grade to restore the natural hillside and re-direct storm water to limit further erosion

Outdoor Classrooms

- Learning extends beyond the classrooms through various flexible arrangements for learning to take place outside

Interpretive Landscape

Research space

Equestrian Trails

- ESHA awareness is raised with new educational signage highlighting the natural flora and fauna along the trail

Sustainability Built In

- 10,561 SF permeable paving
- Reclaimed water irrigation
- Durable, weathering materials selected for coastal hillside conditions
- Bio-retention pits and stormwater swales

Landscape as Teaching Tool

- Interpretive signage teaches students about the sustainability features of the site's design

Eliminating Light Pollution

- Adhering to *Malibu Coast's Dark Skies Ordinance*
- Limiting light levels to those required for safety
- Shielding the ESHA from any artificial light
- No up-lighting anywhere on site

SITE PLAN 0 10 20 40 60 80

Physical Attributes of the Environment

The campus is physically and visually integrated into the surrounding community through restored natural systems, improved pedestrian connectivity, and shared public amenities. Campus pathways align with existing public routes and equestrian trails, reinforcing the school's role as a civic asset rather than a closed institution. Public access to athletic fields, the pool, and outdoor spaces strengthens community ownership while maintaining appropriate security and operational clarity.

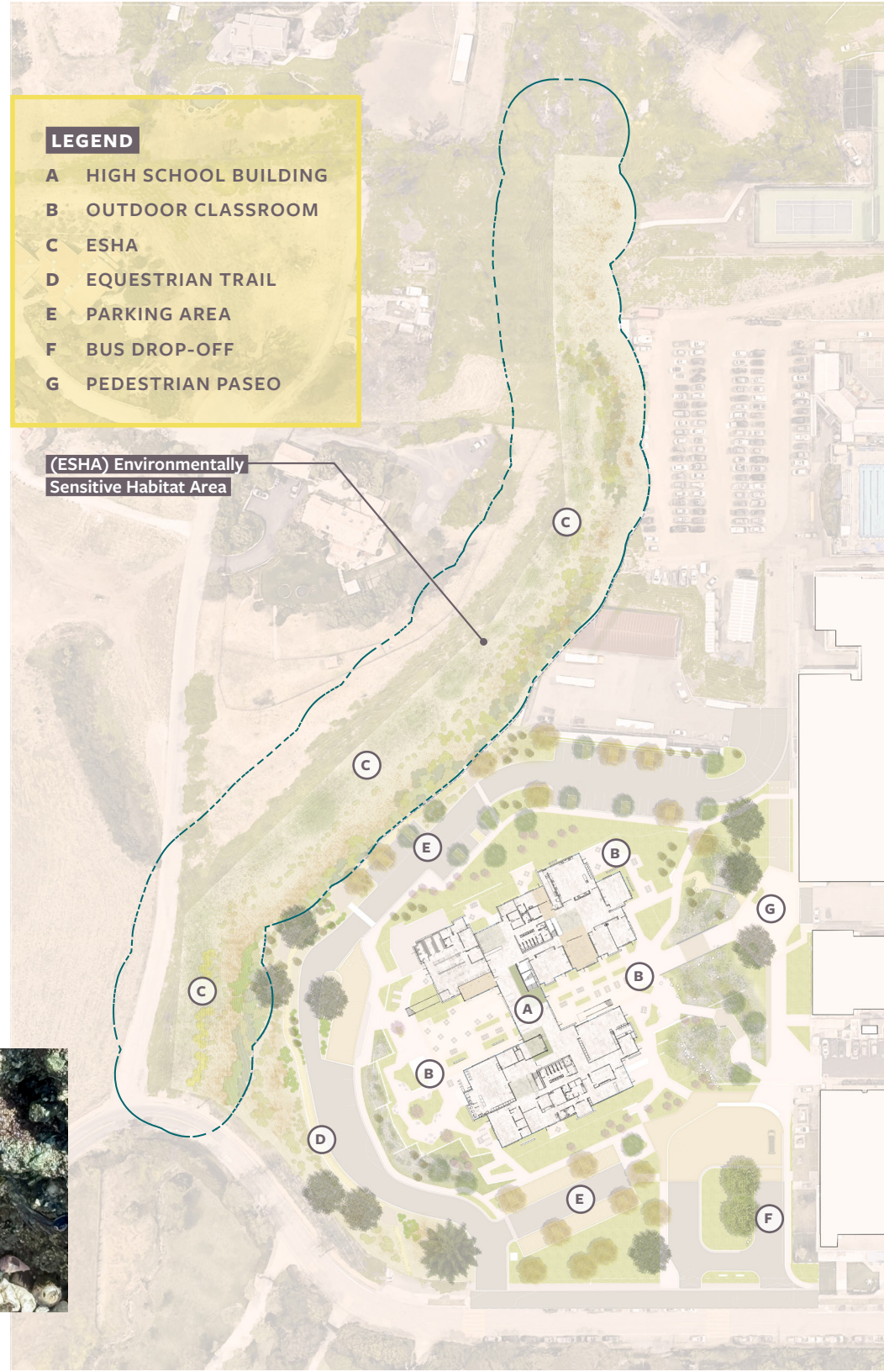


SITE-SPECIFIC PROJECT BASED LEARNING

Ecological Habitat

The campus is conceived as a resilient civic landscape, shaped by the realities of wildfire risk, climate change, and coastal vulnerability. Restored natural systems and defensible landscape strategies enhance fire resistance while supporting ecological recovery and long-term adaptation. A well-connected network of campus pathways aligns with existing pedestrian routes and equestrian trails, providing redundant circulation for daily use as well as clearly legible emergency access and evacuation routes.

Carefully managed public access to athletic fields, the pool, and outdoor spaces reinforces the campus's role as a shared community refuge, strengthening collective preparedness and continuity during emergencies. Layered security, durable materials, and clear spatial organization ensure the campus remains safe, adaptable, and operational under evolving environmental conditions.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT | RESPONSE



MALIBU HIGH SCHOOL SITE

“For me, the exactly opposite of what the perception of Malibu is. We are not luxury, modern, celebrity, pretentious. It is relaxed, quirky, rural/equestrian, coastal.”

— Facilities Design Advisory Team member



Fit Within the Larger Community

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Integrated Learning Environments

