



“Not a School”

Mat-Su Central School
Wasilla, Alaska



Executive Summary

We are a school that is not a school.

Mat-Su Central can be more accurately described as a **community learning center**.

The purpose of this facility is not to host traditional classroom instruction or typical school routines. Instead, our program serves as an incubator for personalized learning styles of all kinds. Some of those education activities will take place in person at the physical building, but many and truly most – only begin there.

What began as a bold identity statement in the very first design conversations quickly became something more, a shared belief that guided every decision along the way. The project challenged the traditional idea of what a school should be and instead imagined something warmer, more personal, a place that truly feels like home.

From the start, the planning process invited the voices of the entire community into the room. School staff, parents, and students all helped shape a vision for a learning environment built around belonging, flexibility, and connection. Their stories, needs, and hopes became the foundation of the design.

The result is far more than a new facility. It's a living, welcoming hub for homeschooled students and their families. This is a place designed to support learning in all the ways it happens. Spaces encourage choice and independence while still feeling safe and nurturing. The environment reflects the belief that families are essential partners in education and that every learner deserves to feel seen, supported, and empowered.

Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model, the design responds directly to the unique rhythms of this community. The project demonstrates how thoughtful planning and deep listening can create spaces that not only serve educational goals, but also strengthen relationships, build confidence, and foster a genuine sense of belonging for years to come.

Throughout the school year, all 2,300 students have access to resources, specialists, teachers, classrooms and labs offered, however, the capacity of the new facility is roughly 400 students at any given time. This strategy is arguably the most efficient and effective use of public resources in the country today.

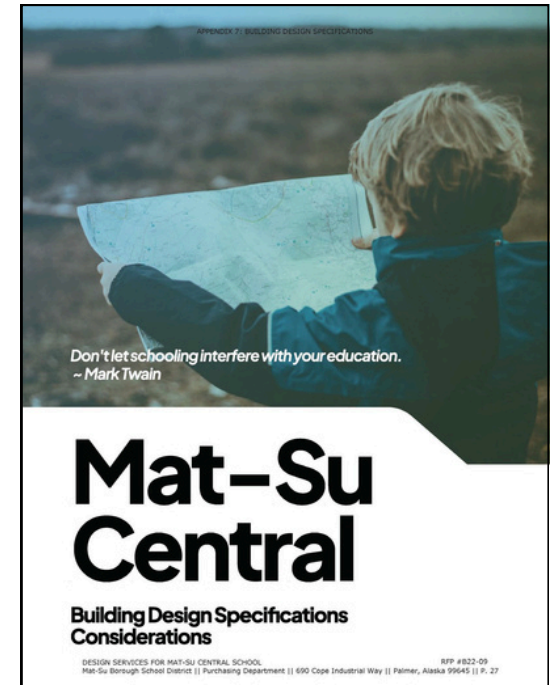
Students come from all corners of the Mat-Su Borough, with varied backgrounds and learning styles. Some will visit the building frequently and others may complete their education without ever setting foot in the physical facility. The school's commitment is to meet each student where they are, supporting their own personal learning journey.



The 50,596 SF facility **now supports more than 3,000 learners** statewide through a flexible hybrid educational model.



Mat-Su Central serves a **geographic area the size of Delaware**, ranging from highly populated cities to remote homesteads. Flexibility and customization are key concepts in delivering quality education to their 2,300 students ranging from young pre-kindergarten kids to college bound teens.



Scope of Work & Budget

The scope of work involved the design and planning of a new, purpose-built educational facility for Mat-Su Central. This two-story building encompasses a total of **50,596 SF** of area with a total construction cost of **\$20.5 million**.

The facility's programmatic spaces were developed through intensive collaborative workshops, ensuring alignment with the school district's requirements and the home-school model's unique needs across **five key categories and support 400 students at a time serving 3,000**.

1. Learning Neighborhoods (Learning & Supports)

Encompassing Elementary (pK-8) and Secondary (9-12) instructional studios, multi-use offices, SPED spaces, and learning support.

2. Creative Academies

Dedicated spaces for Art (including studio, storage, kiln, project lockers), Fitness (with a focus on lifetime health), and an activity lab/Partnership space (for STEM, science, and partnership activities).

3. Learning Commons (Community Commons)

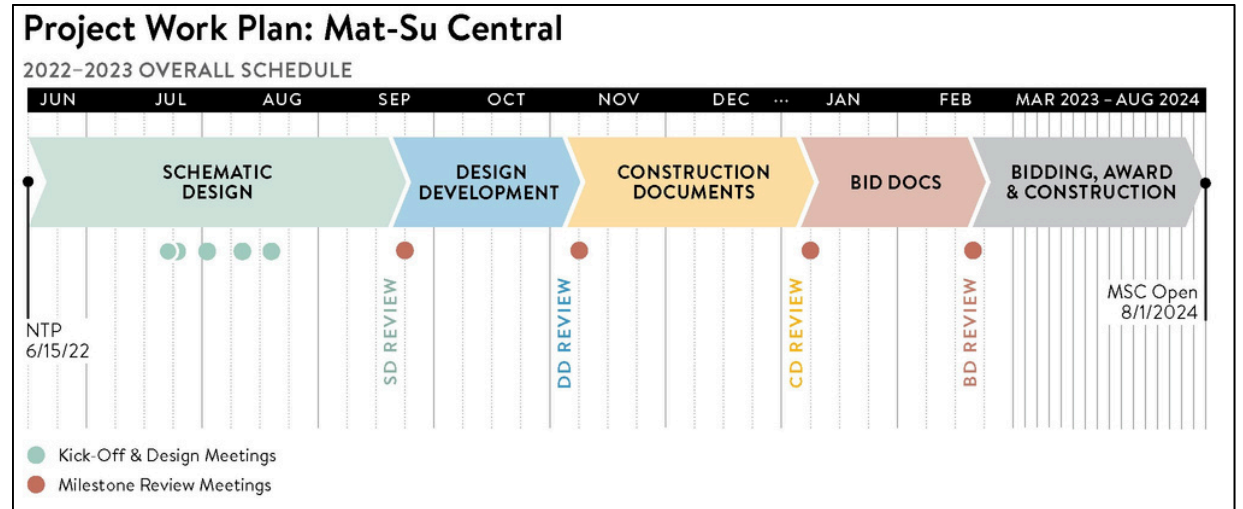
Featuring a central Great Room/Commons, an Ala Carte Café, Library/Bookstore, and a Play Center, designed as a focal point for community interaction.

4. Administration (Family & Support Services)

Including Family/Learning Supports (counselor offices, nurse office, education support), Offices/Administration (front office, principal, assistant principal, accounting), and Staff Supports (staff lounge),

5. Building Support (Building Services)

Essential services such as Maintenance/Custodial, Mechanical/Electrical rooms, and Restrooms.



Get to know Mel

This is Melanie, but she goes by Mel. She's a 14-year-old learner and her home base is on the upper Matanuska River near Chickaloon.

Mel is interested in natural sciences and is working on a project to survey the hunting and nesting habits of Grey Owls. When Mel visits the MSC she likes to catch up with her friends, check out some science equipment, and take in-person drawing lessons.



Let's talk about Marcus

Marcus is a 15-year-old learner based in Wasilla. Marcus has a passion for flying drones and operating flight simulators. He's planning to start training for his pilot's license as soon as he can get a job and earn some money for lessons.

For now, he is trying to work as many hours at the MSC Café as possible. Marcus has developed a craving for smoothies and his hobby is posting funny photos of odd signage on social media.

Starting with the initial qualifications proposal, the planning team utilized **Composite User Profiles** to articulate the character and needs of Mat-Su Central's varied student population

School & Community Engagement

The success of the Mat-Su Central School project came from something simple but important: people felt heard. Before a single wall was drawn, the planning process focused on listening to the families, students, staff, and community members who make the school what it is.

Building Design Committee

A Building Design Committee was formed early in the process to ensure the project reflected the voices of the entire Mat-Su Central community. The committee brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, families, school staff, community members, and district representatives. Their ongoing involvement created a collaborative space for honest dialogue, shared ideas, and meaningful feedback throughout the planning and design process. Through workshops, conversations, visioning exercises, and interactive activities, the team used a variety of methods to uncover not only what stakeholders were saying, but what they were truly trying to describe. The process encouraged participants to think beyond the traditional school model and explore new possibilities for how learning spaces could support connection, independence, and belonging.

A Unique Ask

One of the most meaningful challenges of the project was defining what it meant to design a “school” for a community that did not see itself reflected in the traditional model. Early conversations revealed that families were not looking for long corridors, rigid classrooms, or institutional spaces. They wanted something more personal — a place that supported independence, connection, flexibility, and belonging. That realization shifted the entire design process.

