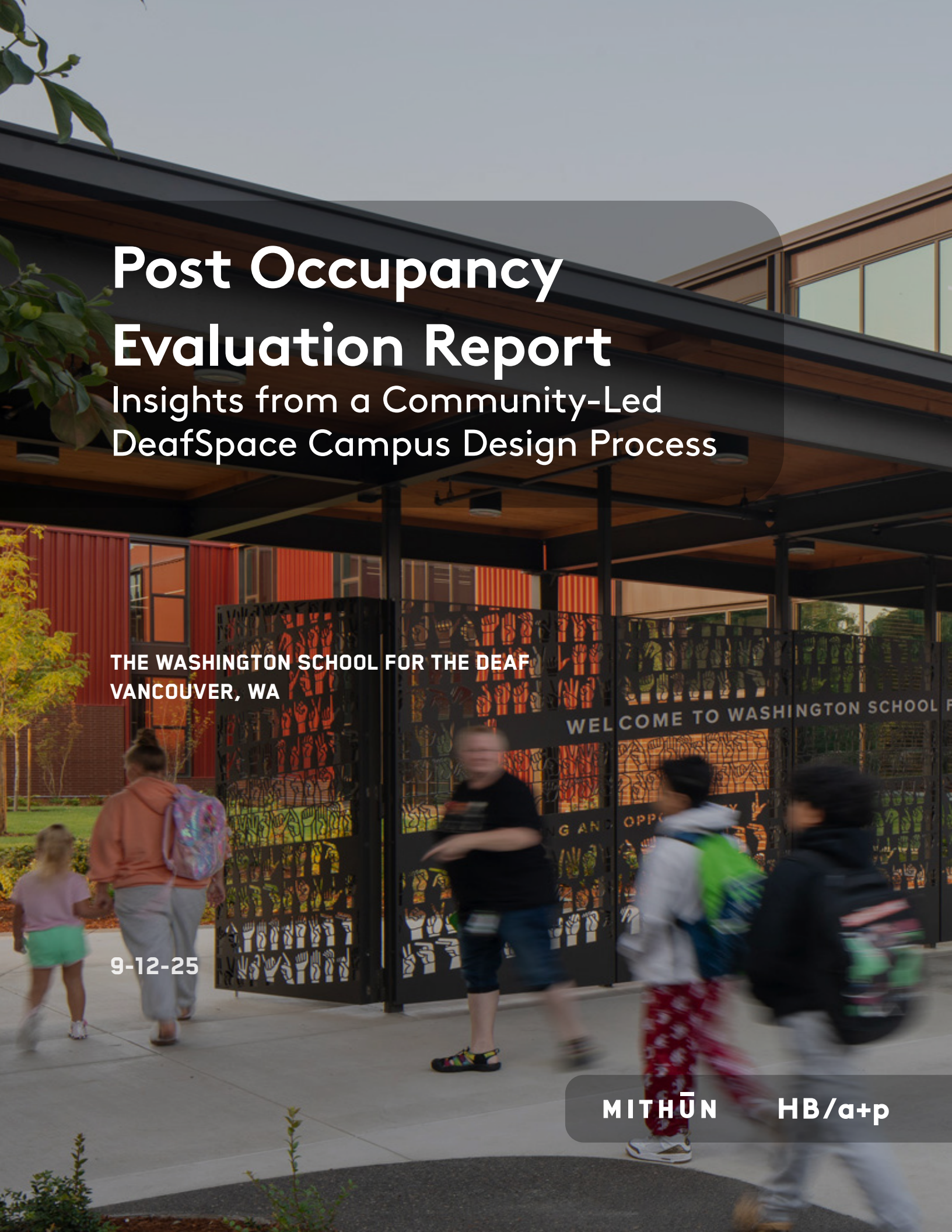
Post Occupancy Evaluation Report

Insights from a Community-Led DeafSpace Campus Design Process



THE WASHINGTON SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF
VANCOUVER, WA

9-12-25

MITHŪN HB/a+p

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The new academic and gym building at the Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) was conceived to serve as an exemplar addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in designing next-generation facilities for Deaf residential schools. This Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) accesses the building's performance and provides insights for future educational projects.