The campus environment is intentionally designed to nurture student belonging—creating spaces where students feel seen, supported, and connected. Strong indoor-outdoor relationships, abundant daylight, and constant visual ties to the landscape help ground students in place and promote wellbeing. Learning environments extend naturally into courtyards, terraces, and outdoor classrooms, offering choice and agency while accommodating diverse learning styles and social needs.

By balancing openness with comfort and safety, and innovation with familiar, human-scaled spaces, the campus fosters a welcoming atmosphere that strengthens relationships, builds pride, and supports every student's sense of ownership and belonging.

- **Openness and circulation reinforce informal learning opportunities**
- **Learning happens everywhere, beyond the traditional classroom**
- **Embodies a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-driven, collaborative learning environments**



Innovation, Sustainability, and Resiliency

The project achieves net-zero energy performance through a resilient, integrated design strategy that prioritizes long-term adaptability, reduced dependence on external infrastructure, and passive performance. A photovoltaic canopy, all-electric systems, radiant floor heating, passive shading, and high-albedo roofing work together to maintain comfort during extreme conditions while supporting continued operation during outages. Site-based resilience strategies—including permeable paving, drought-tolerant landscaping, bioretention swales, and ESHA restoration—enhance stormwater management, reduce heat and fire risk, and support ecological recovery.

These systems are intentionally visible and accessible, reinforcing resilience as both a functional necessity and a daily learning experience. By embedding sustainability and wellness into the physical fabric of the campus, the project strengthens environmental stewardship, preparedness, and long-term durability through everyday use.



- **Outdoor classrooms + restored habitat turn site into active learning space**
- **Sustainability systems become tangible lessons for students**
- **Exclusively Non-Combustible Materials**
- **360 kWdc photovoltaic canopy = 100% energy offset**
- **All-electric systems**
- **Low-VOC finishes and non-toxic interiors**

Indoor–Outdoor Learning as a Core Requirement

The Educational Specifications identify indoor–outdoor connectivity as critical to supporting project based learning and whole child development. Classrooms are designed with direct access to fully programmed outdoor learning environments, enabling instruction to extend beyond the building envelope. Outdoor classrooms support experimentation, collaboration, wellness, and discovery while reinforcing environmental literacy and place based learning

Flexibility & Longevity

To support long term educational evolution, the Educational Specifications emphasize adaptable building systems and reconfigurable spatial layouts. Structural grids, movable partitions, and flexible infrastructure allow learning environments to evolve over time without major renovation. This approach ensures facilities remain **responsive to future pedagogies, technologies, and programmatic shifts**, reinforcing long term stewardship and fiscal responsibility.



