

BACK TO SCHOOL

PK-12

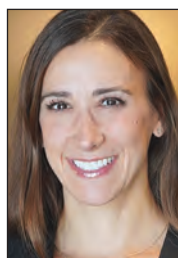


October 22, 2026

ALKI ELEMENTARY OFFERS A BLUEPRINT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF URBAN SCHOOLS

The school's benefits extend beyond its mass timber structure and geothermal heating system to its strong connections with the community and surrounding neighborhood.

As students settle into their new classrooms this fall, Alki Elementary School is already demonstrating what the next generation of public schools can achieve when sustainability, thoughtful design and strong partnerships come together.



BY MELANIE DEITCH
CORNERSTONE
GENERAL
CONTRACTORS

Located in Seattle's Alki neighborhood, the new elementary school replaced a 1950's-era facility for Seattle Public Schools (SPS) with a modern, 88,000-square-foot learning environment designed by Mahlum Architects and constructed by Cornerstone General Contractors.

The school's mass timber structure and geothermal heating system are among its most notable features, but the project's broader significance extends beyond the building itself.

Situated between the Alki Community Center and Alki Playground, the school was intentionally designed to strengthen its relationship with the surrounding neighborhood. Students benefit from a shared gymnasium within the community center, while a landscaped pedestrian pathway links the school to both the community center and the adjacent park.

"Every school we build is ultimately about creating opportunities for students," said Dave Flynn, Cornerstone's president. "What makes Alki especially meaningful is the way it connects learning spaces, public amenities and community investments to create something larger than a school building alone."

BUILDING ON A CHALLENGING URBAN SITE

Every project presents unique challenges, and Alki Elementary was no exception.

The school sits between the Alki Community Center and Alki Playground, and was designed to better connect with them.



PHOTOS BY BEN BENSCHNEIDER

One of the project's defining challenges was its compact urban site – SPS' smallest site in the district, just 1.4 acres. With limited space available for major building systems, the geothermal system was installed beneath the future school building, requiring careful sequencing and coordination during construction.

At the same time, the project team was constructing the new facility within an active residential neighborhood, adjacent to the park, and connected to the existing community center through a refurbished shared gymnasium.

The project team worked closely with SPS, community partners, and neighbors to address questions and concerns as the project moved from planning through construction. Regular project communications helped keep all parties informed about construction activities, schedule milestones, and anticipated impacts such as road closures or construction material deliveries.

"Delivering a complex public project in such a visible, active setting required collaboration at every level," said Matt Everett, Corner-

The library's window wall brings in lots of light, and views of Alki Park and the Puget Sound.



stone's project manager. "Alki Elementary demonstrates what's possible when a school district, design team, contractor, community partners, and neighbors can work through challenges together to deliver a lasting public investment," continued Everett. "From sustainability goals to long-term neighborhood benefits,

every decision was made with the students, staff and families in mind."

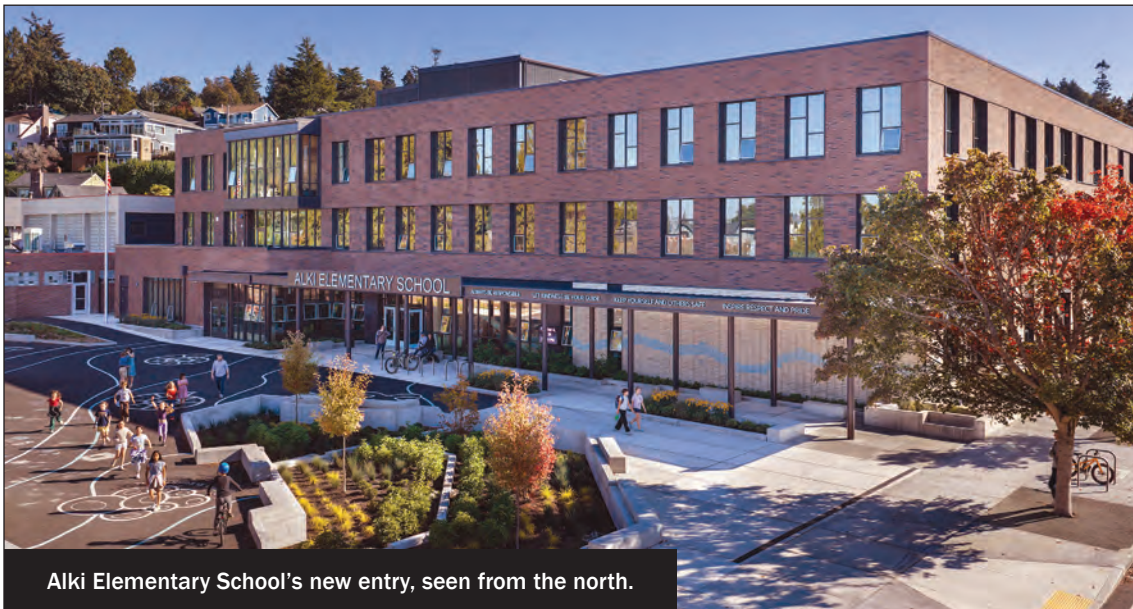
MASS TIMBER: SUSTAINABILITY AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Alki Elementary also reflects the growing role of mass timber and high-performance building systems in educational construction.

For Cornerstone, Alki Elementary adds to its expanding portfolio of mass timber projects, reflecting the firm's commitment to providing owners with sustainable construction solutions.

The school's mass timber structure supports SPS' sustainability goals while creating an environment that feels warm, welcoming and

The Student Commons highlights the building's mass timber structure and opens up all the way to third floor skylights.



Alki Elementary School's new entry, seen from the north.

learning spaces throughout the building, and classrooms designed to maximize daylight and connections to the surrounding environment. Evidence of the school's connection to its surroundings can be found throughout the design, from library views overlooking Alki Beach to exterior brick detailing inspired by the waters of Puget Sound.

While sustainability strategies are often discussed in terms of energy savings and carbon reduction, the benefits extend beyond building performance. At Alki Elementary, sustainable design choices contribute to a school environment that promotes student well-being, engagement and a sense of belonging.

"Alki serves as a living research environment where we're studying how exposed wood, natural light and other biophilic design strategies influence student focus, behavior, well-being and sense of belonging," said Joe Mayo of Mahlum Architects. "Through a funded post-occupancy research initiative, we're collecting feedback from students, educators and district leaders to better understand how design decisions translate into measurable educational outcomes over time."

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS BEYOND THE SCHOOL WALLS

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the project is the way it extends beyond the school building itself, creating stronger connections between students, families and the surrounding neighborhood.

Rather than functioning as a standalone facility, Alki Elementary's integration with the adjacent community center and park creates a campus experience that extends beyond the classroom and reinforces the school's role as a gathering place for students, families and neighbors.

As students enjoy their new learning environment, Cornerstone is completing the final phases of work on the adjacent Alki Playground improvements for Seattle Parks and Recreation. Collectively, the new school, community center and park enhancements represent a coordinated investment in the neighborhood and the people who use these spaces every day.