Problem Statement

Deafness is commonly viewed as an "invisible disability" historically overlooked in the design process even though many aspects of the built environment present physical barriers to the practices of visual communication and multi-sensory spatial awareness central to deaf life experiences. When not properly considered, basic school design elements such as the shape of a room, its degree of enclosure, quality of light, color, visual vibrancy, and even acoustics can make sign-language difficult to see, reduce concentration, increase fatigue, and limit one's spatial awareness, sense of personal safety and belonging resulting in pervasive impact on student success. This project set out to address these items.

Opportunity

Contending with spatial barriers every day, Deaf people have devised DeafSpace design practices — a community-based approach for modifying their hearing-centered environment — to enable social connection and personal agency attuned to their unique ways-of-being. Understanding the critical role the learning environment plays in student performance the design-build team radically reimagined the WSD design approach as a Deaf-led, user-driven process modeled on DeafSpace cultural practices and design concepts. The following key findings summarize the POE results of the design-build team's Deaf-led approach as it was assessed in the first year of the building's use.

Key Findings

Increased Student Wellbeing & Motivation to Learn

75% of educators observed improvements in student focus, behavior, and overall engagement. Reimagining educational environments through universal design and a Deaf-led process created facilities that align with the daily lived experiences of students and staff, delivering clear and tangible benefits.

Stronger Sense of Belonging

83% of staff reported an increased sense of belonging, attributed to the integration of Deaf cultural elements, the school's history, and representations of the broader WSD community. Visually connecting shared spaces and bringing multiple learning communities under one roof fostered stronger connections.

Enhanced Visual Connections

Sightlines throughout the building enhanced spatial awareness, interpersonal connection, and overall wellbeing. 75% of staff also reported easier student supervision and felt a greater sense of safety and security on campus.

Improved Visual Comfort and Sensory Reach

Deaf people inhabit a rich sensory world where vision and touch are a primary means of spatial awareness and orientation. Reducing glare and contrast, and providing even lighting using both daylight and electric sources, led to 88% of staff reporting satisfaction with visual comfort. Wood floor structures expanded proprioceptive awareness — 64% of staff used them for communication. However, vibrations from mechanical systems in some areas were distracting.

Selective Use of Technology to Support Communication

Two-way video doorbells at secure entries aid student and guest movement. A mass notification system reaches all building occupants. However, system complexity must be carefully managed; partnering with a systems integrator ensures the technology functions as intended without overwhelming user

The following report is organized around themes from DeafSpace design and key project goals identified early on in the project charter as a means to illustrate overlapping factors that influence user experiences.

PROCESS

TOPICS:

PROJECT APPROACH

Community-Led Design, Driven by DeafSpace and Universal Design Principles

VISIONING

Developing a Project Charter in Community

BELONGING

Evolution of the Campus in Context

KEY FINDINGS

Authentic community led design leads to better outcomes. *The process takes time to fully engage constituent and understand their needs. Deliberate effort must be taken to set aside any presupposed notions to open a team to better learn from other's lived experiences.*

A rigorous and comprehensive Project Charter provides a clear framework for guiding design and decision making.

It is important to step back and root the project in the history of a place and broader context of campus and regional community. Shifts in campus planning can make big impacts to connect the campus to the broader community.

PROCESS

Project Approach

Community-Led Design, Driven by DeafSpace and Universal Design Principles

Authentic Community Engagement

The most vital design element for this school emerged long before the first brick was laid: an authentic community engagement process. By deeply listening to students, families, educators, and Deaf community leaders, the design team was able to synthesize their unique cultural, linguistic, and educational needs into a built environment that truly supports them. This collaborative process ensured that the school is not just a facility, but a welcoming, empowering space shaped by the people who use it every day.