PROGRAMMED OUTDOOR LEARNING (UPPER FLOOR)



OUTDOOR COMMONS

- **Designed as a community wildfire shelter and place of refuge**
- **Reduces future maintenance and recovery costs through resilient design**
- **Landscape design doubles as an outdoor teaching tool**
- **Durable, weathering materials selected for coastal hillside conditions**

Whole Child Learning Environments

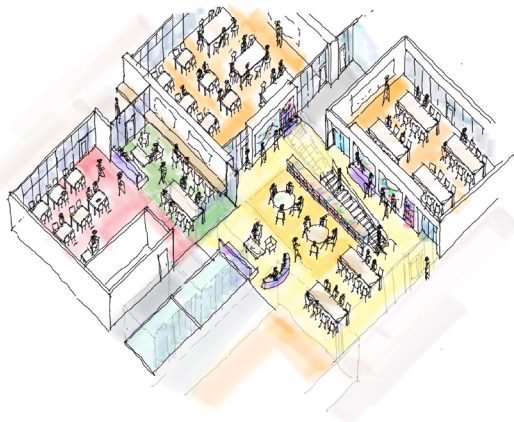
The Educational Specifications define learning environments that support physical, emotional, and social wellbeing as inseparable from academic success. Access to daylight, fresh air, outdoor learning, and movement oriented spaces is prioritized across campuses. Nutrition, wellness, visual and performing arts, and physical activity are integrated into the daily learning experience through specialized spaces and shared community hubs, reinforcing a holistic educational model.

Educational Vision & Goals

The educational vision is grounded in Project-Based Learning (PBL), emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, real-world relevance, student agency, and personalized learning pathways. The environment is designed to actively support this pedagogy by prioritizing flexibility, transparency, and choice—allowing learning to occur across settings rather than within isolated classrooms.



SOCIAL + ACADEMIC HUBS (EXPOSED CEILING AND SYSTEMS)

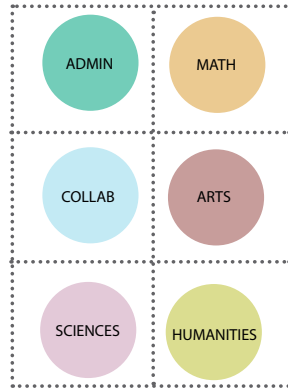


CONCEPTUAL SKETCH OF COLLABORATIVE HUB

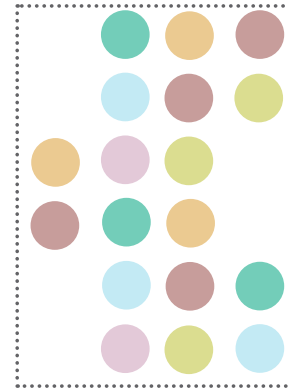
- **Labs, maker programs, and arts studios anchor each learning set**
- **Cross-disciplinary collaboration zones embedded within each set**
- **“The Commons” is the informal social spine supporting community exchange**

Environment Supporting the Curriculum

Learning environments are organized into interdisciplinary clusters, or “sets,” that intentionally co-locate science labs, art and project studios, seminar rooms, and shared collaboration zones. This spatial organization encourages curricular crossover, team teaching, and hands-on exploration, directly supporting PBL methodologies and authentic learning experiences.



TRADITIONAL SILOED MODEL FOR SCHOOLS



DISTRIBUTED MODEL



DISTRIBUTED MODEL PLAN DIAGRAM

LEGEND

- A ADMINISTRATION
- B COMMONS
- C KITCHEN
- D CURATED RESOURCES
- E SPECIAL EDUCATION
- F ASB
- G TEACHER ADMIN
- H FOOD COURT
- I PATIO



1st floor



2nd floor



- Daylight autonomy exceeds 80% of learning spaces
- Operable windows in every classroom
- Parametric daylight design
- Double-height atria extend the classroom for flexible learning modes
- Cross-disciplinary collaboration



Adaptability, Flexibility, and Innovation

The educational environment is designed for long-term adaptability. Reconfigurable spaces, shared zones, and outdoor classrooms allow the campus to evolve alongside changing pedagogies, technologies, and enrollment patterns. Discovery is embedded into the physical and educational framework of the campus, encouraging students to navigate, experiment, and take ownership of their learning journeys.

“School should be organic, no nonsense, authentic, inclusive. Foster creativity and whole child development.”

— Facilities Design Advisory Team member



Supporting a Variety of Learning & Teaching Styles

Flexible, lab-like spaces with adaptable furniture and open layouts support a wide range of instructional approaches, including collaborative group work, independent study, experiential learning, and informal peer-to-peer interaction. Increased visibility across learning spaces empowers educators to engage students dynamically while allowing students to select environments that best support their learning styles and needs.