As school districts across Washington continue to modernize aging facilities, Alki Elementary demonstrates what is possible when owners, designers,

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ON THE COVER

At the addition to Maywood Hills Elementary, multipurpose spaces flex to support creativity, literacy and changing needs over the day. Design/build delivery by Mithun and Lease Crutcher Lewis.

PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

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builders and communities work together. More than a replacement school, it is a model for how educational facilities can maximize limited urban space, support sustainability goals and create lasting value for the communities they serve.

Melanie Deitch is marketing and communications manager for Cornerstone General Contractors.

connected to the Pacific Northwest. Combined with a high-efficiency geothermal heating system, the building

demonstrates how school districts can reduce environmental impacts while investing in facilities designed to

serve future generations.

The school features a three-story commons filled with natural light, collaborative

AFTER THE WAVES SUBSIDE: DESIGN FOR THE UNTHINKABLE

Ready for a day that may never come, resilient buildings earn their value through everyday utility.



BY STEVE
WACHTLER



HOLLI
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TCF ARCHITECTURE

Disasters happen, an unfortunate reality made increasingly hard to ignore by recent fires, floods, hurricanes and landslides. For most, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami off the coast of Indonesia and the 2011 Tōhoku Tsunami in northeastern Japan served as the first wake-up calls to a threat much less common, but far more catastrophic.

As architects, such events are a reminder that the spaces we program for learning, working, or gathering may, in a matter of minutes, be asked to serve as shelter, refuge, or lifeline.

It is expected that a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake event would send catastrophic tsunami flooding and destruction across the coastlines of Vancouver Island, Washington, Oregon and Northern California. Researchers continue to refine their understanding of the hazard, and building codes for the design of tsunami-resilient structures have only recently been developed.

Alarming few vertical evacuation structures (VES) exist. Washington State has two available: the rooftop platform at Ocosta Elementary School and a tower serving the Shoalwater Bay Tribe in Tokeland. Five more are in design or under construction: TCF's North Beach Junior/Senior High School; the Ocean Shores Elementary VES; and VESs for the Cities of Westport, Long Beach and Ocean Shores. These represent an encouraging start but fall far short of the many dozens needed to shelter residents and visitors throughout the inundation zone to prevent mass casualties.

School districts and other public agencies leading this type of project hear the clear mandate from constituents: make us safe. In this work,

Lit from within, North Beach Junior/Senior High School's towers are designed to act as a beacon, an everyday reminder of the refuge close by.



IMAGES BY TCF ARCHITECTURE

architects and engineers are navigating a landscape of emerging building codes, funding gaps, and countless planning unknowns tied to this relatively new project type.

Beyond protecting lives in the moment, what should facilities offer once the shaking stops and the waves subside? And how might expenditure on features designed for a once-in-a-lifetime event be reconciled against a finite budget? Bridging the gap between public expectation and sound solutions is the central challenge these projects must confront.

Reality: Relocation has real limitations.

While moving a facility to higher ground seems obvious, it is not always feasible; land outside the inundation zone is often unavailable, lacks infrastructure, or sits too far from the population it needs to serve.

VESs need to be where the people are. Students spend only part of their day at school, while around the clock, citizens of coastal areas live and work in the low-lying zone. Thus, a school moved to higher ground helps only a portion of the community, and only during school hours. Towers at lower elevations will save the most lives.

Reality: Solutions are costly, and not one-size-fits-all.

VESs take two basic forms: freestanding towers and platforms integrated into a new building. Both are best delivered as new construction, since retrofitting an existing building is costly and complicated given what these structures must withstand.

Forces will come from several directions at once. The structure must first resist the M9.0+ Cascadia earthquake, remaining intact as the ground beneath it fails in three ways: subsidence, when surface drops; soil liquefaction, when saturated soil loses strength and behaves like liquid; and scouring, when sand washes out from beneath. Further, a structure must resist a wall of water and brace for impact by large floating debris (think logs and buses as projectiles). Fortification presents a formidable price tag.

As an example of what this means in practice, TCF Architecture and Degenkolb Engineers conducted a master planning process for Aberdeen and North Beach school districts that assessed renovation vs replacement vs relocation for all schools.

One scenario looked at upgrading a 1990s-era, two-story masonry and wood-framed building, which would

have required removing the entire floor to improve the existing soils, then installing deep piles, caps, and a new structural slab. All underground utilities would need replacement as well. This work would have closed the building to students for two years.

At a cost of upwards of \$40M, the structure would be reinforced, but many of the systems would still be 40 years old. While the school would be made acceptable for safe evacuation during a major quake, it would likely be unusable in the aftermath. Adding a freestanding VES tower could cost an additional \$10-15M more.

By contrast, our high-level estimates indicated that this would be approximately 80% of the cost of a replacement school with integrated tower (a 2-for-1 solution). This illustrates the broader pattern: retrofit buys stability, but not long-term resilience. New construction with integrated vertical evacuation delivers greater longevity from the outset, producing a life safety asset for less than what two solved separately could cost.

Reality: With as few as 15 minutes warning to reach higher refuge, access will be difficult.

Planning entails envisioning terrifying scenarios:

When powerlines are down and roads are impassable, how could survival be made possible for more people? And further, once "everyone" arrives, what conditions will next be faced?

An evacuation refuge is more than a place for escape. Features should support life for an undetermined length of time. In the case of Ocosta Elementary, our nation's (and TCF/Degenkolb's) first VES, this reality guided decision-making. Four stair towers are provided for maximum access. To address the potential of delayed rescue, storage space is offered for food, water and portable generators. While bathrooms would be convenient, the complexities of rooftop plumbing made them financially infeasible.

Reality: Help may not arrive soon (but plan for it regardless).