Designing for ASL

Key to the building's design was creating an environment that supports American Sign Language (ASL) communication, which requires a careful and holistic attention to the full sensory range — especially the visual field. By thoughtfully shaping every visual and spatial detail, the design supports the natural flow of ASL, ensuring communication is accessible, comfortable, and fully integrated into everyday life.

Universal Design

A Deaf-centered design is a powerful catalyst for creating a better school for everyone. By focusing on visual access, clear circulation, and multi-sensory cues, the project advances a truly universal design that benefits all students, staff, and visitors — regardless of size, age, language or ability. These thoughtful, human-centered strategies have created an environment that feels welcoming, comfortable, and intuitive to navigate, demonstrating that when we design with inclusion at the forefront, we raise the standard of accessibility and enhance the experience for everyone who walks through the door.

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PROCESS

Visioning

Developing a Project Charter in Community

From the outset of the project, the design team collaborated closely with the client to draft a comprehensive project charter — an essential document that would serve as a shared foundation for decision-making and prioritization throughout the process. This charter was deeply rooted in the school's mission to support and empower deaf students, ensuring that every design choice aligned with their educational, cultural and communication needs.

Rather than a static document, the charter became a living reference point that guided the team's actions, helping them remain focused on the values of inclusivity, accessibility and equity, even as challenges and opportunities evolved.

The project charter covered a wide range of topics beyond the physical building, touching on community engagement, cultural representation, sustainability, and the integration of Deaf-centric design principles. It also established expectations for team collaboration, accountability, and responsiveness, creating a shared language and set of goals among architects, builders, educators, administrators and consultants. This clear, mission-driven framework was instrumental in shaping the project into more than just a school — it became a new model for deaf education, setting a precedent for how design can holistically support identity, learning, and belonging.

WSD PROJECT CHARTER

ARCHITECTURAL PERFORMANCE	
Active High-Performance	Healthy Building
Integrated Campus with a Heart	Everyone is Together
ASL Bilingual-Rich Learning Environment	Exemplify DeafSpace
PROGRAMMATIC PERFORMANCE	
Support Agency Mission	Instruction and Training: BEST
Academic Program Success	Flexibility, Multi-Level, Engaging
Technology Enabled Learning	Individual Success
PROCESS	
Student Satisfaction and Safety	Positive Campus Experience
Inclusive, Transparent Process	Deep Stakeholder Engagement
Maximize Value and Scope	On Time/Budget
Model Progressive Design-Build	Process and Execution
TEAM	
Optimize Every Exchange	Do it the Deaf Way
Openness	Foster a Learning Culture
Presence	Respect WSD as DeafSpace
Confirmation	Always Double-Check

PROJECT VISION STATEMENT

"TOGETHER WE WILL EMPOWER AND INSPIRE STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND STAFF THROUGH THE COLLABORATIVE CREATION OF OUR VIBRANT, BEAUTIFUL AND DIVERSE DEAF-CENTERED ACADEMIC AND ATHLETIC CENTER, WHICH WILL SERVE TO EDUCATE OUR FUTURE LEADERS AND ENHANCE WSD COMMUNITY PRIDE."

Student Impact

Creating a Deaf-centric environment had a profound impact on students' motivation and overall wellbeing. By designing spaces that fully support visual communication, foster social connection, and reflect Deaf culture and identity, students felt seen, respected, and empowered. The ability to communicate easily with peers and teachers in ASL throughout the school — from classrooms to hallways and communal spaces — helped reduce frustration and isolation, while increasing confidence and engagement. This sense of belonging and ease allowed students to focus more fully on their learning, explore their interests, and participate more actively in school life, ultimately nurturing both academic growth and emotional wellbeing.

