



VAN RAUB ELEMENTARY COLLABORATION SPACE



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What Will Schools of the Future LOOK LIKE?

Architects from LPA and McKinney York are helping change the landscape when it comes to education design.

By Lauren Jones

Van Raub Elementary photos courtesy of Costea Photography, Inc. and LPA, Inc.
Sánchez Elementary renderings courtesy of McKinney York Architects

Collaborative spaces, plenty of light and opportunities for indoor/outdoor learning are some of the major additions coming to classrooms throughout Texas. Over the last five years, school design has drastically evolved as more studies are conducted on the relationship between school architecture and student learning.

“There was a study we helped establish at UT that said when students learn in the context of their local community and with the peers of differing ages, they become more empathetic to those around them,” says LPA’s Kate Mraw, Design Director, RID, LEED AP BD+C, ALEP.

Elementary schools are getting a reboot to prepare students to be leaders, active explorers of their environment, and to develop a respect for those of varying cultures and

backgrounds. “The most successful spaces are those that can accommodate flexible learning, even learning that has taken place outside of the classroom setting — a theme in higher education design for quite some time,” says McKinney York Project Architect Navvab Taylor, AIA, RID, LEED AP BD+C.

LPA, an architecture firm based in San Antonio, has had a 26-year relationship with Boerne ISD, contributing to the design of 14 of the 16 schools in the district, and working to create a new way of designing that supports academic changes. From the beginning, their role has been to understand teaching methods, how those drive spatial design, and how both teachers and students interact within the space. “Rather than falling back on traditional methods, we thought about how to build community and support the needs of elementary students and early learners,” says Mraw.

LPA looked to community surveys, teacher needs and the latest data to design Van Raub Elementary, which opened in August 2018. They found a call for design that supports student agency and the ability to make choices and take actions needed to reach their goals. With a focus on flexibility, collaboration, visibility, connectedness and wellness, LPA created “neighborhoods” broken up by grade level, open areas, team rooms, spaces to be messy, spaces to work outdoors



VAN RAUB ELEMENTARY OUTDOOR LEARNING SPACE



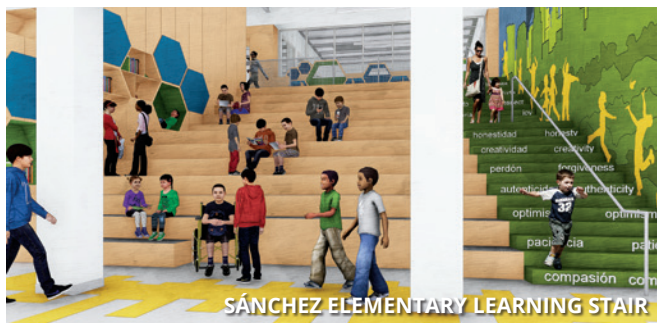
SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY EAST - PLAYGROUND



SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY DINING COMMONS



SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY EAST VESTIBULE



SÁNCHEZ ELEMENTARY LEARNING STAIR

and digital tech which assists as kids work in small groups. Activities that focus on the four C's: collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity are ideal for such settings, including project-based learning and labs with or without additional technology.

"It's important for kids to develop a sense of belonging at an early age, to find their sense of self and community, so when you offer that at a physical level you can encourage it from an educational standpoint," Mraw says.

Those at Austin firm McKinney York have likewise found a call for more collaborative spaces and sustainability in school design. Sánchez Elementary, which is right on I-35, was built in the late 70s and was in need of modernization. With its proximity so close to downtown, the neighborhood has become more diverse, drawing students from outside the community as well.

"The school is 45 years old but has really good bones," says Taylor. "There are a lot of memories there and we wanted to incorporate them into a new design."

For the firm, who has a depth of experience in residential, commercial and institutional work, building an elementary school was a first and unlike other projects with a singular owner or small group of owners. Building a school included numerous voices like the Campus Architectural Team with principals, parents and community stakeholders whom they met with for a full year, and tours of local schools so they could get a feel for what Sánchez could look like. They also had three public meetings where the design was presented to

the community. Construction began on the new and improved Sánchez Elementary in March 2020 and it's set to welcome students in the fall of 2021.

Like in Boerne ISD schools, there will be breakout rooms for small groups, plus a learning stair that will act as a central gathering space for class demonstrations and performances and an outdoor learning studio. In addition to more community spaces, McKinney York transformed the dated classrooms with plenty of windows as daylight has been found to improve student performance.

"We are excited to be educating the next generation and the environment in which this is done is critical to its success," says McKinney York's Michelle Rossomando, Project Manager, AIA, RID.

But how is improved school design affecting students and teachers in real time? Tanya Tate, principal of the brand-new Dr. Ferdinand L. Herff Elementary in Boerne ISD, says it's "changed practices and has provided more opportunities for kids to work together, think collaboratively, problem solve and be more creative," she says. "It reminds me of working at Google but for elementary schoolers."

Tate explains, "The days of a 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum are over. Today's curriculum requires teachers to customize the content for each student and meet them at their ability level. Traditionally, classrooms were more 'sit-and-get,' with direct teaching. Today's classrooms are student-centered, hands-on, minds-on, and the teacher facilitates learning in small groups, flexible groups — where open learning spaces are more effective."

With that said, both students and teachers have had to adapt and learn how to interact within their new spaces, but positive outcomes have already been seen. "You can tell our students are really engaged," says Tate. As learning has become more about student collaboration and communication, "shy students are more comfortable opening up in small settings instead of lecture-type settings involving the whole class," she adds.

So, how will education architecture hold up and how will it continue to develop over the years? Curriculum and early childhood education research will continue to influence the directionality of design, and architects, teachers and those in the community have already come to value the importance of school design and how it can be inspiring. Building for the future means building for flexibility, adaptability and resiliency. ♦

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