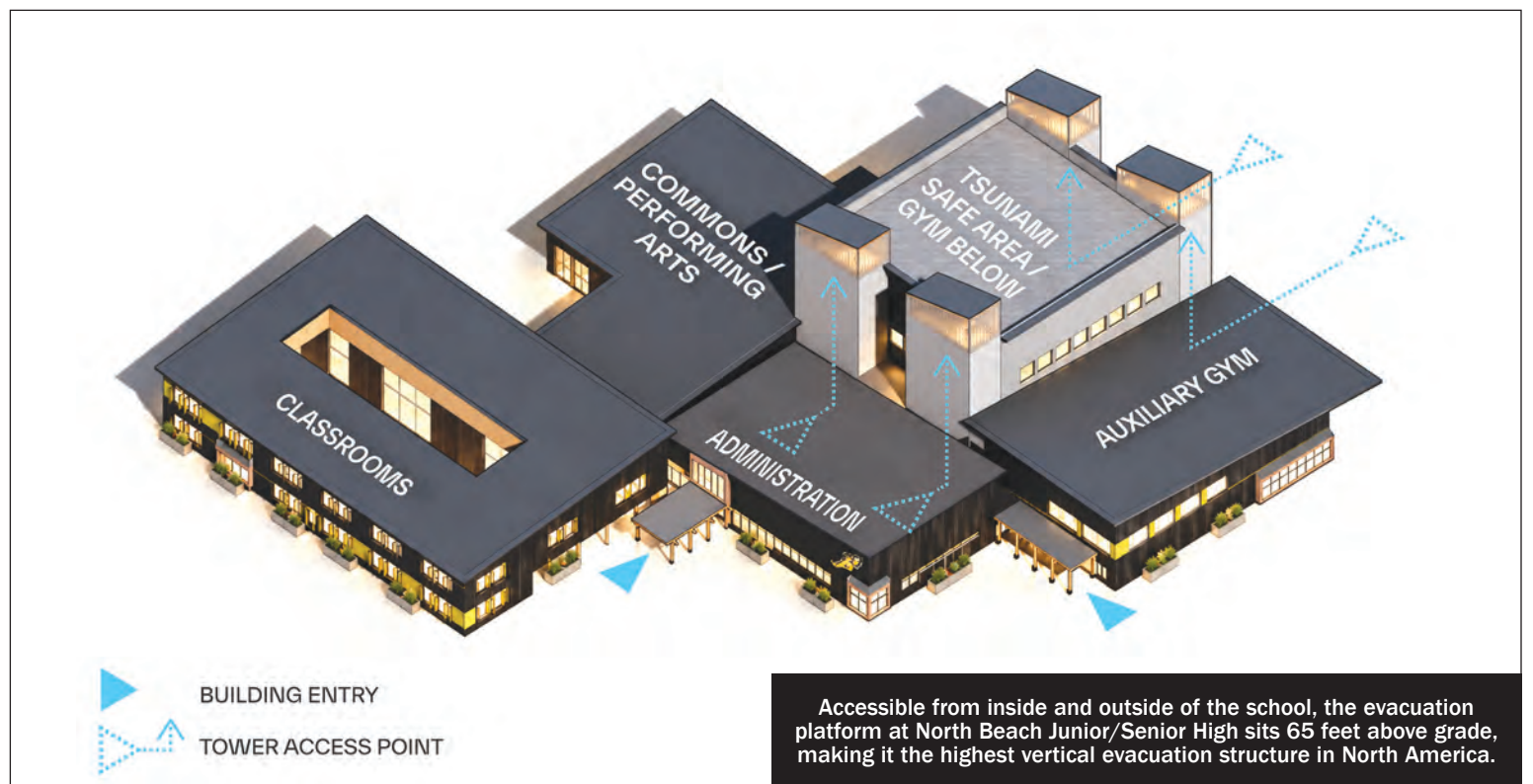
Neah Bay, home of the Makah Tribe, sits on a stretch of coastline exposed to tsunami risk. When construction is completed, the TCF-designed Neah Bay K-12 School will relocate an entire oceanfront campus out of the inundation zone. The new site and building are intended to give residents somewhere safe to go in a crisis, while also strengthening tribal culture throughout everyday use.

Development was not cheap. The steep hillside, paired with Neah Bay's persistent rain, wind and remote location, significantly constrained material delivery and site access.

For these same reasons, emergency response post-disaster may be weeks away. To sustain life in the interim, the facility includes large gathering spaces; a diesel generator with battery backup paired with photo-voltaic panels; and outdoor cooking facilities; all features that will also serve campus life in times of calm. Further planning is underway for a helicopter landing area and secondary access to a new health clinic near the stadium, a designated gathering place following a catastrophic event.

Reality:
Each project has its own unique "right" answer, but value comes from two-for-one thinking.

Ocosta and North Beach Jr/Sr High Schools reinforce this notion: in both cases, it made sense to take advantage of the gym's high-volume space, utilizing the roof deck as a platform rather



than adding a freestanding structure alongside it. At Neah Bay, the generator that carries the campus through a winter storm outage is the same generator that will carry a shelter when the grid is gone.

Everyone benefits from

solutions that serve everyday needs while anticipating disruption. The ability of designers to project forward, anticipate worst case scenarios, and maximize value through dual-purposed features gives owners confidence that their decisions

will function well in times of calm, and adapt as intended when it matters most.

Steve Wachtler is a managing principal at TCF Architecture and co-leader of its Educational Studio, with more than two decades of PNW

school design experience in seismic and tsunami resilient construction. Holli Smith is a principal at TCF Architecture with a foundation in interiors-focused architecture, leading marketing and supporting school master planning.

At Central Kitsap High School and Middle School, Skanska built a new combined facility between the existing middle and high schools while both campuses remained active.



PHOTO BY LARA SWIMMER

MAKING SCHOOL OPERATIONS CENTRAL TO THE CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE

Five principles for keeping schools open during construction while maximizing community investment and minimizing costs.

Schools are undoubtedly some of the most important buildings in any community. So, when citizens vote to invest in a new one, those of us that are entrusted with their construction have a responsibility to deliver the very best school possible.

Most school districts don't have acres of empty land sitting around ready to be developed into a new school, which means most of the time, we're building alongside an existing school or, in some cases, within the existing footprint.



BY ALBERT MARTIN
SKANSKA

Whatever the conditions, we have to make it work. Students and teachers need classrooms. Parents and buses need access to drop-off and pick-up. Athletic schedules, music and arts performances and after-school programs don't stop for construction, either.

Those priorities shape how Skanska approaches K-12 construction. Before visible construction begins, we

work to understand both the building and how the school functions every day. Not only does this planning help us build the best school, but it also enables maximum budget efficiency.

Here are five principles key to how we approach school construction:

1 Plan around learning

Most school districts don't have an empty "swing school" available to temporarily house several hundred (or more) students while their existing school is remodeled or rebuilt. Renting portable classrooms adds cost and provides no lasting value once the new school opens.

Our approach is to first study whether construction can proceed around an operating campus. One way involves building the new school on an available portion of the property such as athletic fields or parking areas, and moving in over summer break.

We then remove the old building and turn that space into new parking areas and athletic fields. Tighter sites often require more complex phasing, where sections of a

building are completed and turned over while students occupy other areas.

Renton High School is a good example of this, where work is underway now. Skanska has started construction of a new three-story, 350,000-square-foot high school on the 33.3-acre site occupied by the existing school.

The current high school will remain occupied during con-

struction, requiring multiple phases coordinated around school operations. Most of the existing high school will be demolished later, while the original 1930s portion and IKEA Performing Arts Center will remain.

Successful phasing starts with understanding the school and all of its operations. We are working hand-in-hand with school administrators and district leaders

to understand needs and expectations, and to learn bell schedules, bus and parent access points and drop-off patterns, testing periods, athletic schedules, performances, food service delivery schedules, and anything else that may impact our ability to complete our work or hinder someone else's ability to access the school when they need to.

The last thing we want is

Phasing will play a crucial role in the construction of the new 350,000-square-foot Renton High School, which Skanska is building.



RENDERING BY BRIC ARCHITECTURE

to schedule a construction delivery when dozens of buses and hundreds of parents are arriving for pickup, or plan an activity that causes vibrations or extra noise for Finals week. Our teams understand that preserving the learning environment is just as important as building the new school.

2 Keep students moving safely

Maintaining school operations during construction sometimes requires coordination down to individual class periods. At Central Kitsap High School and Middle School, Skanska built a combined facility between the existing middle and high schools while both campuses remained active.