What made the work especially exciting was the opportunity to rethink familiar assumptions and create an environment shaped directly by the experiences of homeschool students and families. Each discussion uncovered new ideas about how learning happens, what support looks like, and how space can foster both community and individual growth. The process became less about designing a school building and more about creating a place where people felt comfortable, valued, and at home.



Assistant Principal, School District Representative, Community Member, Activities Director, Librarian, Principal, Interior Designer, Student

In-Depth Visioning & Dialogue

The process prioritized pre-design planning through extensive conversations about the educational vision before physical design began. Activities such as “Visual Vocabulary,” “Vision Board,” and “Learning Signature” exercises helped define the school’s identity and capture what the community valued most.



Consensus-Building Workshops

Workshop 1

We explored the school's vision and goals while sharing lessons learned from other educational facilities.

Facility Tours

The team and BDC visited a variety of local facilities creating a shared vocabulary for future design explorations. Given the program's interest in non-institutional environments the tours included the Anchorage Museum, the Aloft Hotel, the Rustic Goat restaurant and an REI retail store.

Workshop 2

At this stage we explored the school space needs and organization. Six distinct 'Idea-grams' were developed to guide the development of concept plans. The concept of Learning Signature was introduced, and participants were given worksheets as homework.

Workshop 3 & 4

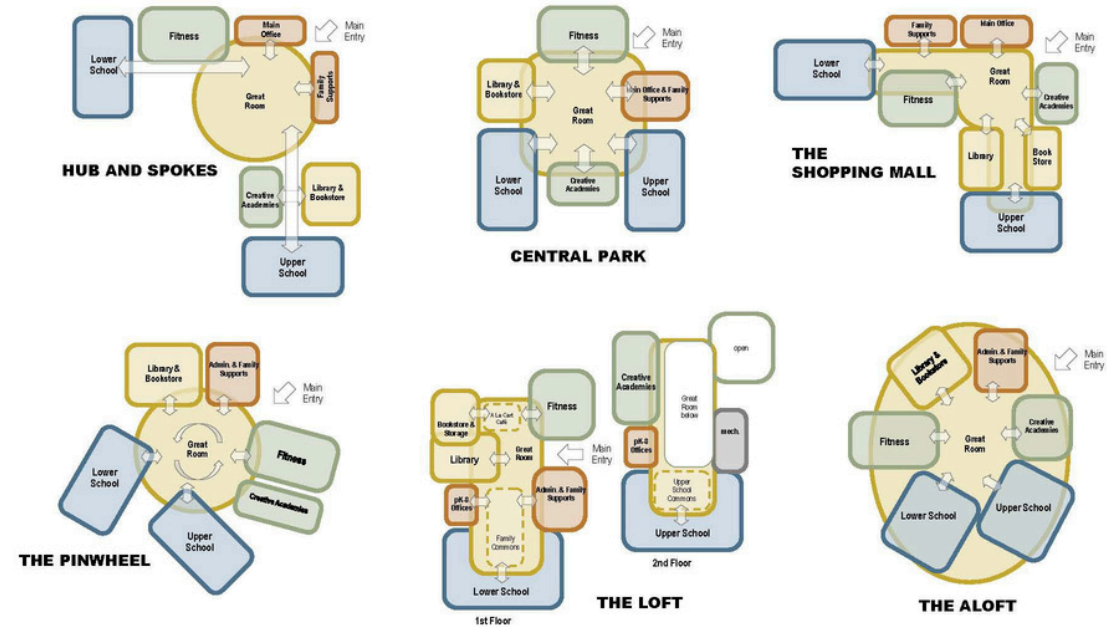
15 distinct concept plans were developed to find the best fit for the school's goals and aspirations. A rigorous evaluation process narrowed the field down to a single innovative concept for further development. **Learning Signature** ideas were compiled, discussed and refined and interior design 'look and feel' exercise identified 'industrial chic' as an aesthetic that closely aligned with the school's identity.

Workshop 5

The selected concept was refined including cost information and a consensus was reached with the BDC to move it forward to the School Board for approval.



Rough sketches from interactive workshops were transformed into a series of organizational ideas that were the basis for development of the architectural plan options.



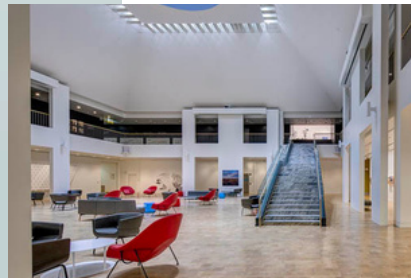
Aloft Hotel Lobby



Aloft Outdoor Courtyard



Museum Atrium



REI



Rustic Goat Restaurant



Unique Needs & Challenges Addressed

✓ "Not-a-School" Ethos

A critical and repeated theme was the desire to avoid the feeling of a "typical school" as many of their parents and students have a negative view of mainstream education. The design actively sought to be welcoming, unique, and inclusive, moving beyond a narrow "homeschool" perspective.

✓ Distance to Campus & Logistics

Recognizing that families often travel significant distances, the design focuses on maximizing productive time on campus. This includes dedicated spaces for toddlers, convenient parking, and delightfully easy access to materials, resources and equipment to manage the "stuff" parents bring.

✓ Hybrid Learning & Flexibility

The design anticipates that hybrid learning is the norm and spaces must be innovative, versatile, and flexible, easily reconfigurable with nearby storage to support a multitude of activities and shifting on-campus/off-campus ratios.

✓ Community Learning Resource Center

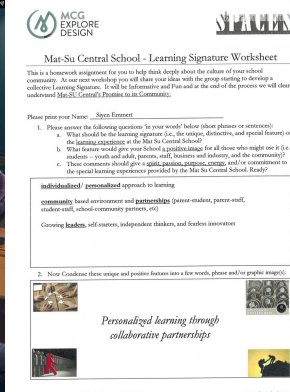
Mat-Su Central is a hub that provides materials and resources to support the wide variety of learning styles and programs that inspire each student's individual learning journey.

✓ A Home Where You Belong

Create a physical embodiment of the school's "Learning Signature," a place where families feel welcomed, supported, and truly belong. The planning team's collaborative process ensured the building would connect students to their community in meaningful ways.



15 unique plan options were developed by four different designers with continual refinement from user workshops



Educational Environment

The educational vision for Mat-Su Central School, crystallized in its **Learning Signature** exercises conducted by the planning team.

Three themes emerged:

1. **Personalized Learning Through Collaborative Partnerships.**
2. **Your Education + Your Path + Your Future = Your Journey**
3. **Charting your own course, leveraging family involvement**

These key themes guided planning the educational environments:

Choice-Based Learning

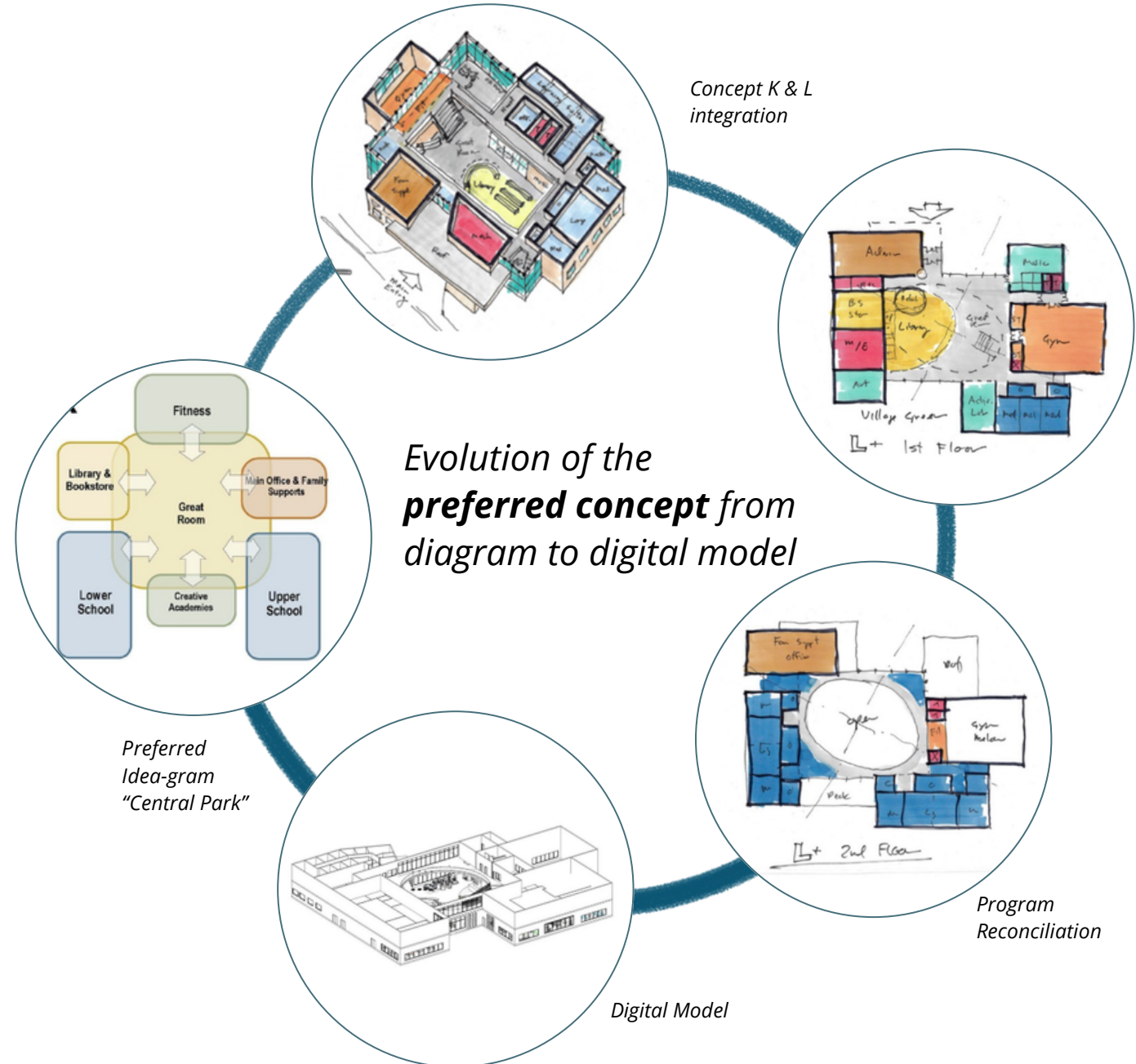
The facility offers a diverse array of Learning Neighborhoods with various sized studios (small, medium, large, multi-use) for elementary and secondary students, allowing for individualized learning plans and diverse pedagogical approaches. These spaces support varied learning styles, from quiet individual study to dynamic interactive group experiences.

Creative Academies

Dedicated space for Art, Fitness, and Technology/Maker spaces provide specialized equipment and environments for hands-on activities like science, robotics, and creative expression. These areas celebrate student creativity through physical and visual displays.

Learning Happens Everywhere

The design promotes a learning anytime, anywhere philosophy. The central Great Room serves as a dynamic hub for various activities, while the Library/Bookstore offers open learning space, small group meeting rooms, and a Technology Help Desk. Outdoor learning areas, including trails, picnic tables, and potential garden/greenhouse space, extend learning beyond the interior walls.



Fostering Family Involvement & Nurturing Relationships

Families as Partners: The Great Room offers many supportive features including coffee, snacks, a Play Center, and Family Restrooms. The school also seeks to partner with the local community by offering classes, programs, and events onsite that support students, families, and neighbors alike.

Caring Advocates: Family / Learning Support areas include counselor offices, nurse office, and education support spaces, dispersed throughout the facility to provide convenient, ready access for students and parents.

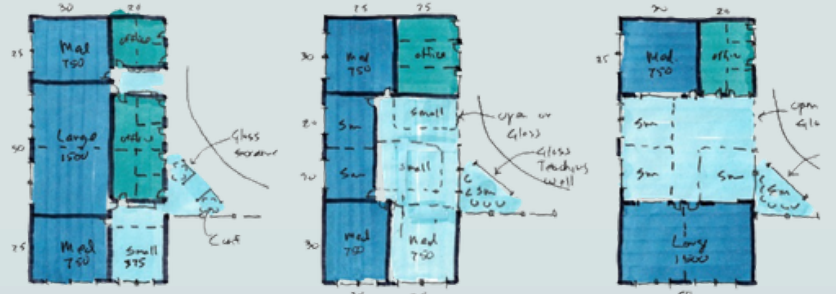
Dynamic Student Mix: The multi-age swirl of students fosters natural collaboration and relationships, with older students having opportunities to mentor younger ones.

Adaptability and Flexibility for Future Needs

- » The learning environment is inherently innovative, versatile, and flexible, supporting a multitude of activities and easily reconfigured with nearby storage. This is crucial for a home-school program where student engagement ratios and staff needs can frequently shift.
- » The campus is designed to be future-ready and nimble to support evolving needs, recognizing that hybrid learning and robust technology are the norm at this school.
- » The space layout, with its flexible instructional studios, operable partitions, and glass garage doors, allows for dynamic changes in educational delivery systems and provides opportunities for community-based learning and onsite programming.
- » Food-related activities like “crock-pot day” and “Flapjack Friday” are supported with power and equipment, fostering social interactions and healthy attitudes. A community kitchen is also provided for students, families, and community programs to store and prepare lunches or breakfasts throughout the day.

Support for the Whole Learner and Inclusive Spaces

The facility features comfortable spaces with soft seating and a variety of furniture types and sizes. Gender-neutral restrooms speak directly to the school's commitment to provide a facility that welcomes all.



Multiple options were developed for each learning suite exploring the relationship of faculty offices, formal and informal learning spaces

Programs MSC has been able to support with their flexible learning suites

These programs have grown by 20% and now 70% of them can be hosted on-site.

Get REAL™ FINANCIAL REALITY FAIR™ YOU'RE INVITED!

WHAT: A REAL WORLD FINANCIAL EXPERIENCE
WHEN: FEB 12TH 12-2:00 PM

WHO: ALL HOMESCHOOL HIGH SCHOOLERS
WHERE: MAT-SU CENTRAL SCHOOL, 2055 N. Stringfield Rd. Palmer
WHY: WHEN IT COMES TO MANAGING YOUR FINANCES AFTER SCHOOL, THE SIMPLE TOOLS AND INFORMATION AT **THIS FAIR** WILL KEEP YOU FROM MAKING COMMON COSTLY MISTAKES AND HELP YOU PLAN A BRIGHT FINANCIAL FUTURE!

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 Registration for 25/26 Available Online
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 Shielded Metal Arc Welding (SMAW)
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MCS WORKSHOP
Birds & Bones

OWL PELLET DISSECTION **MEET ACE, THE BARN OWL** **HANDS ON SCIENCE**

This engaging hands on workshop will have students excited to learn about bird adaptations! Students will dissect an owl pellet, and explore bird skull, beak, wing, and feet adaptations. Recommended for grades 4-8.

We will also have a special guest visit the class! Ace, the Barn Owl, and his friends from the AK Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center will teach us about the incredible work they do with sick and injured birds in Alaska. Don't miss this opportunity to get up-close and personal with Ace!

APRIL 10, 2026
9:00 - 10:30 AM
 LOCATION: MAT-SU CENTRAL SCHOOL

REGISTRATION: www.Matucentral.org

UAA UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE

Seawolf Ready

Learn about next steps to attend UAA including admissions, financial aid, course placement, advising, and orientation. Meet with a variety of UAA departments and get assistance with getting started at UAA!

Mat Su Central School
 March 20, 2026 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
 The Summit Room

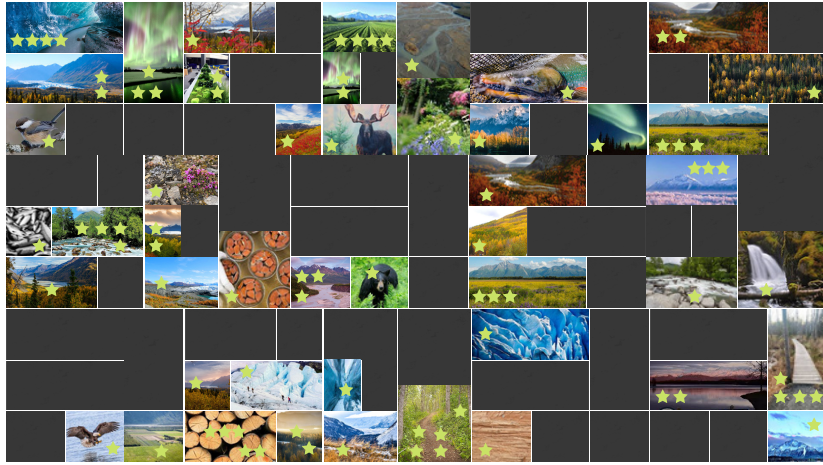
ART
 6TH-12TH GRADE STUDENTS

MARCH 13

SHOW
 THROUGH MAY 6

VAGABOND BLUES - PALMER

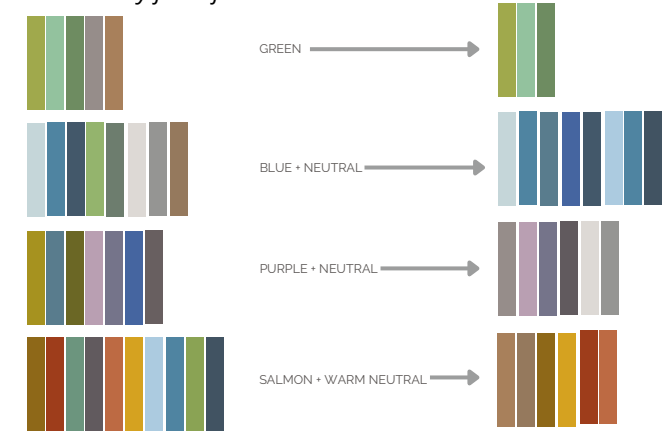
Sense of Place Results



Grouped by Color



Color Study from favorites



Design Story

Three core themes emerged early in the planning process: personalized learning through collaborative partnerships, empowering students to shape their own educational journey, and the essential role of family involvement in student success. Rather than treating these as abstract goals, the design team used them to create a larger story experienced throughout the building itself.