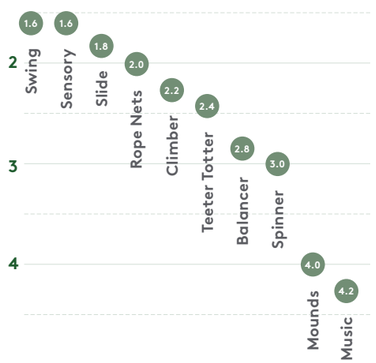
Playground Prioritization

The guiding principles and priorities of the Playground Design Committee shaped the design of the playground, one of the new Hearts of campus.

Guiding Principles

- CHALLENGING
- CREATIVE
- INCLUSIVE
- NATURAL
- FUN!

1 Highest Priority Play Elements

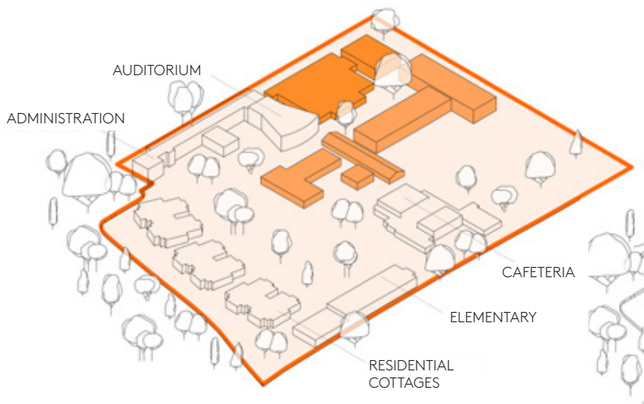


5 Lowest Priority

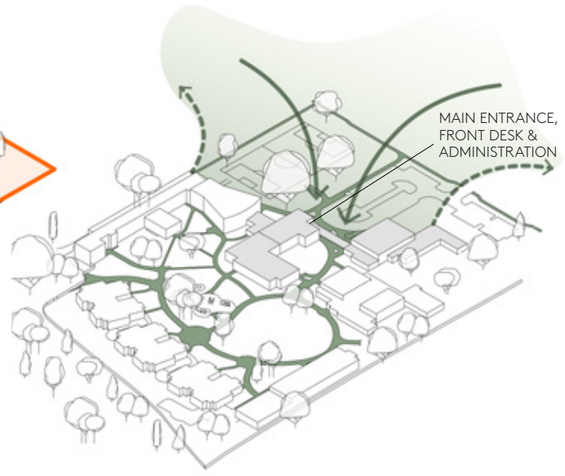
PROCESS

Reorienting the Campus

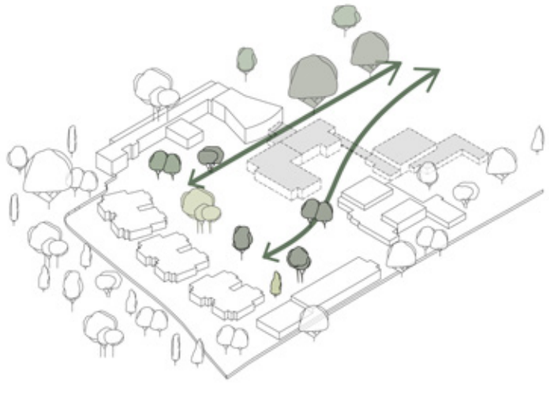
Evolution of the Campus in Context



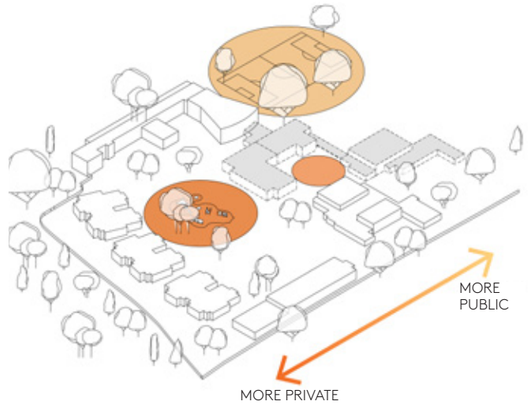
Historically, campus faced south to the Columbia River. WSD and its community turned their backs to each other, leading to a sense of disconnect, desolation, and separation. The campus did not reflect the pride, connectedness, or energy of its community.