During one phase, construction affected the path middle school students used to get to PE class. Rather than design some complicated and costly bridge or long work-around path, the team simply stopped work on that part of the project at designated times and used supervision and spotters so students could safely pass through the controlled area, attend class and return to the main campus.

Central Kitsap's larger phasing plan presented another challenge. We needed to complete and turn over portions of the new building for students to begin using while construction was ongoing in other parts of the same building. This required a

complex level of coordination between school officials, our team and local authorities so that operation and inspection of mechanical and fire-life-safety systems supporting occupied areas could be managed while other areas of the building remained under construction.

Simply put, we can't treat education as something happening next door to our construction projects. Instead, school operations must become part of the construction schedule.

3 Investigate early

There isn't flexibility in the academic calendar when it comes to the start of school. The first day is the first day, and if the school isn't ready, there's nowhere for the kids to go, so meeting our occupancy dates is iron clad.

That also means missing a critical summer window might mean waiting months for another opportunity to perform disruptive work while students and teachers are away. Early investigation of conditions, utilities and underground infrastructure helps reduce that risk.

At Browns Point Elementary School in Tacoma, Skanska built a new school adjacent to the existing one. That allowed students to remain in place, but it also required careful planning to ensure that construction did not disrupt power, water or

OPERATIONS — PAGE 19



Skanska needed to install an upgraded fire alarm system at Fairview Middle School while keeping the existing system operational while school was in session.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SKANSKA



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A NEW KIND OF SCHOOL TAKES SHAPE IN AN EXISTING BUILDING

An innovative transformation of an existing elementary school creates a new home for personalized learning, real-world connections, and a more sustainable future.

What happens when an elementary school becomes a middle and high school?

At Bellevue Big Picture School, the answer is not simply a new set of classrooms. It is a transformational approach to learning that connects students with mentors, community partners and authentic experiences, helping them discover their passions and pathways through internships and learning beyond school walls.



BY CORRIE ROSEN
MAHLUM

The work was shaped by the district's Strategic Plan and Bellevue Big Picture School's mission: "To prepare all students for success in college, career, and citizenship through personalized, rigorous and relevant learning experiences." Those goals provided a foundation for thinking about how students would learn and what kind of environment could support that learning.

Equally important were the principles of Big Picture Learning: personalization, real-world connections, shared leadership, a common intellectual mission and supportive partnerships. Together, these influences shaped both the educational program and the spaces where students will spend their days.

The result is a school that feels connected to what happens beyond its walls.

A former exterior courtyard is reimagined as a light-filled hub for the school's Learning Through Internship program.



IMAGES BY MAHLUM

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY, TOGETHER

For Bellevue Big Picture students, learning extends well beyond traditional classrooms. Projects, internships and mentorships connect their school experience with the adult world. The design gives those relationships a place in the center of campus.

A former exterior courtyard has been reimagined as a hub for the school's Learning Through Internship program. Students, Advisors, Mentors and families can gather, work together and connect. "Uniquely Big Picture, one student at a time" is embedded in the wall here,

a simple expression of the school's commitment to personalization. Community partnerships are no longer something that happens somewhere else. They are part of the daily rhythm of the school.

The 6-12 campus also creates connections across grade levels. Middle school students have spaces designed around their age and developmental needs, while high school students have environments that support greater independence. At the same time, the two groups are intentionally connected.

A middle school student might see the high school internship program in action.

Older students can serve as mentors and role models. What is happening in another part of the school becomes a glimpse of what comes next.

That kind of connection is difficult to create through programming alone. It becomes part of the culture when the building makes room for it.

STARTING WITH WHAT WAS ALREADY THERE

There is another story embedded in the project: the building itself.

The former elementary school was redesigned to accommodate a new age range, a different educational model and a new set of

priorities without losing the value of what was already there.

Rather than starting over, the design team looked for ways to work with the existing building and use its constraints to guide new possibilities.

The mural from the original school, depicting the Eastgate neighborhood, has been preserved, carrying part of the school's and community's history forward as the campus moves into its next chapter.

That approach also reduced the environmental impact of the project. Reusing the existing building is estimated to reduce embodied carbon by 56% compared with new construction. A new addition takes a different approach, supporting the district's operational energy goals through a net-zero design.

For a school district looking at aging buildings across its portfolio, the project offers a different way to think about modernization. An existing school can be more than a building that needs to be replaced or updated. It can provide the structure for something new.

DESIGNING WITH THE PEOPLE WHO WILL USE IT

The transformation was shaped not only by the building and the district's goals, but by the people who will

A new south entry creates a welcoming porch for students and a plaza for gathering.



Daylight, natural ventilation, and views strengthen students' connection to the outdoors, while warm wood and biophilic elements bring nature into the interior.



bring the school to life.

Throughout design, the project team engaged with students and staff to understand how the new campus could support the school's distinctive educational model. Students, mentors, families, community members, school leaders and district leadership all contributed to the conversation.

That engagement also extended into design and construction. Students from Bellevue Big Picture School interested in design had opportunities to participate as interns in our office, giving them a firsthand look at how a project moves from ideas and drawings to a building they would ultimately use themselves. For a school

built around real-world learning, that experience is more than an added program. It reflects the same connection between education and the professional world that the building is designed to support.

The process helped keep the conversation grounded in the people who would use the school while creating

opportunities for students to see their own interests and future possibilities reflected in the work.

BRINGING NATURE INTO THE SCHOOL DAY

The transformation is also visible in the everyday experience of the building.

Daylight, natural ventilation and views strengthen students' connection to the outdoors, while warm wood and biophilic elements bring nature into the interior. Together, these choices support well-being, belonging, curiosity and engagement.

Sustainability was part of the conversation from the beginning. The project team worked with students, school leaders and advisors to establish guiding principles for the design. Rather than becoming a separate layer, sustainability is woven through the project: in the reuse of an existing building, the learning environment and the experience students have every day.

A SCHOOL FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

There is something fitting about a school focused on preparing students for the real world being created through the transformation of an existing building.

The building itself has had a second life. The former elementary school now supports students from sixth grade through graduation. A courtyard has become a

NEW KIND OF SCHOOL — PAGE 17



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Creativity shapes both the curriculum and learning environment at The Evergreen School.



IMAGE BY MITHUN

SPACE FOR PROVOCATION

Designing agile learning environments that center creativity.

We have long known that the learning environment itself can serve as a “third teacher,” creating opportunities for active learning, discovery and student choice. This approach is becoming even more important as artificial intelligence changes how people find and use information. Students still need knowledge, but they also need to question, create, imagine and think critically, to use information, test ideas and respond to a changing world.



BY JOANN
HINDMARSH
WILCOX
MITHUN

Schools can build these skills by creating spaces for provocation: purposeful learning experiences that begin with a question, material or challenge and invite

students to explore possible answers.

How can design provoke expanded, student-led learning?

Educators describe two related forms of discovery: invitations and provocations. An invitation encourages students to interact with materials without a specific outcome. A provocation adds a learning goal, guiding question or creative overlay, moving students from casual exploration toward deeper thinking.