- **Indoor-outdoor connection**
- **Flexible furnishings for multiple learning styles**
- **Natural ventilation + daylight across all zones**
- **Learning happens everywhere, beyond the traditional classroom**



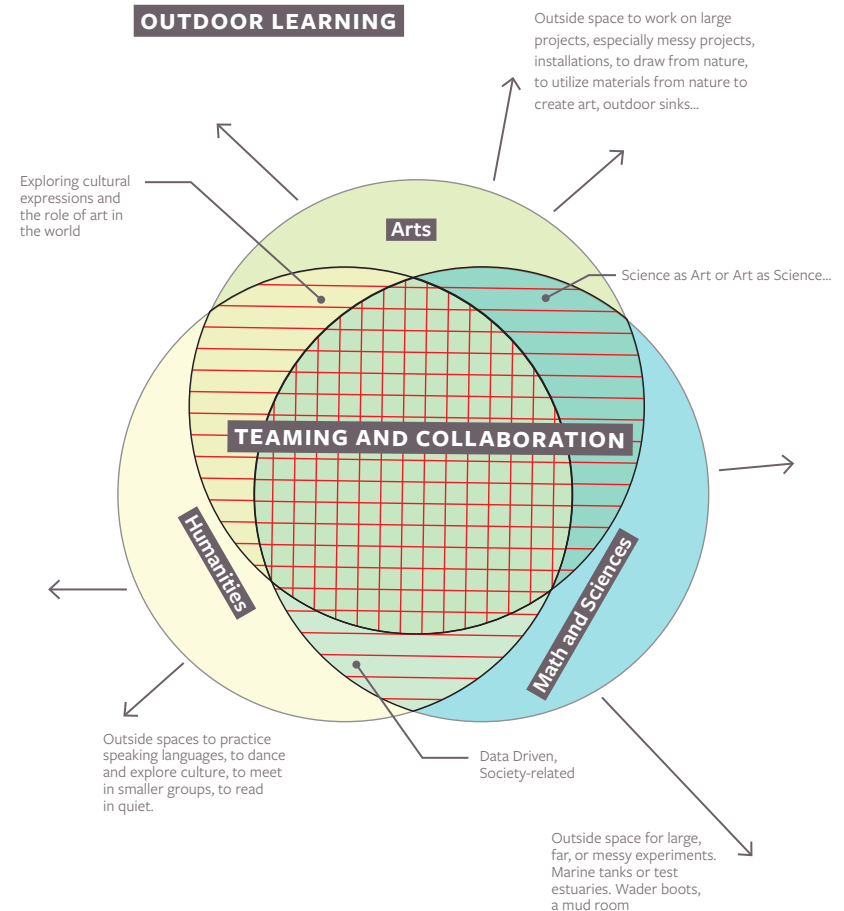
The District-wide Educational Specifications establish Project Based Learning as the foundational instructional approach, emphasizing interdisciplinary, real world, inquiry driven learning. Instruction shifts away from a traditional teacher centered model toward environments that support simultaneous individual, small group, and large group learning. Classrooms and shared learning spaces are intentionally designed to accommodate rotational learning, collaborative work, and hands on exploration, enabling students to synthesize information through multiple modalities including research, making, presentation, and reflection.

Zoned, Flexible Learning Environments

Educational Specifications require classrooms to function as multi zoned learning environments, supporting mini lessons, independent work, digital learning, and creative exploration within a single space. Furniture, storage, and instructional surfaces are mobile, allowing spaces to adapt fluidly to evolving teaching strategies and learner needs. These environments empower educators to act as facilitators and coaches while enabling students to choose learning settings that best support their work styles.



- **Layered formal, informal, + exterior learning settings**
- **Break-out spaces function as social + academic hubs**
- **Informal breakout zones support spontaneous project work**





Teaming Studios & Shared Learning Hubs

The Educational Specifications introduce teaming studios as essential extensions of the classroom. For every group of six classrooms, a shared teaming environment supports interdisciplinary collaboration, project lay down space, push in/pull out instruction, and social learning. These spaces function as hubs for innovation, providing access to resources such as writable surfaces, digital tools, and project storage, while reinforcing collaboration and student agency.



“In our former school, social groups were separated. Now social circles are colliding and interacting. The new campus is so open and connected; I’m now interacting with everyone in our school.”