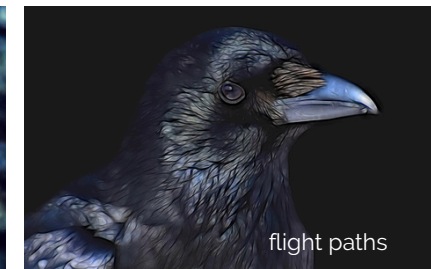
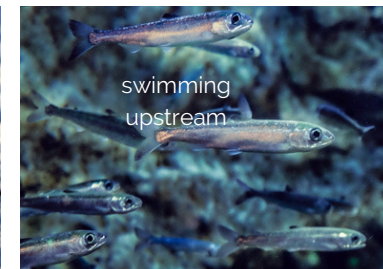
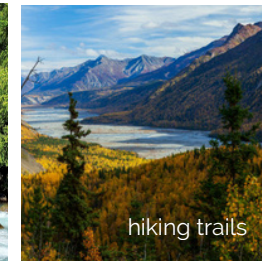
Spaces, materials, graphics, and interactions were intentionally designed to reflect these values at every scale. The environment encourages exploration, independence, connection, and shared ownership of learning. Together, these themes created a design narrative that supports individual paths while reinforcing a strong sense of community and belonging. The concept of a "desire path," reflecting how nature moves and grows informed circulation, visibility, informal learning opportunities, and student autonomy throughout the building.



More Than A School; A Community *Where You Belong*

Create a space in which lifelong learning can thrive. Support the imaginations of our youth and inspire them along their journey & discovery of their talents. There are many paths we can choose to take in the world, some that come naturally, and some that allow us to grow and thrive.

Desire Path ...the act or action of moving in a chosen path from point to point.



Located at the confluence of the Susitna and Matanuska Valleys, the building creates a warm microclimate for the south facing learning patio, capturing the precious warmth of the sun while buffering the fierce glacial winds from the northeast.





Village Green Outdoor Patio



Physical Environment – Exterior

The physical environment of Mat-Su Central School is a carefully crafted response to its unique homeschool program, designed to be inspiring, functional, and deeply integrated within its Alaskan context.

Natural Integration: Located on an undeveloped forested parcel, a primary site goal was to **"preserve portions of the native forest"** and existing vegetation, maintaining a **"park-like setting."** Trails exploring the forested site connect to the adjacent Pioneer Peak Elementary, embodying a connection to the community and nature.

Outdoor Learning and Play: The site design preserves the natural forest as much as possible while creating the building pad necessary to address ground water and drainage issues. A creative playground area is planned for the south patio that focuses on imaginative play zones rather than traditional equipment.

Village Green: An outdoor gathering area with southern exposure, sheltered from the north winds is connected to the interior by glass overhead garage doors providing areas for outdoor projects and other learning activities.

Shared Facilities: Mat-Su Central is closely connected to the adjacent **Pioneer Peak Elementary School** sharing their traditional playgrounds and play fields.

Environmental Challenges: The flat site and high ground water required creation of an elevated pad for the building and parking areas and a specialized wastewater treatment system. Protection from prevailing north glacial winds also influenced design.

Smart Circulation & Utilities: Parking for 150 primary spaces with gravel overflow is provided, strategically broken into at least two lots to minimize their visual impact, with dedicated material pick-up/drop-off spaces near the bookstore.

Welcoming Entry: The building's entry features gently curving administration wing and canopy contrasting with the orthogonal geometry of the balance of the facility. Ample glazing in the Great Room provides a warm beacon showcasing the facility's dynamic learning activities.

Exterior Envelope: In response to the harsh Alaska climate the exterior is clad in high efficiency insulated metal panels with vertical textured finish. Resin wood paneling adds warmth and texture at key access points to the facility providing a highly durable weather resistant façade.

Physical Environment – Interior



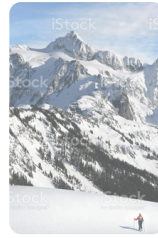
VALLEY STUDIO



RIVER STUDIO



MOUNTAIN STUDIO



Furnishings

Furniture was chosen to reflect the diversity of the community. Pieces come in many sizes and styles, supporting both children and adults. Fabrics are durable, non-toxic, and built for long-term use. Foam stadium seating, flexible stools, and ergonomic laptop tables encourage new ways of sitting, learning, and engaging with peers.

Interior Materials

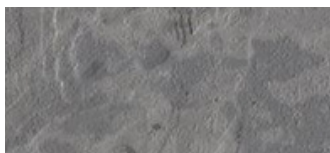
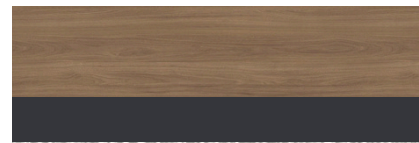
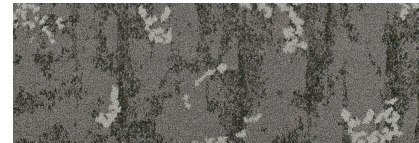
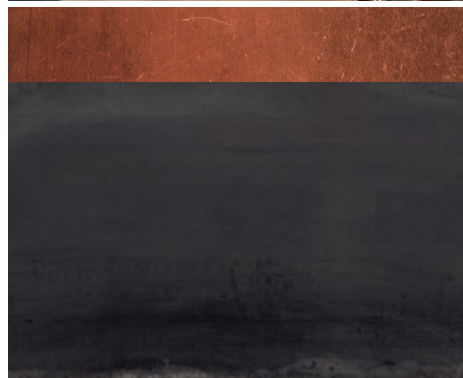
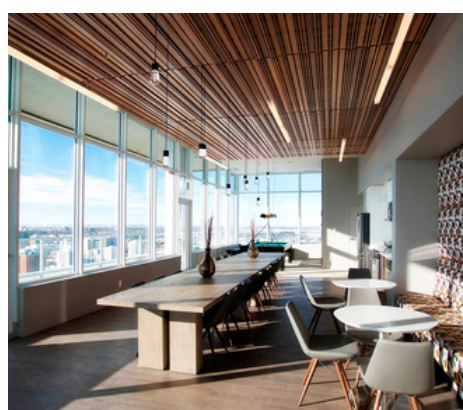
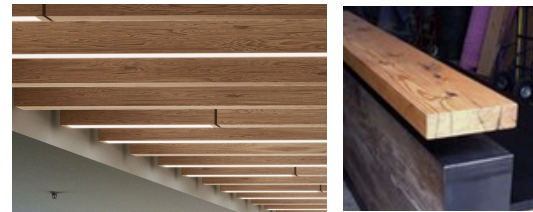
Informed by tours of other learning environments and commercial facilities, the design approach blends warm wood tones, natural materials, and mixed metals to create a welcoming and timeless atmosphere. The environment is calm, comfortable, and supportive, allowing students of all ages, abilities, and learning styles to feel at ease.

Colors & Texture

Earthy tones and soft materials create a calming environment that supports focus and minimizes overstimulation. This atmosphere is especially welcoming for neurodiverse students and families with young children. Finishes are durable, non-toxic, and designed to withstand heavy use, promoting wellness while reducing maintenance needs. Together, these materials foster a space that feels inclusive, comfortable, and deeply connected to the community's identity.

Lighting

More than simply illuminating the space, lighting serves as a defining design feature. Industrial-inspired fixtures in mixed metals with copper accents add warmth and visual interest throughout. Distinct lighting styles help define activity zones, reinforcing wayfinding while giving each space its own identity. Daylight sensors throughout the facility maximize the use of natural light, while dimming controls allow spaces to adapt seamlessly for study, collaboration, or performance. In the Great Room, expansive glazing creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere during Alaska's long winters.