Both approaches are valuable. This article focuses on how school design can support provocations in shared, flexible environments where students can explore an idea, return to it and develop it over time.

Time is essential to this process. Meaningful discovery rarely fits within a single class period. When students can revisit an experiment, model or question over days, weeks or months, they are afforded time to make novel

connections and test innovative approaches that build understanding.

Case study: a new facility centered on creativity through provocation

The Evergreen School is an independent school in Shoreline serving highly capable students in preschool through eighth grade. Creativity shapes both its curriculum and its campus. Curiosity drives deep and meaningful learning, and Evergreen students thrive when their questions help guide the process.

So, when planning a campus expansion for its preschool through kindergarten programs, the school partnered with Mithun to create spaces that spark wonder and connect ideas across subjects through questions, hands-on making and experiences beyond the classroom.

The school needed spaces that could support its provocation-based curriculum and

respond to students’ rapid academic and social-emotional development between preschool and kindergarten, so Mithun began with a yearlong, teacher-led study of how learning happens at Evergreen.

A key finding was that young learners engage with their physical environment more than any other age level. And a project can lose its value if it must be packed away after an hour or each day. Children need places to leave work in progress, return to it and follow their curiosity at their own pace.

Students also engage with provocations differently as they mature. Preschool students may learn best in small groups rotating among activities, while kindergarten students can work in larger groups, sustain attention longer and pursue more complex investigations. Mithun’s design solution creates spaces for provocation that remain familiar from year to year but gradually transform to support growing agency.

Creating dedicated space for long-term exploration

Evergreen’s earliest learners needed places to experiment, tinker, play and solve authentic problems in big spaces specifically designed for little bodies. So, the design provides dedicated areas where creative work in progress is visible, and projects can remain in place.

This concept builds on Evergreen’s BIG Lab — short for Build, Imagine, Grow — an existing maker space for older students. For younger learners, it became a series of age-appropriate studios, or ateliers, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach:

- Preschool students use several small, comfortable exploration areas with clear boundaries.

- Prekindergarten students share a larger communal space.

- Kindergarten students use three interconnected spaces that support learning across subjects.

These open-ended “creativity ateliers” invite children to experiment, persist and solve problems in spaces that can be connected or contracted to suit the activity. Sliding doors connect studios with classrooms, outdoor learning areas and one another, while features for art, science and construction support projects that cross traditional subject lines.

Classrooms and the ateliers form connected learning suites. Learning areas are organized by size, materials and function rather than by a fixed number of seats. And each suite, in turn, connects directly with outdoor learning and play space. This approach gives teachers more ways to organize students and activities, and allows projects to move among settings as they develop.

Leveraging multipurpose communal spaces for exploration

A school does not need a specialized curriculum on creativity to benefit from space for student exploration. With a recent classroom addition to increase student

At Maywood Hills Elementary School, an open learning studio is positioned adjacent to a new dining space for maximum flexibility and impact.



PROVOCATION — PAGE 17

PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

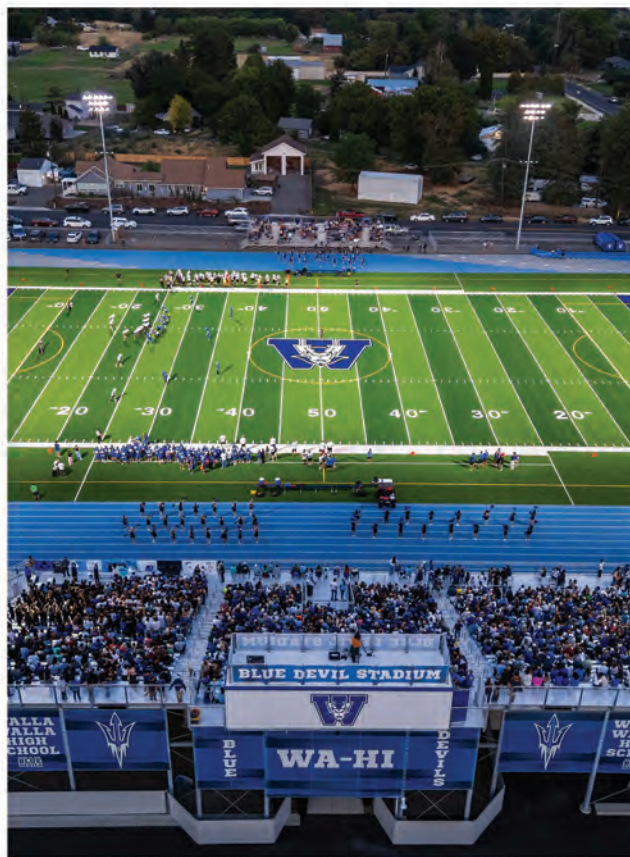


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HOW INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS ARE EXTENDING THE LIFE OF AGING SCHOOL CAMPUSES

Some of the most impactful school modernizations extend far beyond a school's building to modernize essential systems.

Across Washington, many school campuses are reaching an age where decades-old infrastructure no longer aligns with modern expectations for safety, accessibility, security and environmental performance.



BY MADDIE OLSON
AHBL

As districts work to extend the life of existing facilities, campus modernization has become a strategic investment in both student success and community resilience.

While classroom technology and educational programming often dominate conversations around school improvements, many of the most impactful modernization efforts occur outside the building. Site circulation, stormwater infrastructure, accessibility upgrades, utility improvements, and campus security all play a significant role in extending the life of existing schools, and ensuring they continue to serve students and communities for decades to come.

With more than 26 years of experience in civil engineering and site development, Bill Fierst, a principal at AHBL, has helped school



Terminal Park Elementary School in Auburn features accessibility upgrades, improved pedestrian connections, upgraded utilities, and enhanced stormwater infrastructure designed to support a safe, modern learning environment for students, staff, and families.

PHOTO BY DOUG WALKER

districts throughout Washington modernize aging campuses to meet evolving safety, accessibility, infrastructure and operational needs. Through that work, he has seen firsthand that some of the most impactful improvements focus on how people move through a campus.

"One of the biggest improvements we make on school sites is separating bus traffic and parent traffic," Fierst said. "Those are two different types of vehicle movements, and reducing those conflicts creates a safer environment for students,

staff, and families."

Many campuses were designed for different enrollment patterns and transportation needs than those they serve today.

"As schools have grown and transportation patterns have changed, there are more students arriving in different ways than when many of these campuses were first built," Fierst said.

As a result, modernization projects frequently focus on improving circulation and reducing potential conflicts between vehicles, buses and pedestrians. Reconfig-

ured drop-off zones, updated parking layouts, and safer pedestrian routes can improve both functionality and safety without requiring entirely new facilities.

Campus security has also become a growing priority for districts.

"We're seeing more emphasis on centralized entrances and designated visitor access points," Fierst said. "Schools also want campuses that are easier to monitor, whether that's through site layout, fencing, or creating more defined student areas."

Many modernization proj-

ects incorporate these considerations from the earliest planning stages, pairing campus security enhancements with infrastructure upgrades designed to meet current standards.

