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South Shore campus will create a hub for the community Rainier Beach K-8 school joins a high school, park and community center.

By TOM BATES
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This fall, Seattle Public Schools opens a new state-of-the-art learning environment at South Shore School designed to emphasize the connections made at school and foster a greater sense of community with the surrounding Rainier Beach neighborhood.

South Shore is the latest example of how the country is moving away from the obsolete, ineffective factory model of school design and instead creating schools that place the needs of the students first, recognizing that students learn in different ways and at different rates.

Seattle Public Schools has a five-year plan called Excellence for All to raise achievement for all students, retain and attract great teachers and increase efficiency. The plan also sets high expectations for every student and recognizes and supports the central role teachers play in helping students to graduate from high school ready for college, careers and life.

Student focus, personalization and active participation are hallmarks of South Shore and evident in the way the facility design is composed of distinct small learning communities, or educational "houses." Each house has several classrooms clustered around a shared learning space.

"Only three other SPS buildings have small learning communities, which allow for more effective learning by accommodating large group, small group and individual learning opportunities," said Don Gillmore, program manager for the district's Building Excellence school-construction program.

Community alternative

South Shore is different from most other Seattle Public Schools in many ways. Founded in 2002 as an innovative public-private partnership between the district and the Seattle-based New School Foundation, it offers a unique educational structure, including the only pre-kindergarten program in the district. It is also just one of nine K-8 schools in the district, which gives the community an alternative to the traditional elementary and middle school models.

The foundation funds the full-day pre-K program and allows the school to offer smaller class sizes, a longer school year, and supplemental health and social services for students and families. The grant funding is in its eighth of 10 years.



Photo courtesy of BLRB

Perimeter windows will flood the school with daylight, and retractable glass doors will link the space to this outdoor plaza.

South Shore originally opened as a preschool and kindergarten in a worn-out former middle school building. Since then, it has added one grade a year — up to seventh grade starting this quarter. It will add an eighth grade in 2010. The school serves a diverse student population throughout South Seattle.

South Shore was designed as a place where students can build relationships not only within their school but with the community.

It is co-located on a large community-use campus bordered by Rainier Avenue South and South Henderson Street. The campus includes the recently built South Lake High School, a city park and the Rainier Beach Community Center. A true synergy and sharing of public facilities takes place among the four facilities, supporting a variety of community needs.

Like most new schools today, South Shore was designed and built with environmental sustainability as a core value.

All learning spaces are bathed in daylight and the facility includes the school district's first displacement ventilation system, designed to enhance both energy efficiency and indoor-air quality. Nontoxic and environmentally friendly materials were carefully selected for use throughout the school's interior, and the building includes a small demonstration green roof.

Fostering community

The \$69.6 million, 139,000-square-foot school was designed by BLRB Architects, built by Graham Contractors, and managed by Heery International, DKA Architects and Gillmore from the school district.

The school's design centers on a two-and-a-half-story-high, drum-shaped commons used as a schoolwide gathering area, a performance area and the school cafeteria. Its circular shape, symbolizing community and inclusiveness, provides a unique space for connection and unification of all students. A central skylight and perimeter windows flood the space with daylight, and retractable glass doors link the space directly to an outdoor plaza.

Seven distinct small learning communities branch out from the commons, or "heart of the school." Each community is uniquely designed around integrated shared learning centers that include a team

area, tutor space and patio to connect learning with the outdoors.

Wings and floors are arranged to correspond with the rising grade levels so as students move up in grades they move up in the building. The middle school occupies one such cluster and differs from the rest of the school in that it is housed in the only three-story portion of the building. Each grade level occupies a floor with sixth grade on the first floor, seventh on the second and eighth grade on top, which signifies the rise to the top before matriculation to high school.

The design fosters community immediately as one enters the building and finds overstuffed comfortable chairs in what's known as the community living room, a place where parents can have coffee and mingle during the day, a place you can often find teachers as well. The concept originated in 2002 when the school opened, and was important to the school community that it be included in the new design.

Energy efficiency

South Shore's sustainable features include a green roof at the school's entrance, optimized daylight with photocell-controlled lighting in all occupied spaces, a displacement ventilation system, and nontoxic, recycled-content building materials and finishes, all contributing to a high-performance healthy school.

The displacement ventilation system is considered a forward thinking way of supplying air directly to the occupants in a space. Fresh air is supplied near the floor at a very low velocity, and the air rises as it picks up heat from occupants and equipment.

The warm air rises to the ceiling where it is exhausted from the space. This vertical air flow pattern minimizes the spread of airborne germs horizontally, contributing to the health of students and staff.

Green interior finishes include wheatboard protective wall wainscoting, a product made from the wheat stock left over after harvest. Much of the

flooring throughout the building is exposed honed concrete and the carpeting is made from recycled material.

New vitality

Because it sits on a multiuse superblock, the school was designed not only as an effective learning environment but also an important community resource.

“We have a full-sized gym that adults can use after hours, and the rotunda can be used as a community room,” Gillmore said.

“These spaces were designed with separate entrances, allowing the community to enter without going through the school. In addition, South Shore has a Gateway to Technology (pre-engineering) lab where the students can learn 21st-century skills. This lab was designed so that it can also be utilized by the adjacent South Lake High School students as well.”

The school, which is just two blocks away from a new light-rail station, has helped revitalize a piece of the city that was in disrepair, Gillmore said. School officials and designers hope that the new school will serve not only as a catalyst for urban renewal but also as an important community landmark.

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