LEVEL 1 - FLOOR PLAN

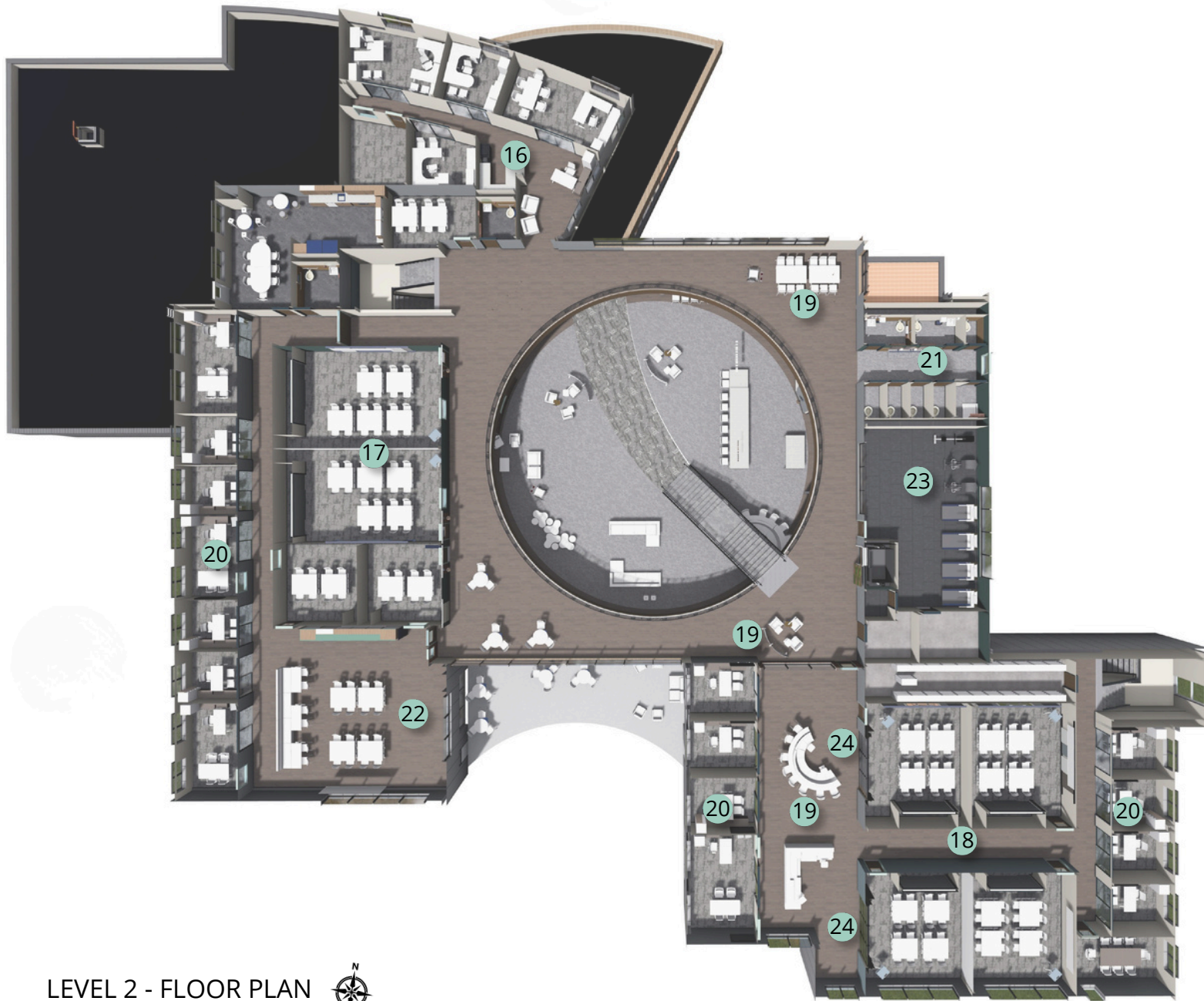


LEVEL 1 - FLOOR PLAN

The design solutions for Mat-Su Central School focus on flexibility, inclusion, and a strong sense of belonging. Instead of traditional classrooms and corridors, the layout is organized around a central Great Room that acts as the heart of the school. This shared space supports everything from learning and collaboration to rest and connection, giving families a place to gather throughout the day.

LEGEND

- 1 **WELCOME**
Front desk and welcome crew
- 2 **ADMINISTRATION**
Support spaces for staff
- 3 **BOOK STORE**
School Curriculum pick up/ check out
- 4 **LIBRARY**
Book check in/out and study space
- 5 **GREAT ROOM**
Open areas for group work and family support
- 6 **LEARNING CAFE**
Student-run coffee shop and group work space
- 7 **GENDER NEUTRAL RESTROOMS**
Single stall, with shared wash stations
- 8 **FIREPLACE**
Heart of the Great Room
- 10 **MAKER SPACE**
Supports active activities, science, and community led programs
- 11 **ART ROOM**
All things creative
- 12 **MUSIC ROOM**
With operable wall for separate practice rooms
- 13 **PRE-SCHOOL**
Supports a full time pre-school program
- 14 **OUTDOOR LEARNING STUDIO**
Patio that connects the art room, great room and maker space together
- 15 **OVERHEAD DOOR**
connecting classrooms to open learning studios



LEVEL 2 - FLOOR PLAN

Flexible learning studios replace fixed classrooms, allowing spaces to shift based on need. Movable walls, modular furniture, and shared resources support a wide range of learning styles, from group activities to quiet, focused work. Students can choose how and where they learn, creating a sense of ownership in their experience.

LEGEND

- 16 ADMINISTRATION**
Support spaces for staff
- 17 HIGH SCHOOL**
Students grades 7-12
- 18 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**
Students grades 1-6
- 19 OPEN LEARNING STUDIO**
Open learning space to give choice and control to students
- 20 OFFICES**
Independent Learning Programs (ILP) offices
- 21 GENDER NEUTRAL RESTROOMS**
Single stall, with shared wash stations
- 22 STUDY / GROUP ROOM**
Highschool support space, and Flapjack Friday
- 23 WELLNESS ROOM**
Open to students, parents, and Staff
- 24 OVERHEAD DOOR**
connecting classrooms to open learning studios

Educational Environment

Flexible Spaces: At MSC learning looks different for every student. Some come for just one class, while others may spend most of their day on campus. To support this, classrooms and studios are designed to flex and adapt. Movable walls, mobile teacher storage, and modular furniture make it easy to change layouts on the fly.

Staff Offices: These spaces function as meeting spaces for both students and teachers. They will be used year-round to support the development and upkeep of student Individual Learning Plans.