"In urbanized areas, a lot of those neighborhoods were developed 50 years ago or more," Fierst said. "In some cases, the existing water mains weren't sized to meet today's fire code requirements, so modernization projects have included significant water system improvements."

While students and parents may notice a new entrance or reconfigured parking lot, some of the most complex modernization work takes place below ground.

Stormwater management is one of the most common challenges encountered on older campuses.

"Existing campuses may not have any stormwater flow control or water-quality treatment because those requirements didn't exist when they were built," Fierst said. "When districts undertake enough work on a site, those improvements often need to be added as part of the project."

Many school sites throughout the region were developed before modern environmental regulations were implemented. As campuses are renovated or expanded, they often must be retrofit-

Outdoor amenities at Terminal Park Elementary School include a covered play area, synthetic turf field, running track, peace garden, and recreational spaces that support learning, play, and student well-being.



PHOTO BY DOUG WALKER

ted with stormwater treatment and flow-control systems to meet current standards. Modern projects may also incorporate low-impact development strategies such as permeable pavement and bioretention facilities designed to improve water quality and manage runoff.

Accessibility is another major component of campus improvement projects.

"Many older sites don't have accessible routes that meet current requirements," Fierst said. "A big part of modernization is retrofitting campuses so students, staff, and visitors can move through them safely and comfortably."

Many older campuses were built before current accessibility standards existed. Improving walkways, parking areas, and pedestrian connections helps make campuses more welcoming and functional for everyone.

A recent elementary school modernization project illustrates how districts often address multiple needs through a single investment, combining ADA parking upgrades, circulation improvements, and stormwater infrastructure enhancements.

Modernization priorities can also vary significantly



The replacement Dick Scobee Elementary School includes improved student pick-up and drop-off areas, bus circulation, pedestrian infrastructure, stormwater management systems, and roadway improvements that enhance campus safety and accessibility.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AHBL

between urban and rural districts. While schools in more developed communities often focus on traffic circulation, utility capacity, and campus security, rural districts often place additional emphasis on facilities that support broader community use.

Fierst noted that schools in many rural communities serve as gathering places for

events and activities beyond the school day.

"It's really a center of community activity," Fierst said.

As a result, modernization projects in rural districts often support both student needs and broader community use, including upgrades to athletic facilities. In some cases, natural grass fields have been replaced with synthetic turf and enhanced

drainage systems to improve year-round usability and reduce weather-related disruptions.

"The synthetic turf field will allow for more all-weather use throughout the year," Fierst explained. "The drainage system helps eliminate standing water and keeps the field usable for longer periods."

These types of moderniza-

tion projects also highlight an important reality: schools are often required to remain operational while improvements are being designed and constructed. Balancing construction activities with ongoing school operations requires careful planning and coordination among dis-

INFRASTRUCTURE — PAGE 19



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WHEN DESIGN BECOMES CURRICULUM: TURNING TYEE HIGH SCHOOL INTO A LIVING LABORATORY

Tyee's Environmental Leadership Program sparked an ongoing partnership with the architects designing the school, creating hands-on opportunities for students to explore sustainability, stewardship and their role in shaping a better future.

Students gather in the school's new daylight-filled commons where reused glulam stair elements support connection, wellbeing and learning.



PHOTO COURTESY OF INTEGRUS



BY SAM
SCHAFFER



TINA
CAMPANELLA

INTEGRUS ARCHITECTURE

The true value of a school building is measured by the learning experiences it inspires. At Tyee High School in SeaTac those experiences emerged when an innovative teacher worked with architects to transform the school's sustainable design features into opportunities for hands-on, real-world science learning.

When Melissa Chance, a Career and Technical Education (CTE) teacher and leader of Tyee High School's Environmental Leadership Program, was recruited to develop Highline Public Schools's Environmental Leadership Pathway, she envisioned a program that would help students better understand the world around them and their role in shaping its future.

In the program, students earn science credit by exploring environmental issues affecting their own communities, investigating solutions and learning how individual actions can create meaningful change.

"We want them to see that their community is important to them, how to have the hard conversations and learn together," Chance said.

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At the same time, Integrus Architecture was designing the new Tyee High School building. The team designed the building around principles of decarbonization, health and wellness, place and stewardship. Those principles informed everything from the school's mass timber structure and daylight-filled learning environments to its native landscapes, rain gardens, solar panels and sustainable materials.

For Chance, the connection was immediate.

The vision for her program was never intended to be confined to a classroom. Instead, it centered on helping students engage directly with the environmental challenges and opportunities surrounding them. The new Tyee High School offered a powerful extension of that approach.

The same principles that guided the building's design were the very concepts students were learning through the Environmental Leadership Program. Stewardship, resource conservation, healthy environments and sustainability were no longer abstract topics. They became visible and tangible through the architectural designers' materials choices, systems and landscapes.

A BUILDING DESIGNED TO TEACH

For Chance and her students, the school's sustainability features quickly became more than design elements. They became teaching tools.

Questions about climate and carbon came to life through Tyee's mass timber structure and material reuse strategies. Lessons about water quality and ecosystem health connected directly to the campus rain gardens, bioswales and native land-

scapes. Concepts related to health and wellbeing became tangible through daylight-filled learning environments, views to nature and spaces intentionally designed to support comfort, belonging and student success.

Recognizing the educational potential embedded within the building, Integrus Associate Principal Sam Schafer and architects Alexandra Forin and Will Crothers, members of the original Tyee design team, continued their involvement long after construction

was complete. Inspired by the project and by Chance's innovative approach to science education, they continued working alongside her to help students understand not only what sustainability features existed throughout the campus, but why those decisions mattered and how they influence environmental and human outcomes.

Students explored topics such as carbon sequestration, stormwater management, daylighting, renewable energy, native ecosystems and material reuse. They selected sustainability features throughout the campus to research and interpret, transforming their findings into district leadership presentations, educational posters and permanent informational plaques that will help future students understand the stories embedded throughout the school.

The partnership also gave students direct access to the professionals who helped shape their learning environment. Through conversations with architects, landscape architects, engineers, educators and community partners, they gained insight into how people from different disciplines collaborate to address real-world environmental challenges.

In the process, students became more than learners. They became interpreters, educators and stewards of their own school.

FROM DESIGN INTENT TO STUDENT AGENCY

The Environmental Leadership Program was never intended to be just another science class. Nor was Tyee High School designed simply to house students for six hours a day.

Instead, both were created to foster a deeper understanding of the connections between people, place and the environment.

The result is a feedback loop that extends far beyond construction. Design inspires curiosity. Curiosity leads to learning. Learning fosters stewardship. And stewardship, in turn, helps students recognize that they have the power to shape the future of the places they care about.