Now a new front door on Evergreen connects WSD to the neighborhood, affirming the school's significance and projecting the values of the Deaf community.



View axes were maintained and created with glazing, linking mature campus canopy and critical visual connections.



New Hearts for campus were developed along a public-private spectrum: from the public-facing field, to the central courtyard hub, south to the playground.

Circa 1928 aerial view of campus, looking north. The school originally faced the train station to the south, but became cut off as subsequent development turned the campus inward, centering on the power plant.

WSD's new front door replaces a perimeter chainlink fence with a welcoming, community-facing, artful gate to greet the neighborhood, an approach that balances security and permeability.

This important view corridor showcasing mature legacy trees on campus was preserved with glazing through the library, enhancing visibility and pride.

The playground on the south lawn has become the private heart of campus, nestled between the elementary school on the academic building's first floor and the residential cottages to the south.

INTEGRATED DESIGN STRATEGIES:

SENSORY REACH

TOPICS:

COMMUNICATION

Visual Cues, Connectivity, and Spatial Awareness

Facilitating Intimate, Group and Community-Wide Communication

AWARENESS

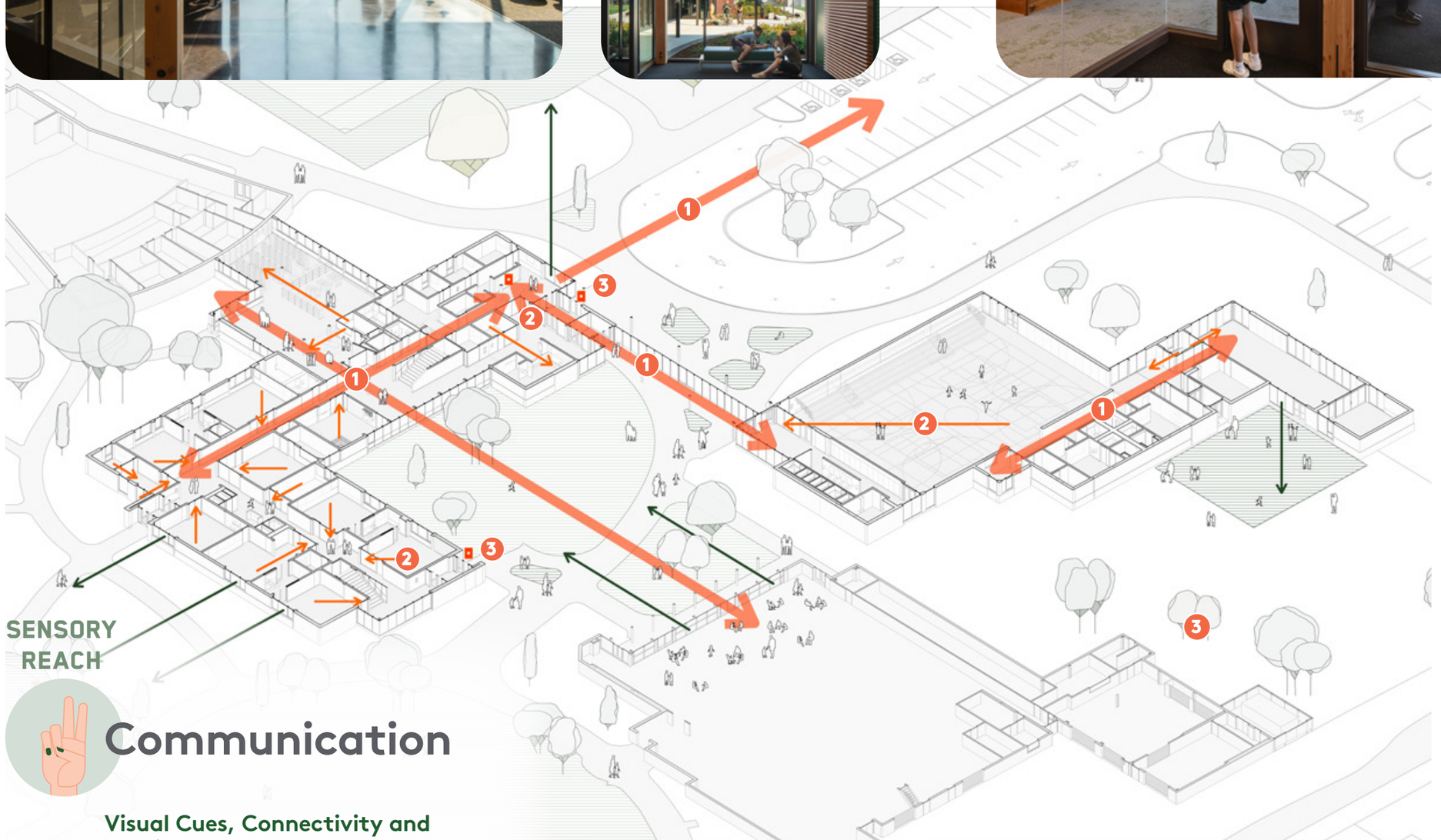
Attention and Disturbance: Striking a Balance with Vibration and Acoustics