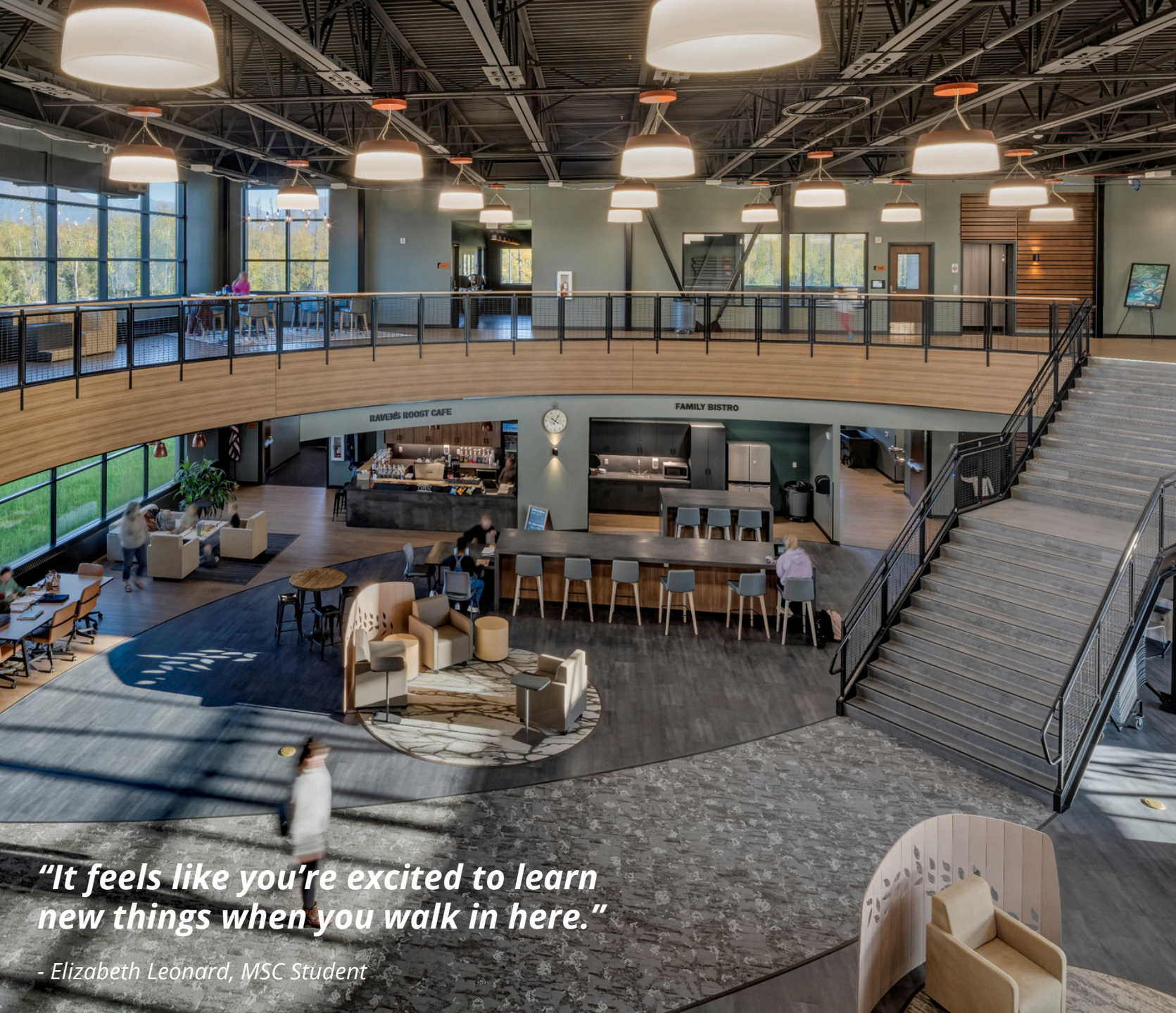
Learning Studios: Three Learning Studios – **Mountain** (high school), **River** (middle school), and **Valley** (elementary/pre-K) are designed as welcoming hubs. Each entrance feels like a front porch, complete with wood details, signage, and lighting, so that students feel like they're walking into a welcoming space, not a traditional classroom.

Open learning studios enable students to step outside the conventional classroom setting, allowing them to engage both physically and mentally. Research indicates that offering choices to support individual learning enhances retention and fosters a positive experience, enabling the brain to absorb more information.

Each day, this area offers:

- Dedicated spaces for students to collaborate on group projects
- Lecture zones where teachers can create a more relaxed atmosphere for learning
- Additional space for larger classrooms, easily accessible by opening the overhead doors west of classrooms 236 and 232





"It feels like you're excited to learn new things when you walk in here."

- Elizabeth Leonard, MSC Student

Educational Environment

Great Room: This is a vibrant space designed for the community to gather, exchange knowledge, engage in meaningful discussions about growth, and find inspiration for learning. The room will adapt to the rhythms of the school year, accommodating events such as proms, fundraisers, large performances, and group presentations.

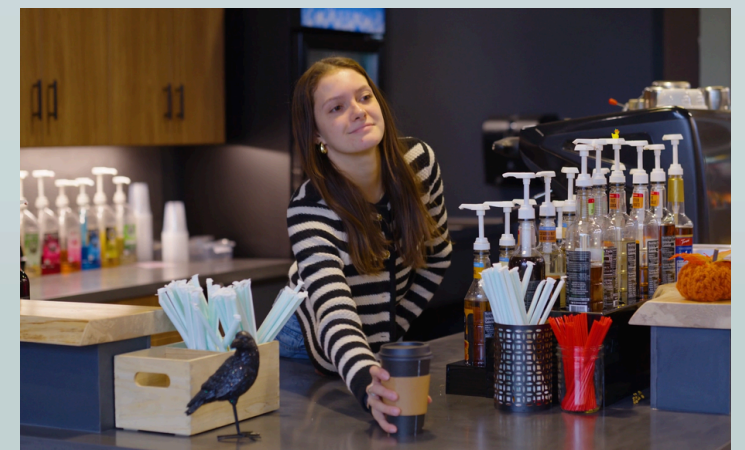
On a daily basis, this area provides:

- Spaces for students to study, either in groups or alone
- Comfortable waiting areas for families while students are in class
- Supports meetings with families and students with teachers or to plan Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

All spaces are equipped with power and data access to support necessary tools. The lower two areas are designed for flexible teaching, accommodating groups of 10 to 20 students, or serving as the lecture space for art or activity lab classes, ensuring the rooms can be fully prepared for the intended activities.

Wayfinding: Wide, open pathways connected to the Great Room hub providing visual connections to the learning studios and support services. Students and families navigate the building easily, whether they are in wheelchairs, pushing strollers, or walking between learning zones.

Student Ownership: MSC encourages students to take an active role in school operations. Even the café is run by students, providing real-world experience in teamwork and business skills.



"It was worth the wait."

- Ava Clements, MSC Student



Educational Environment

Wellness

The materials strategy for Mat-Su Central School was grounded in research focused on health, durability, and long-term impact. Our team regularly references the WELL Building Standard and Red List guidelines as part of our internal process, regardless of client requirements. This informed early decisions around indoor air quality, material toxicity, and how the environment would support daily well-being.

This project was also one of the first schools in the district to incorporate operable windows, allowing for direct access to fresh air. This decision was rooted in research linking ventilation to improved health, focus, and comfort, especially in learning environments.

Published research and internal studies helped us understand how materials influence behavior, particularly for students sensitive to light, texture, and environmental stimuli. These insights were reinforced through conversations with families and staff, who emphasized the need for calm, low-odor, and non-toxic environments.

One moment captured the impact of these decisions. During an early visit, a parent paused, took a deep breath, and said her child would finally be able to attend school in a space like this.

Materials were selected to support both immediate comfort and long-term performance, creating an environment that actively supports the health, dignity, and success of the community it serves.

Sustainable Practices: While not pursuing third-party certification, the project integrates sustainability best practices tailored to the region and climate. Goals include reducing non-renewable energy costs, improving occupant health, and promoting environmental stewardship. The facility is designed as a **"teaching tool for environmental consciousness"** and showcases the importance of Alaska natural resources.




Safety & Security

Classroom Security: Although they are readily accessible from the Great Room, classrooms can be easily isolated and locked down in case of emergencies. All ground floor windows feature balanced magnetic switches and glass break detectors, with classroom doors consistently locked.

Secure Entry: The building incorporates a comprehensive safety and security plan. A sallyport-style entry with card readers at main doors and push-button release from reception controls access. A gate at the entrance counter lowers on lockdown, and magnetic holders on doors to the Great Room drop during emergencies. Despite these robust security measures, the entry has an open welcoming feel that the users desired.

Gender Neutral Restrooms: Students who use wheelchairs were part of the design process, helping shape restrooms that feel supportive and dignified, not just compliant. Traditional restrooms were replaced with private 'everyone' toilet compartments, with shared handwashing stations. This strategy provides equal access for all gender identifications while reducing security concerns related to traditional group restrooms.

Accessibility: Due to the school's close proximity to a pediatric oncology clinic, many students use wheelchairs or other mobility supports. One parent shared a report from her daughter outlining several real-life accessibility needs within the facility. These included practical considerations such as accessible places to set bags and handheld items in restrooms rather than relying on hooks placed on the back of doors, intentionally designed spaces in lounge areas where wheelchair users can comfortably pull up and feel fully included rather than like an afterthought, and rugs with safer, lower-profile edges that are easier to roll on and off. These examples highlight how thoughtful, user-informed design choices can significantly improve comfort, dignity, and accessibility for students navigating the space daily.

The image shows a spacious, modern school interior. A prominent feature is a curved wooden balcony with a metal railing that spans across the upper level. Below the balcony, the main floor is furnished with several large, brown modular sofas arranged on a light-colored rug. In the background, there is a reception desk, a television displaying a nature scene, and a grand piano. The ceiling is high with exposed wooden beams and recessed lighting. Large windows on the left side provide natural light.

“When we met with the designers, we could tell immediately they weren’t just chasing a project, they were investing in our vision for how personalized education could look and feel.”

- Nathan Chud, MSC Assistant Principal

The Great Room is the school hub, connecting library, learning suites, labs and outdoor learning spaces.