That transformation is what excites Chance most. Some students enter the program simply needing science credit or looking for a more engaging way to connect with science. Others arrive with little interest in sustainability or environmental issues. Yet through hands-on learning, community partnerships and meaningful connections to their surroundings, many

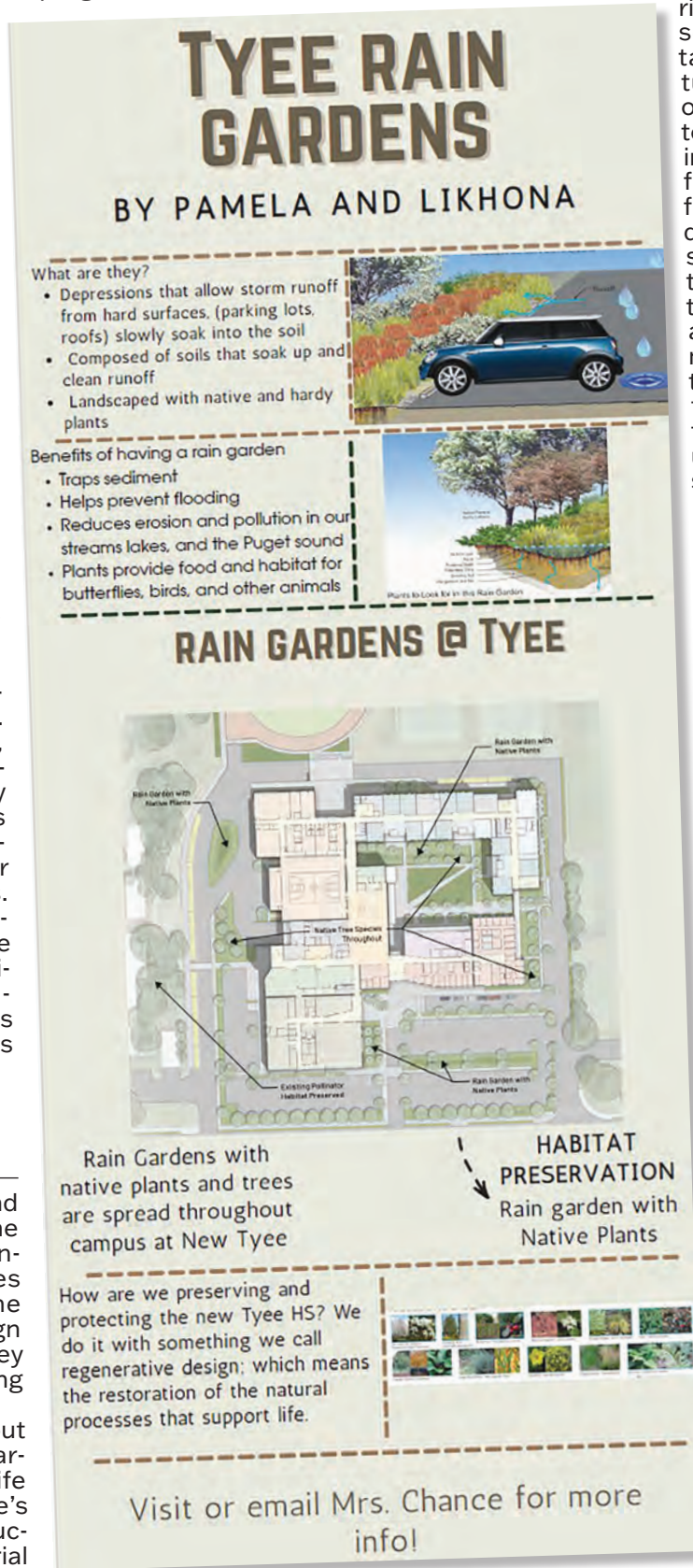
students have developed a deeper interest in science and a greater appreciation for the role they can play in their communities.

Reflecting on those changes, Chance said, "I have won some kids over."

Together, the program and the building demonstrate what is possible when educators and designers work together toward the same goal, helping young people understand their relationship to the world around them and empowering them to influence it.

In that way, Tyee's most important sustainability feature may not be its rain gardens, mass timber structure or daylight-filled classrooms. It may be the students themselves, who are learning that stewardship is not something a building does. It is something people choose to practice every day.

Sam Schafer is an associate principal specializing in education architecture and Tina Campanella is director of business development and marketing at Integrus Architecture.



Student-created posters help tell the story of Tyee High School's sustainable design features, turning the campus itself into a living laboratory for environmental learning.

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NEW KIND OF SCHOOL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

place for connection. Spaces that once served one age group now support a different kind of learning. And the school reaches beyond its campus through the people and organizations that become part of students' education.

None of those changes required the existing building to disappear. Instead, the project asked what was already possible and then pushed it further.

For students arriving this fall, that may simply feel like their school: a place to learn, work with others, meet people from outside the classroom and see what might come next. For the district, the project demonstrates how its commitments to educational innovation and sustainability can come together in one place. And for the people who designed it, Bellevue Big Picture School is also a reminder that some of the most interesting opportunities for the future of education may already be standing in front of us.

Corrie Rosen is a partner at Mahlum Architects who works closely with owners, general contractors, and consultants to leverage each team member's expertise in shaping design solutions to achieve client goals.

PROVOCATION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

capacity at Maywood Hills Elementary School, the Northshore School District also needed to increase space for multipurpose activities and enrichment programs, without adding rooms dedicated to single use. Mithun's design solution was to place an open learning studio with features for art, making, science and exploration adjacent to a new dining space, forming an expandable, flexible innovation hub.

The spaces work separately or together. The studio supports quiet dining at lunch and group learning activities throughout the day, while the dining space provides overflow space for projects as needed. Its location between the entry and playground places creativity-in-learning along a route students use regularly, increasing visibility and access. As a result, engagement with, and program diversity of, enrichment programs is increasing.

Maywood Hills shows how strategically designed, flexible, visible space for creativity can broaden participation within an existing program and limited footprint.

Design principles for spaces of provocation

Both Evergreen and Maywood Hills point to several adaptable

strategies:

Support varied activities. Design spaces that can shift easily between individual work, small-group discovery, large-group collaboration and hands-on making, that supports teaching across subjects and collaboration among educators.

Put exploration along everyday paths. Locate project areas where students already travel and gather. Visible and accessible spaces invite participation and agency.

Connect subjects and materials. Place clean, messy, wet and dry work areas near one another so projects can easily combine art, science, technology, writing and building.

Make tools accessible. Provide student-height storage, work surfaces and materials so students can find, use and return resources independently.

Separate adult resources. Provide educators planning, preparation and storage nearby, so adult materials do not take over the learning environment.

Use technology purposefully. Accommodate digital media tools, 3D printers and audio equipment to support research, documentation and multi-media creation.

Let work remain in place. Value space for creativity early and track it in space planning; long-

term access allows students to test ideas, learn from mistakes and improve their work.

Giving curiosity room to grow

A space for provocation is not defined by one room type, piece of furniture or technology. It is an environment that gives students time, choice, useful tools and permission to follow a question.

At Evergreen, connected ateliers support a learning model rooted in curiosity and long-term exploration. At Maywood Hills, flexible shared space expands access to mixed-media activities throughout the day. In both cases, design helps students take a more active role in learning.

When schools create visible, adaptable and respectful environments that support agency, safe risk, and discovery, space becomes more than a backdrop. It becomes an active part of the learning process and gives curiosity room to grow.

JoAnn Hindmarsh Wilcox is a partner at Mithun and education practice leader with national influence on PK-12 and higher education design.

