The Power of Early Childhood Education

Preparing for Your Child’s IEP MEETING

Look Inside Schools Built for the 21st Century

4 Questions for the Colorado Teacher of the Year

Helpful List of Private Schools
The path leaves from the drop-off zone and winds around in an eclipse-like arc until it meets the entrance of Creekside Elementary School. The grounds, complete with river rocks, sand, and xeriscaped grasses, invite people in.

The new Creekside Elementary School building—designed by Fielding Nair International and Benner Wagner and Grody Architects and built by GE Johnson Construction—looks more like a modern museum than a school. It’s one of 63 projects that Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) is funding with the 2014 bond program in order to create more innovative learning environments that are in line with 21st century students.

For school buildings constructed in the 1950s, such as Douglass, Emerald, and the original Creekside Elementary schools, it was deemed more financially prudent to scrape than to repair. Each of these schools spent around $22 million on a new building and opened to students on August 16 of this year.

“We were so inhibited in our prior building,” said Jon Wolfer, principal of Douglass Elementary. Many of Wolfer’s teachers wanted to do more “vertical teaming”—working with teachers in grades just above or below the grades they teach—and found this difficult because of how classrooms were arranged.

Inside Creekside, natural light floods the entrance. The entryway blends into the “gathering” stairs, the stage, and “the café,” which looks more like a coffee shop than a cafeteria, featuring booths and tables at various heights and configurations. The fishbowl-like setting,
called “the heart,” puts students in the middle of everything, which is exactly the goal—student-centered learning.

Prakash Nair, president and CEO of Fielding Nair International (FNI), found that the traditional education model was not always successful. He started his own architecture firm, specializing in educational design. “The physical school building represents an educational philosophy that has been debunked,” says Nair, “You can’t mass produce education.”

FNI’s design includes a variety of open and closed learning spaces to encourage both social and independent learning. Now, private spaces with doors or movable walls are just as valued as wide-open areas. “If an architect is simply trying to build a space, then the teacher says, ‘What do I do with this space?’” Nair says. “You have to talk to the educators to see what they need and then build the space.”

At Creekside Elementary, visitors can see Nair’s philosophy in action. Four fourth graders sit on the carpeted portion of the stairs, engaged in a math assignment. Behind them, other groups of students chose their own areas in which to work: two lie on green cushions, four nestle inside wooden cubbies; three more study at a desk overlooking the stairs. Off to the side, a teacher sits with a student.

With windows in every direction, the area lets in so much natural light that many of the staff members have yet to actually turn on a light. “I like all the windows. It makes me feel relaxed,” says fifth grader, Stella Delaney.

**CO-PLANNING AND CO-TEACHING IN CO-EXISTING SPACES**

In a traditional elementary school building, students are in the same room with the same teacher for most of the day. At Creekside, the rooms don’t belong to a certain teacher, and the students don’t have assigned desks or even rooms. Older students travel from space to space with blue bins that house their needs for that hour. All students have wooden cubbies in their grade level common area that hold coats and backpacks.

The teachers share the new “flex spaces,” which are equipped with movable walls and furniture to support varied modes of curriculum delivery. The rooms spill out into a common area intended for small and large group instruction. Instead of awkwardly sitting against the walls of confined hallways, students can now gather with their poster boards and markers, their Chromebooks, or their reading and notebooks.

The new configuration allows for easier co-planning, in which teachers collaborate during their office hours to plan a lesson together, and co-teaching, in which teachers combine their

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classes and teach the same lesson together. Before, narrow hallways meant to be kept quiet and colleagues teaching behind closed doors made co-planning and co-teaching more of a challenge.

Because many teachers in BVSD were already using a co-teaching model, the new building supports their instruction. Others have attended trainings on project-based learning and collaboration.

“You have to tweak the learning environment just enough where it’s uncomfortable so that teachers don’t revert back to their former ways (of teaching),” says Adam Galvin, principal of Summit Charter Middle School, which was remodeled by FNI two years ago.