Results

The Mat-Su Central School project successfully delivered a facility centered on the unique needs of homeschool students and families through an intensely collaborative planning process. Because no established standards currently exist in Alaska for hybrid homeschool learning environments, success was measured against the original educational vision and stakeholder goals. Outcomes include increased enrollment, expanded program opportunities, stronger family and community engagement, and flexible learning spaces that support a geographically dispersed student population. Originally intended to serve the Mat-Su Borough School District, the program now has the capacity to support learners and families across the entire state of Alaska, demonstrating how educational environments can evolve beyond traditional school models to support personalized, relationship-centered learning.

The following are excerpts from the original brief provided to the planning team.

'Each student is partnered with an academic advisor who helps guide them and their family on a path that best fits their specific needs and ambitions'

Advisor offices were intentionally integrated throughout the learning neighborhoods to provide students and families with easy access to support and guidance. Glass walls and high transom windows maintain openness and allow natural daylight to continue into surrounding learning spaces, reinforcing the school's transparent, relationship-centered approach to personalized learning.

'Every student is unique, so every learning path that they takes is unique'

The facility was designed with a wide variety of flexible learning settings that support different learning styles, schedules, and educational goals. Adaptable studios, open learning areas, small group spaces, and informal learning nooks allow students to choose how and where they learn, reinforcing individualized educational pathways rather than a one-size-fits-all model. It's a wonderland of opportunity for **each individual to explore**.

'It is critical that the Great Room is warm, open and inviting - a place where our families want to hang out and informally educate their kids.'

The Great Room was designed as the social and educational heart of the school, offering comfortable seating, natural light, flexible gathering areas, and direct connections to learning spaces throughout the building. Families can study, meet, relax, share meals, or participate in informal learning activities together, creating an environment that feels welcoming, supportive, and community-centered rather than institutional.



"There are so many things in the actual structure of this place that stir up questions. Wonderful questions that we should be asking."

- Nathan Chud, MSC Assistant Principal

Results

'The flexibility of our learning program should be reflected in the flexibility of the building itself'

Flexible learning studios, operable walls, overhead doors, and adaptable furnishings allow spaces to easily shift between individual study, group collaboration, presentations, and community programs. This flexibility supports the evolving needs of hybrid learning, varied schedules, and the wide range of activities that define the Mat-Su Central educational model, that now reaches the entire state of Alaska.

'Mat-Su Central's space should foster relationships and an exchange of educational opportunities between our diverse student body, multigenerational families, professional staff and wider community.'

The building is organized around the Great Room, creating a shared hub where students, families, staff, and community members naturally gather, interact, and learn from one another. Flexible learning spaces, community-led programs, and informal gathering areas encourage collaboration, mentorship, and the exchange of educational opportunities across generations and learning styles.

'The Mat-Su Valley is one of the most beautiful places in the world, and we want our school to maximize those natural elements.'

The design embraces the surrounding Alaskan landscape through expansive views, abundant natural light, preserved forested areas, and direct connections to outdoor learning spaces. Connection with nature is a common thread throughout the design, expressed through warm colors, natural materials, and preservation of wooded areas across the site. Large windows frame views of Pioneer Peak and physically connect learning spaces to the outdoors, reinforcing the relationship between learning, community, and place.

'Covered entry promoting expansive/welcoming front entrance.'

The entry was designed to feel open, welcoming, and community-centered rather than institutional. Soft curves, warm materials, natural light, and expansive glazing create a visible connection into the Great Room, allowing the building to serve as a warm and inviting beacon for students, families, and visitors throughout Alaska's long winters.

'The Great Room will flow into the library and bookstore, which is core to our program.'

Rather than functioning as separate spaces, the Great Room, library, and bookstore were intentionally designed to overlap and support one another. This open connection expands opportunities for informal learning, collaboration, curriculum access, and family engagement while making the library feel like an active and integrated part of the daily learning environment, while keeping items safe and secure when not attended.

***"It's subtle things, like a change in paint colors that make all the difference. People walk in and are like 'Wow, we can do this?'"
Yes we can, and we can do it on a budget."***

- Michelle Sande, MSC Admin Secretary



Results

Overall, Mat-Su Central rethinks educational stewardship by replacing the traditional full-occupancy school model with a flexible hybrid learning ecosystem. The 50,596 SF facility supports 2,300 geographically dispersed learners through adaptable spaces, shared resources, flexible scheduling, and multi-modal educational delivery.

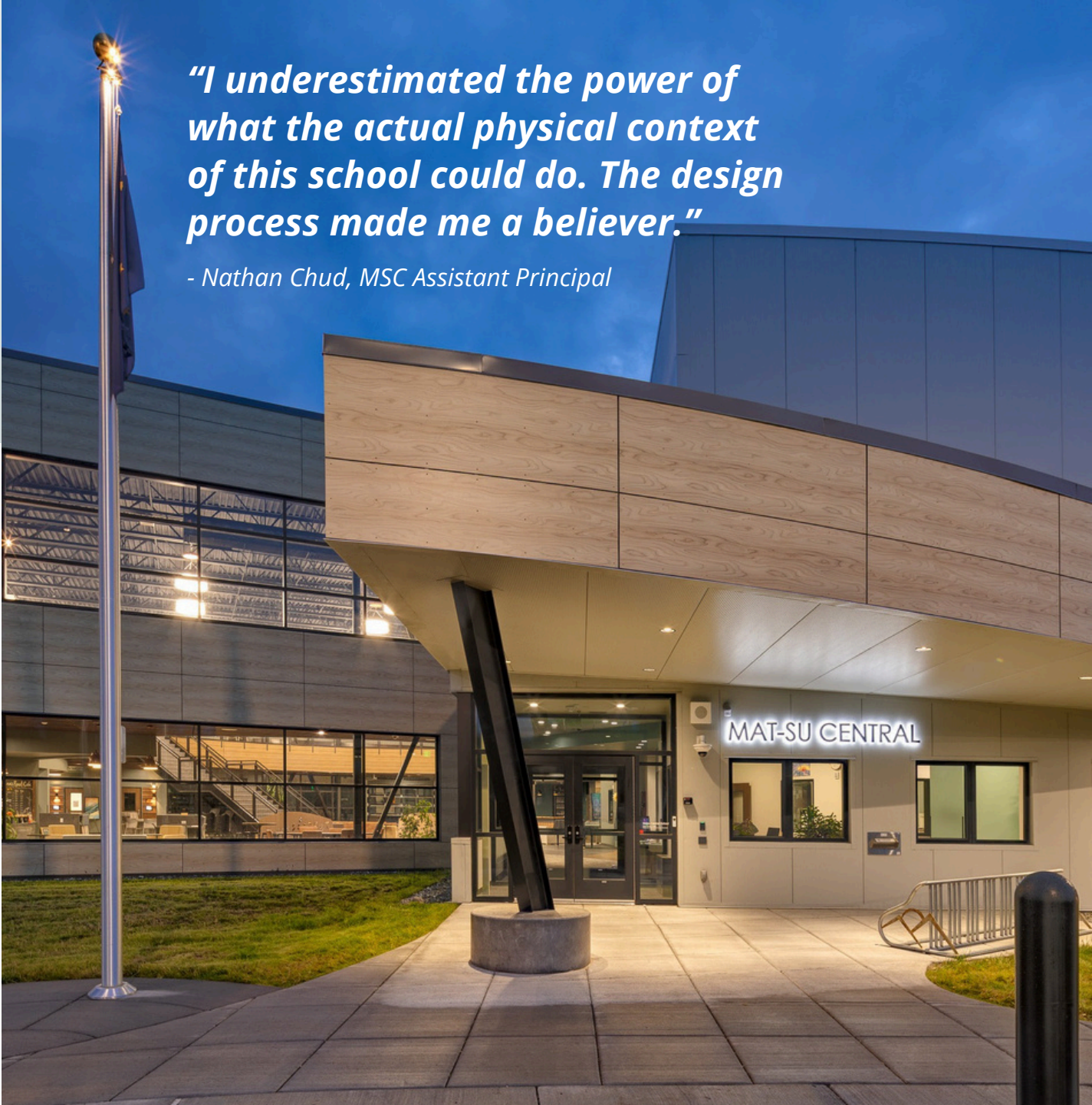
Rather than investing in oversized single-purpose facilities, the district prioritized high-utilization environments that maximize educational opportunity, community access, and long-term adaptability while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

Since its opening in 2025 it has added 700 additional students to its program and is continuing to grow.

One Space, Many Uses

Unlike traditional schools designed for full-time occupancy, Mat-Su Central operates as a hybrid educational ecosystem, dramatically increasing the number of learners served relative to building size and construction cost.