Summer seismic upgrades make aging schools safer—while kids keep learning all year long.

Lincoln High School Phase 2, Seattle, WA
Voluntary seismic upgrades on an occupied campus.

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Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA
Substantial Alteration upgrades to a landmarked 1927 school.



Oakland High School, Tacoma, WA
PCS collaborated with a Progressive Design-Build team to deliver seismic upgrades to a historic 1912 school.



Laurelhurst Elementary School, Seattle, WA
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SEATTLE DAILY JOURNAL OF COMMERCE

buildings in the Spring District were on the market. Of the two, Block 5 remains

Runstad and Shorenstein Properties, who have sold other buildings there in the past. Last week, Broderick Group said in its fourth-quarter Eastside office report that Block 6 has sold for \$270 million. King County hasn't yet recorded any such deal at 1646 123rd Ave. N.E. (That's on the east side of the campus.)

Says Broderick, "The project garnered strong interest, numerous tours, and multi-

The apartments opened in phases, beginning in 2009, then first sold in 2015

Photo via

319 Redmond trade for \$147

By BRIAN MILLER

Giovanni Napoli, Phil.

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OPERATIONS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

storm systems at the existing school while bringing those same systems to the new one.

Similar challenges existed at Fairview Middle School. We needed to install an upgraded fire alarm system while keeping the existing system operational since school was in session, all while coordinating around school activities.

Our work at Sumner High School, which is just beginning, shows how phasing and proper planning supports a long-term campus transformation. Skanska recently began Phase II of the school's multi-year, three-phase expansion.

The work includes construction of a three-story, 103,000-square-foot building directly adjacent to and connected with the existing high school. Scheduled for completion in fall 2028, Phase II will provide approximately 50 classrooms plus spaces for special education, robotics, aerospace manufacturing, CAD and digital design,

culinary arts, early learning and childcare.

The sequence of how all this comes together is critical. Phase I already delivered 18 classrooms, a library, kitchen, technology upgrades and a 12,000-square-foot commons and cafeteria. Phase II adds classroom capacity needed as the broader redevelopment moves forward, and portions of the existing high school are removed and replaced.

Phase III will include a performing arts center, gym, swimming pool, music rooms and athletic fields. The overall sequence is expected to stretch across several years because students will remain on campus throughout the transformation.

4 Focus resources on permanent solutions

Beyond its impact on people and the learning environment, phasing is also a financial decision. Every dollar spent on temporary classrooms, temporary utilities, or an inefficient sequencing

of construction activity is a dollar that's unavailable for the permanent school.

To put those dollars in perspective, Renton School District voters approved a \$676 million construction and improvement bond in 2022, which included funding for the new Renton High School. Sumner-Bonney Lake School District voters approved a \$732 million bond measure in 2024 to fund capacity, improvement and safety projects across the district, including work at both Sumner and Bonney Lake High Schools.

Our responsibility is to direct as much of those public dollars as possible towards permanent improvements.

That makes preconstruction especially important. By working with school districts and our design partners to study site configurations and school operations schedules, we can develop thoughtful phasing plans and schedules before construction begins. Our goal is to develop an

executable plan that limits temporary activity wherever practical.

5 Invest in the local community

It's important to look for opportunities for local, small and diverse businesses in the communities where schools are being built. For GC/CM projects, one approach is to structure bid packages in smaller chunks so qualified smaller firms have a realistic opportunity to compete.

Before procurement begins, we've also used project-focused versions of our Construction Management Building Blocks program to help local companies understand topics like contracting, insurance, scopes of work, and public bidding requirements. For the Central Kitsap project, we held a two-week bidder-readiness workshop for local business. Every participating company submitted a bid, and two firms new to GC/CM work and to working with Skanska won

contracts.

These efforts show the broader responsibility that exists with school construction. Communities invest in schools because they believe in the long-term success of their students. Our job is to help school districts translate that investment into high performing facilities while creating lasting value for the broader community.

School construction ultimately involves two commitments. We need to deliver the facilities communities voted to fund, while protecting the learning experience taking place during construction.

The new school matters. And so does every school day before the new doors open.

Albert Martin is vice president/account manager for Skanska USA Building, where he oversees Skanska's work in the K-12 market.

INFRASTRUCTURE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

districts, designers, and contractors.

For districts beginning modernization projects, Fierst emphasizes the importance of strategically evaluating which elements of a campus can be preserved.

"If you can reuse portions of existing pavement or infrastructure, there can be significant cost savings," he said. "The key is balancing what should be preserved and what should be replaced while still meeting today's requirements."

As school districts continue investing in aging facilities, modernization is helping schools adapt to changing expectations while preparing

for future generations.

Many of the most important improvements may never be seen from inside a classroom, but they are essential to creating campuses that are safer, more efficient, and better equipped to serve students and communities for years to come.

Maddie Olson is a senior marketing coordinator at AHBL, where she specializes in A/E content development and proposal coordination. Bill Fierst, a principal at AHBL with more than 26 years of experience, was a technical contributor to the article.



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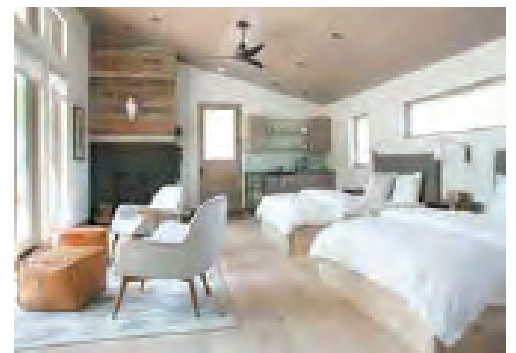
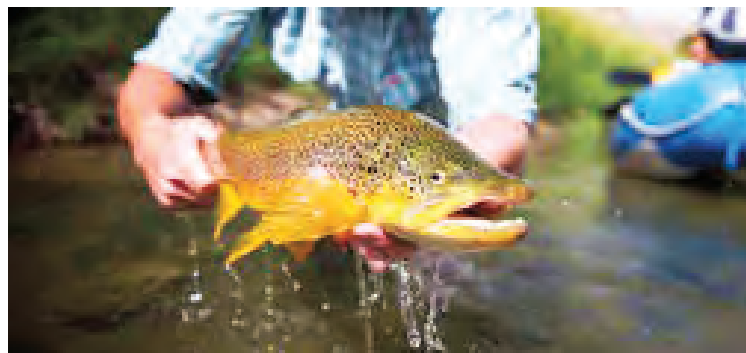
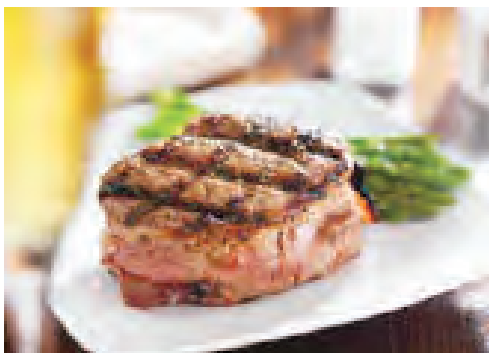
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