KEY FINDINGS

> ***Design can facilitate spatial awareness and provide visual and tactile cues 'in 360 degrees' to improve deaf people's orientation and wayfinding. This supports a greater feeling of comfort and safety as well as aids supervision of students.***

> ***Deaf individuals inhabit a sensory rich environment. Extreme care must be made to manage vibration, noise and support clear visual connection and communication.***

> ***Technology can carefully be utilized to augment remote communication, mass notification and elsewhere like athletics.***



Communication

Visual Cues, Connectivity and Spatial Awareness

1 Primary View Corridors

The creation of view axes across key spaces is important to create a greater sense of spatial awareness and connectivity. Supervision is enhanced when primary entries and paths of circulation are in direct sight of regularly occupied spaces. Staff take advantage of this passive supervision means while on break, repeatedly using the library as a comfortable space outside the fray, but within direct line of sight of the new central hubs of campus. A noticeable increase of student social engagement and connection is evident daily in the new visually connected social hubs. Greater overall spatial awareness greatly increased occupants general sense of safety.

2 Visual Connectivity Between Spaces

Visual connectivity between all spaces further enhances awareness, connection and supervision. This needs to be carefully balanced with the opportunity for potential distraction. Elementary aged students were noticeably less visually distractable than secondary students, likely due to the level of concentration required when initially learning ASL. Distraction increase at glazing between classrooms and corridors, when facing areas that students can congregate.