— Student President at the Ribbon -Cutting Ceremony



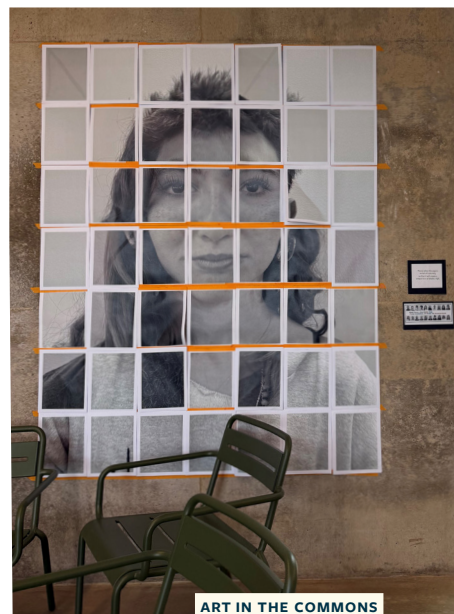
- Collaboration spaces in every set to promote cross-disciplinary connections
- Inter-classroom glazing promotes openness and visibility
- Outdoor classrooms expand project work into the landscape

Inclusive, Equitable Access to Learning Resources

Educational Specifications require equitable access to high quality learning environments across all programs, including general education, special education, and specialized learning pathways. Learning spaces are designed to be inclusive, accessible, and adaptable, supporting diverse learners while integrating students with varying needs into the broader school community. This inclusive design approach reinforces dignity, belonging, and shared ownership of learning spaces.

“When students feel emotionally connected and cognitively challenged, we have opportunities to stretch their thinking and how they can create change.”

— Dr. Jacqueline Mora,
Assistant Superintendent -Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District



RESULTS

Achievement of Educational Goals

The project successfully translates Malibu High School's Project-Based Learning (PBL) educational vision into a physical environment that actively supports interdisciplinary learning, student agency, and real-world engagement. Purpose-built studios, laboratories, seminar rooms, and shared collaboration spaces enable students to work across disciplines, engage in hands-on inquiry, and take ownership of their learning.

The seamless integration of indoor and outdoor learning environments reinforces movement, choice, and experiential learning as daily practices rather than exceptions. As a result, the campus supports deeper engagement, collaboration, and personalized learning pathways aligned with contemporary educational goals.



RESULTS

Achievement of School District Goals

The project advances district-wide priorities for resilience, sustainability, equity, and future-ready learning environments. Designed in direct response to lessons learned from the 2018 Woolsey Fire, the campus prioritizes safety, durability, and continuity of operations through resilient materials, systems, and site strategies. The project establishes a replicable model for aligning pedagogy, performance, and place—demonstrating how thoughtful planning and design can support evolving instructional models while responsibly stewarding public resources. Long-term adaptability and reduced operational impacts position the facility as a sustainable investment for the district.

Achievement of Community Goals

Beyond serving students, the campus strengthens its role as a civic and environmental asset within the broader community. Improved pedestrian connectivity, restored natural systems, and shared access to athletic and outdoor amenities reinforce community ownership and connection. Ecological restoration efforts, public pathways, and educational signage enhance environmental awareness and stewardship, while the campus's open yet secure design balances accessibility with safety. The project reflects shared community values by integrating education, resilience, and environmental responsibility into a cohesive whole.



RESULTS

Unintended Results & Achievements

In addition to meeting its original goals, the project has emerged as a **living laboratory for sustainability, resilience, and discovery**. Visible energy and water systems support informal and curriculum-based learning, allowing students to observe high-performance strategies in action. The campus also functions as a resilient community resource during emergencies, capable of operating independently when needed. Perhaps most significantly, the project has fostered a culture of collaboration, curiosity, and continuous improvement—extending its impact beyond the building itself and reinforcing education as a shared, community-centered endeavor.

Stewardship of Financial Resources

The project demonstrates strong stewardship of financial resources through durable construction, long-term adaptability, and reduced lifecycle costs. Investment in resilient systems, net-zero energy strategies, and flexible learning environments minimizes future maintenance and operational demands while maximizing educational value. By aligning initial capital investment with long-term performance and adaptability, the project delivers lasting value for students, the district, and the community.

Sustainability and Wellness Outcomes

Net-zero energy performance, all-electric systems, passive design strategies, and sustainable site features contribute to measurable environmental outcomes while supporting occupant comfort and wellbeing. Access to daylight, fresh air, outdoor learning spaces, and views of the natural landscape promotes physical and mental wellness for students and staff. Sustainability is not only achieved but made visible, reinforcing environmental literacy and stewardship as integral components of the learning experience.



- Extends the value of public investment beyond students to the broader community
- district-wide benchmark for future educational facilities
- First purpose-built high school in the district designed entirely around Project-Based Learning
- Demonstrates how physical design can operationalize educational reform
- Reinforces place-based education as a core instructional strategy