Traditional School	Mat-Su Central	The Numbers
Built for full occupancy	Built for flexible occupancy	Total project size: 50,596 SF
Fixed classrooms	Adaptable learning settings	Total construction cost: \$20.5 million
Age-separated	Multi-age learning	Approximate cost per SF: ~\$405/SF
Single-use	Multi-use spaces	Approximate cost per student served (3,000 current students): ~\$6,833/student
Institutional scheduling	Personalized scheduling	
Large campus footprint	Compact hybrid ecosystem	



"I underestimated the power of what the actual physical context of this school could do. The design process made me a believer."

- Nathan Chud, MSC Assistant Principal

Staff Interview

-Nathan Chud, Assistant Principal 1 year after opening

How many additional programs have you been able to provide as opportunities at the school now that you have your new space?

"The building changed what was possible for us. Before this, a lot of what we did felt temporary or limited by space. **Now we can actually build programs around the needs of students instead of around what rooms happen to be available.** I don't know that there is a clear number simply because it opened up our options so significantly that we have yet to hit our max. Regardless, we've added far more on-site classes, clubs, events, and student showcases than we could have supported before. The flexibility of the building has been huge for us."

How have you seen the great room used by parents and grandparents?

"Honestly, this is probably our favorite part of the building. **Families actually stay.** Parents (and grandparents) sit together while kids are in class, meet with advisors, work remotely, drink coffee, and connect with each other naturally. It feels more like a community space than a waiting area. There's life in it throughout the day."

how often do you host special events like proms, battle of the books, the senior business fair?

"Constantly. The building regularly gets used for events like the ones you listed. Some are large formal events and some are smaller gatherings, but there's almost always something happening. **What stands out is how naturally the building handles transitions** between those uses. It doesn't feel like we're forcing the building to become something it's not."

Does your community at large feel more supported with the new building?

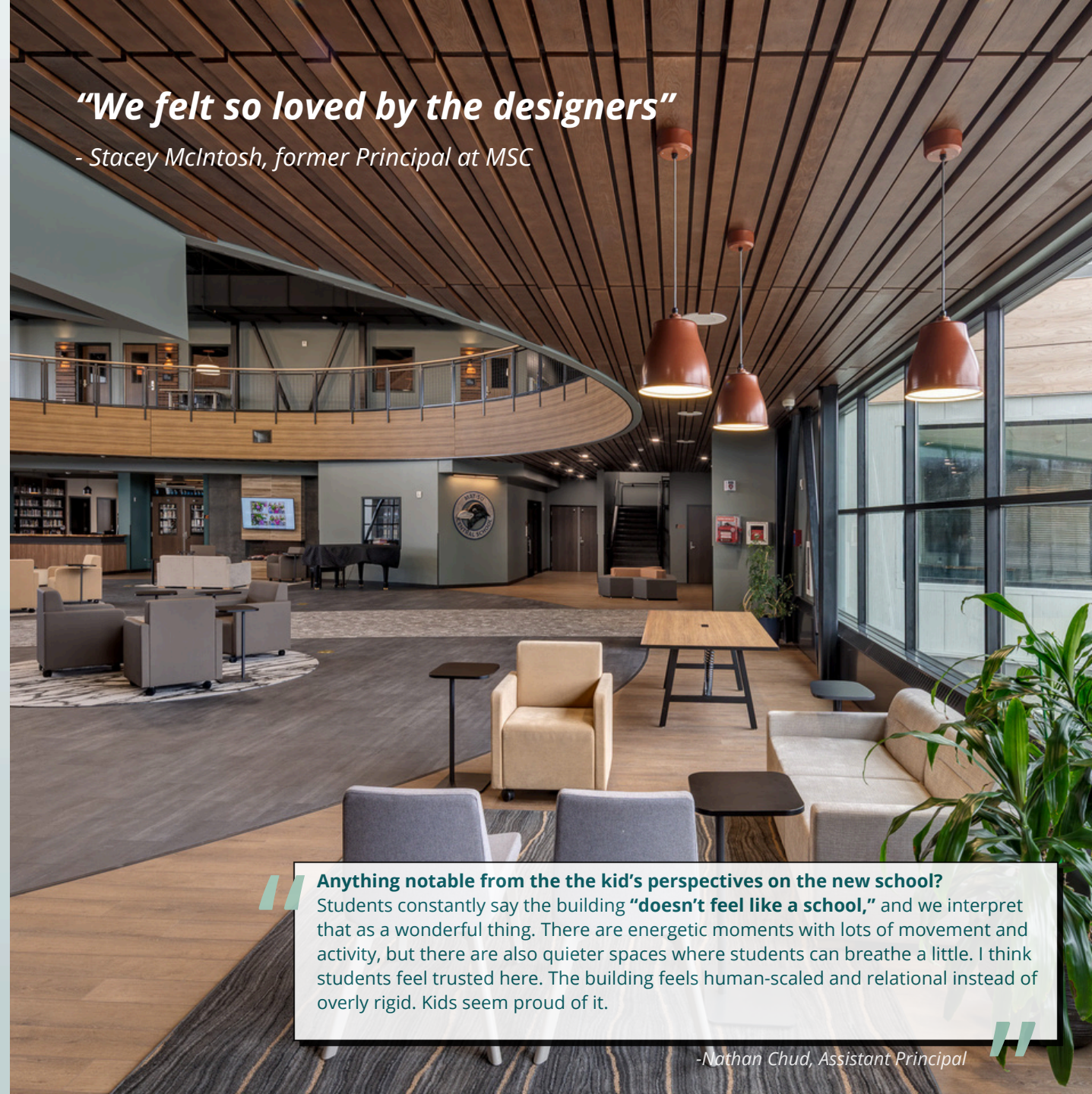
"Absolutely. I think for many families this building communicated that their educational model mattered. Correspondence and hybrid families sometimes feel like an afterthought in public education. This building told them otherwise. **There's a sense of dignity and belonging** tied to having a space that was intentionally designed for this community. Beyond this, the wider community is borrowing the space after school hours on a regular basis... I imagine that will only increase in the years to come."

Are there any unintended results and achievements of the process and project?

"I think the biggest unexpected thing was how much the building shaped relationships. The design created natural interaction points everywhere. Families connect more. Students linger more. Staff have pods of unique connection with one another. **There are interactions that happen organically now that never would have happened in our old setup.**"

"We felt so loved by the designers"

- Stacey McIntosh, former Principal at MSC



Anything notable from the the kid's perspectives on the new school?

Students constantly say the building **"doesn't feel like a school,"** and we interpret that as a wonderful thing. There are energetic moments with lots of movement and activity, but there are also quieter spaces where students can breathe a little. I think students feel trusted here. The building feels human-scaled and relational instead of overly rigid. Kids seem proud of it.

-Nathan Chud, Assistant Principal



Collaboration, Collegiality, & Connection

Deep Engagement Process

- Consensus-building workshops, Learning Signature exercises, and iterative design studies shaped the project collaboratively.
- The Great Room serves as the social and educational heart of the school, connecting students, families, staff, and community partners.
- Shared learning spaces foster mentoring, informal interaction, and multi-generational connection.



Respect

Respect for Different Learners

- The design intentionally rejected institutional school models in favor of spaces that feel welcoming, calm, and human-centered.
- Individual learning plans, flexible participation, and varied learning settings acknowledge and support different educational journeys.
- Planning conversations centered on listening first and designing around the lived experiences of homeschool families.



Place Matters

Alaska-Specific Environmental Response

- The project responds directly to Alaska's climate, landscape, and community identity through site orientation, preserved forest, and outdoor learning spaces.
- Views, materials, textures, and natural light connect learning to the surrounding environment.
- The campus creates a sense of belonging for a geographically dispersed regional community.



"It feels like you're excited to learn new things when you walk in here."

- Elizabeth Leonard, MSC Student



Learners First

Personalized Learning

- Personalized learning pathways and flexible learning studios support student choice, independence, and varied learning styles.
- Advisor-centered planning strengthens relationships between students, families, and educators.
- Wellness-focused materials, lighting, and furnishings create supportive environments for neurodiverse and sensory-sensitive learners.



Diversity

Inclusion & Equity

- The planning process engaged students, families, educators, community members, and district representatives throughout design.
- Hybrid learning and flexible scheduling support geographically dispersed learners with varied educational needs.
- Inclusive spaces, including gender-neutral restrooms and multi-generational learning areas, ensure all learners feel welcome and supported.



Innovation

Reimagining the School Model

- Mat-Su Central reimagines the traditional school model as a flexible hybrid learning ecosystem now serving 3,000 distributed learners.
- Adaptable learning environments support multiple teaching styles, community partnerships, and evolving educational needs.
- Community-led programs in welding, carpentry, photography, cooking, and career skills extend learning beyond traditional academics.

What would it look like if we designed a school with the belief that learning happens everywhere?

It would look like Mat-Su Central.