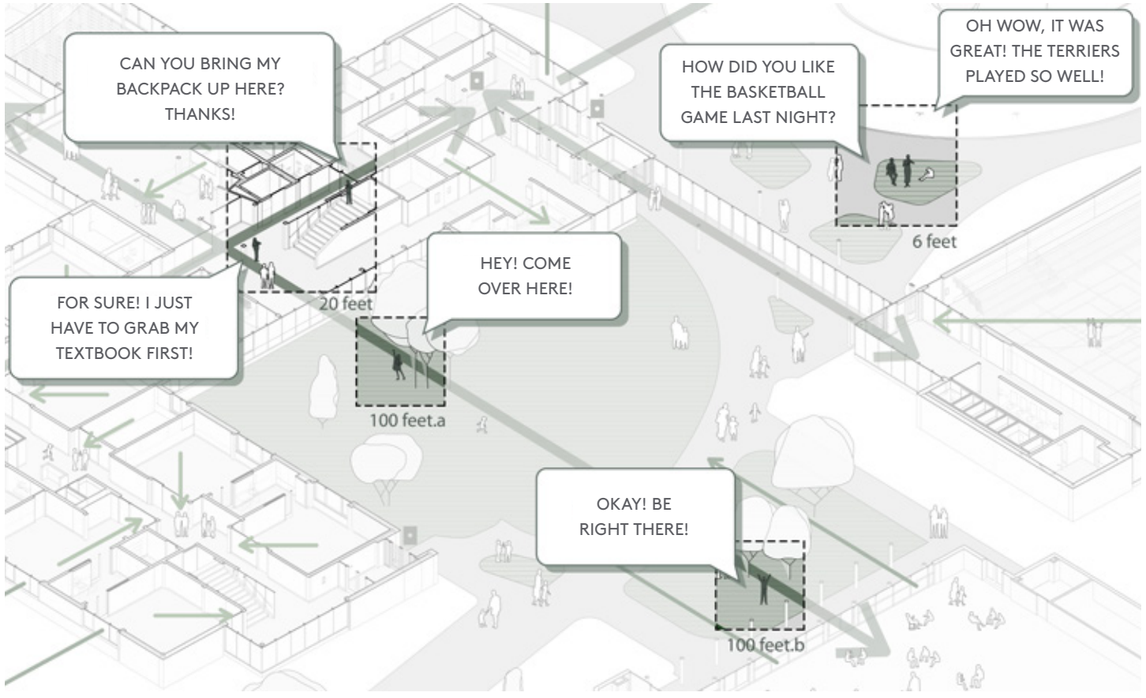
3 Visual Communication at Entries

Clear sightlines at entries are critically helpful. Glass reflectivity and the layering of multiple glazed walls (such as at vestibules) reduces the efficacy of these visual connections.

SENSORY REACH

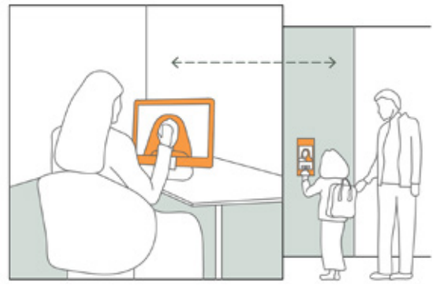
Communication

Facilitating Intimate, Group and Community-Wide Communication

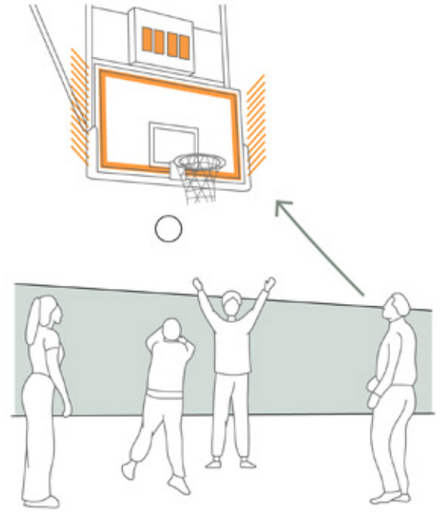


Signing and Distance: Designing for ASL at a Range of Scales

ASL can be used to communicate at a range of distances and levels of detail: from intimate discourse within 6 feet, to conversing across a wide common space, to conveying general messages from the opposite side of the courtyard. View corridors, glazing, and open spaces facilitate this variety of spatial connections, enabling ease of communication throughout campus.



