

Seattle Public Schools has a commitment to focus on ensuring racial equity in their educational system, to unapologetically address the needs of students of color who are furthest from educational justice, and to work to undo the legacies of racism in their educational system.

How does the design of school buildings support that commitment?



## OLYMPIC HILLS ELEMENTARY | EQUITY-FOCUSED POST OCCUPANCY INTERVIEW

Design began on Olympic Hills Elementary School (OHES) in 2013, around the time the school board's equity policy was crafted; and the new building welcomed its first students in 2017. McGranahan team members, Seong Shin and Michael McGavock, sat down with OHES Principal Libby DeBell and Assistant Principal Rachelle Gardner to better understand how the principles developed through planning and design were being experienced by those who daily inhabit the building.

Our hope was to identify key lessons that Seattle Public Schools (SPS) could implement in the planning and design process for future schools. Specifically, our team was interested in how the design of OHES may have helped, or hindered, the leaders and staff of that school as they worked to uphold the eight commitments to the success of every student, found in the school board equity policy; equitable access, racial equity analysis,

workforce equity, professional development, welcoming school environments, partnerships, multiple pathways to success, and recognizing diversity.

We paraphrased the answers given, for narrative continuity.

**Talk about themes associated with equity—belonging, inclusion, identity, ownership, culture, safety...for students, teachers, and families.**

Providing a unique color for each pod celebrates each grade, and helps students take pride in their community. Students take pride in their own spaces and in doing field trips to other pods. The staff added bulletin boards outside pods to display student work (expression of identity) and created individual pod culture plans.

The central hallway display area provides the opportunity to celebrate our student diversity. The school has a program called “learning for justice” where we focus on identity, justice, and action. The school puts student identity projects on display, for Heritage Month in the communal places in the school, so everyone sees the projects daily on the way to lunch/gym, and in the pods.

The building encloses the play area from the street, giving a sense of safety outdoors. Other technical safety features work well; keycards, knock down buttons, etc. Parents dropping off their children right outside the commons is like having a home away from home. Students move through the main corridor beside the library. Colorful windows blend each of the grade level pod colors into a space that belongs to the whole school.



## Little Communities in a Big School

Students in small groups in the shared learning area at the heart of the green pod. Direct access from the shared learning to the outdoors allowed for dispersed pick up and drop off during the Covid Pandemic.

## How does the design of Olympic Hills support your school culture—centered on differentiated instruction pedagogy—and academic success?

The key element to support our culture of inclusion and to support each child individually, is the classroom grouping around a shared space to form a pod. Each pod is a little community in a big school environment. Small group learning in the shared area works very well and provides opportunities to learn from each other, both for teachers and for students. Furthermore, there is a high degree of transparency between spaces. Seeing what everyone is doing creates alignment, educational equity, and a consistent experience. We have instructed teachers not to cover the glass between spaces.

Learning support staff are assigned by grade level. There are five classrooms per pod. Extended learning, special education services and multilingual support are delivered throughout the pod, in shared spaces and in the classrooms. Currently there is an extra classroom

in each pod for support programs among the general education teachers they partner with. Students receive support within the pod, in small groups and working independently. There is no stigma of having to leave your peers to have your individual needs met outside the pod. Individual supports are part of the community culture. Students know more than one adult; we all know all the students.

As a side benefit, the pod arrangement was super helpful during the pandemic. Parents could go directly to each pod, outside in the courtyards, and pick up their children.

We don't use the small group rooms at the entrance to each pod as intended. Instead, we use them for speech/language therapy, OT/PT, family advocate, and instructional coaches. These staffs are better located outside of the main office by and closer to the learning environment. As children move through the hallways, there is a sense of safety, with the presence of, and access to, adults throughout the building.

## Talk about qualities of the school design that are beneficial for students “furthest from educational justice”.

*“When you feel you are in a wonderful place, and you feel cared for ...it recognizes your dignity... you (children, staff, and families) will rise above. This translates to academic success.”*







### How has the school design made a difference for a student, teacher, or family member?

What comes to mind first is the “calming corner” in each classroom, with views of the trees outside which are used and appreciated. *Note: The school staff didn’t know that this feature was an intentional design element. It was inspired by teachers creating a secluded space in a classroom closet in the former school building.*

### What are some lessons we can learn from your experiences in the school?

- The school orientation by the architects was helpful. We recommend doing it again for newer teachers.
- The classroom setup works well except for two items: 1. Teachers needed more tackable surface, so we ordered and installed it for teachers.



2. Many of the sliding cabinet door panels fell off, so all teachers took them off, and they use the storage area without the door panels.

- Student desks could be lighter, for flexible seating and group arrangements.
- Basketball hoops are too high for many children. We need hoops with adjustable height or multiple heights.
- The reception desk front panel was too high for office staff to see kids while sitting at the desk; it was not welcoming. We removed the metal portion of the front counter to be more child friendly.
- Currently, teachers eat in their pods because the staff lounge is far away. A more central location for the staff lounge would foster better teacher relationships across the school.



- There is not enough outdoor covered play area. We would like two play structures.

### Are there aspects of the school design that help you engage and support the community?

There is a sense of community in the school: families come into the pods and have lunches outdoors in the gardens. During COVID, it has been hard not having families in the building. The connections to outdoors, color and daylight, wide corridor, and high ceilings provide welcoming and inviting feel. The energetic full spectrum colors provide “positive energy,” “joy,” and “beauty”.

What was intended to be a Family Room and Professional Development Center for teachers has been



## Social and Professional Growth

We use the Family Resource Center for educating families and bringing resources to them. The clinic/health room works well, although we haven't found a partner to offer services there. The cafeteria is a truly a multi-functional space, and we love that it is centrally located. The library is great for events like new parent orientation and coffee time, they love it!



developed into a Family Resource Center for families to interact with other families. We use this space for educating families and bringing resources to them. We went through a design process, visiting other schools.

Our goal is for families to be able to go into the Family Resource Center without going into the office, so the visibility across the entry area is very helpful. We have provided couches, food, clothing, computer, parent education classes for families, and English classes. It acts as an affinity space for our Latino family council and Black family council.

The extra community kitchen in the cafeteria is a smart addition. We like bench-style café tables; they worked well during the pandemic for social distancing. The stage works well for all kinds of activities. Outside, the porous blacktop is good for the school day and after-hours use, used for summer festival by PTA, with the cafeteria open to it. The PTA uses the gardens a lot.

*"We appreciate the energy of the place, prideful of cultures in the community. We finally have a building that matches how special the community has always been".*

- OHES Principal Libby DeBell



## Meaningful Placemaking

It is clear that thoughtful design effects equity and justice within a school community. McGranahan is committed to deepening our collective understanding of what makes a meaningful place, conversations like these are invaluable in that effort.



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