In Creekside’s commons area shared by fourth and fifth graders, a teacher stands at a desk working with one student. She is just outside her learning community where other students, visible through the rolled-up glass garage door, are quietly cutting and gluing.

“Flexible classrooms give students a choice in what kind of learning space works best for them, and helps them to work collaboratively, communicate, and engage in critical thinking,” says Francine Eufemia, principal of Creekside Elementary. There is still plenty of direct instruction from teachers, but now, when teachers assign time for group or individual work, there is the space to support it.

The increased transparency not only allows teachers to supervise more easily, but also to view students in various settings. Walking through the building, the staff can see into the learning communities, the art room, the commons area, or the café, and observe how students interact, behave, or perform. More input on each student translates to more personalized instruction for every child. “They’re not just one teacher’s 30 kids, they are everybody’s,” Galvin says.

On the first level at Creekside, the second and third grade communities have not yet closed their movable wall. “We haven’t needed to,” says Katie Webb, second grade teacher. “Now we have three to four learning spaces students can move between throughout the day, and teachers will push in instead of students being pulled out.”

Surprisingly, the spaces don’t get overwhelmed with noise. Soft tile floors and absorbent ceilings help minimize sound travel.

WHAT’S A MOVABLE?
A key aspect to modern school design are the movable furnishings. Instead of teachers planning for 10 minutes at the beginning and end of class to rearrange the desks for group work, the tables and chairs can easily be reconfigured to fit various needs. Desks can be adjusted to standing and turned vertical to be used as a whiteboard. Rolling chairs, wobble stools, and squishy cushions give consent for children to wiggle

Security Measures
Having flexible work spaces doesn’t mean the school is flexible when it comes to safety.

- Employees have greater lines of sight both indoors and outdoors
- All learning areas can be locked down in an emergency
- Visitors must check in on an intercom before entering

The entry at Creekside Elementary School is flooded with light and blends into the “gathering” stairs, the stage, and the café.
Students and teachers flow from one learning space, such as the art room shown right, to another, allowing them to pick the space that works best for them.

and wriggle and jiggle. “I just think people are more focused when they’re comfortable,” says Elias Olson, a fourth grader, who was lying on a cushion with his legs outstretched behind him and his Chromebook in front of him.

Some schools, such as Summit Middle Charter, also have movable screens and closed-back couches to give easily distracted students more privacy.

MORE CHOICE FOR STUDENTS
The change is just as monumental for the teachers, administrators, and staff as it is for the students, who are learning a new set of rules, navigating a different space, and making more decisions on their own. Students are given more independence and a chance to lead their own learning, which is another of BVSD’s guiding principles. Real learning happens, BVSD educators believe, when the student is left to learn and make mistakes on their own.

“All kids need to learn to cooperate. There’s a lot of independent work now,” says Creekside parent Alissa Simms. “There are a lot of expectations about their maturity.”

CHALLENGES OF THE SYSTEM
The new building does not come without challenges. For example, there is not much space for teachers to post student work, which in the past helped build a welcoming environment. For some, the clean, uncluttered space lacks the warmth of the old building.

“I like all the natural light, but it’s not as cozy,” says fifth grader Neva Upton.

For the younger students, the building has a lot of space to navigate. There are more distractions and the use of every space isn’t clear, such as the booths in the café that the kindergartners would rather climb on than sit on to eat.

For teachers, they lack a space to call their own, except for a desk in a room designed for collaboration. They have to be incredibly organized in order to predict the materials needed for each space they enter. Also, the wireless technology that is fitted to every room demands a new set of skills, and the daily hope that everything is working.

But all in all, the blended spaces seem more like real life where students are learning to be quiet observers rather than distracted gapers. They are part of a community that values both the world outside and the work inside.

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A Green School Building

The school buildings aren’t just new—they’re also more environmentally friendly.
• Building materials are diverted from landfills through reusable, repairable, or recyclable material
• Built with low volatile organic compounds (VOC) and non-toxic material
• Upgraded lighting
• Increased renewable energy so the building will eventually have zero net energy
• Projected savings of $170,000 in annual utility costs