Two-way video Doorbells at Entries



Backboard light kit and shot clock

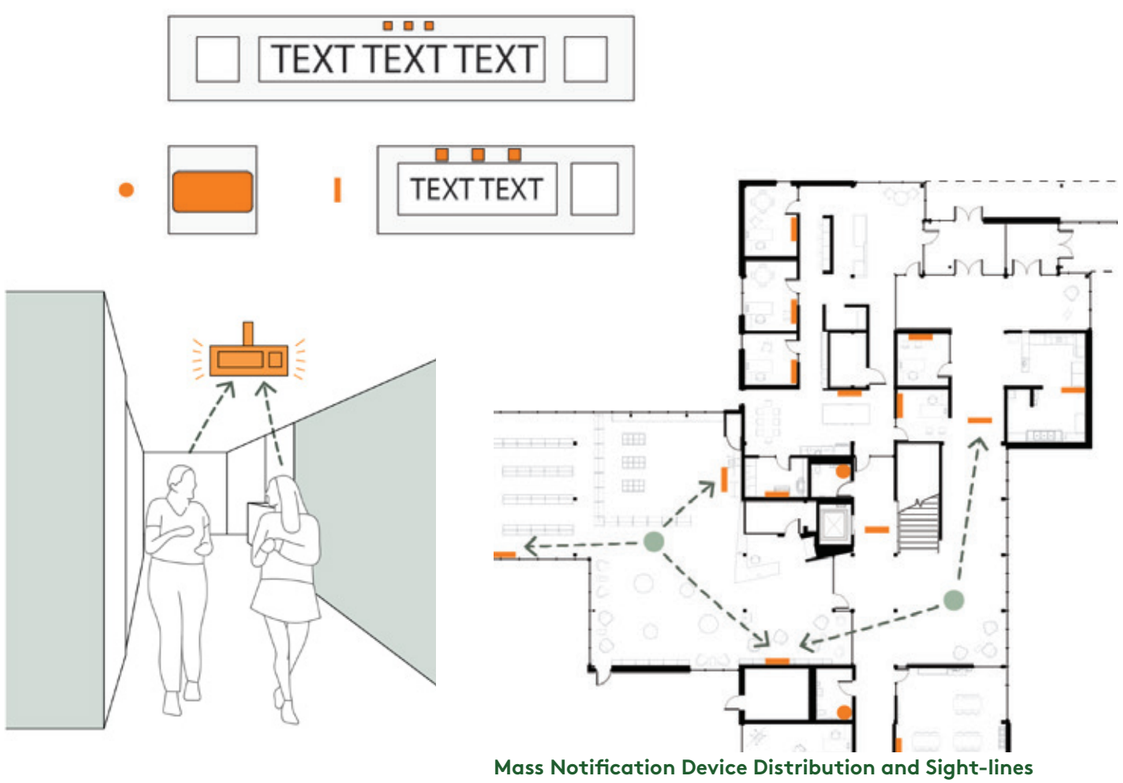
Visual Communication Systems

Technology can augment direct visual communication. Mass notification systems with broad visibility to all spaces are important means. The amount of information displayed should be carefully considered, to maximize legibility and not be too much of a visual distraction. They systems are often capable of integrating across a broad range of devices, which is helpful but also complicating. A specialized systems integration specialist can facilitate successful implementation of the system.

Two-Way visual doorbells greatly enhance accessibility and communication at entries. They are ideally implemented at all regularly used entries. Colored lights indicating a doors lock status provides indication when doors are remotely unlocked.

Visual systems can also help 'level the playing field' in athletics. A backboard light kit and shot clock are relatively inexpensive means to mimic audible buzzers allowing visual and audio communicators to more equally focus on the game.

Mass Notification System



Mass Notification Device Distribution and Sight-lines

Awareness

Attention and Disturbance: Striking a Balance with Vibration and Acoustics

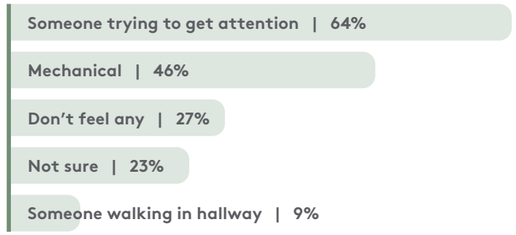
Floor Vibration

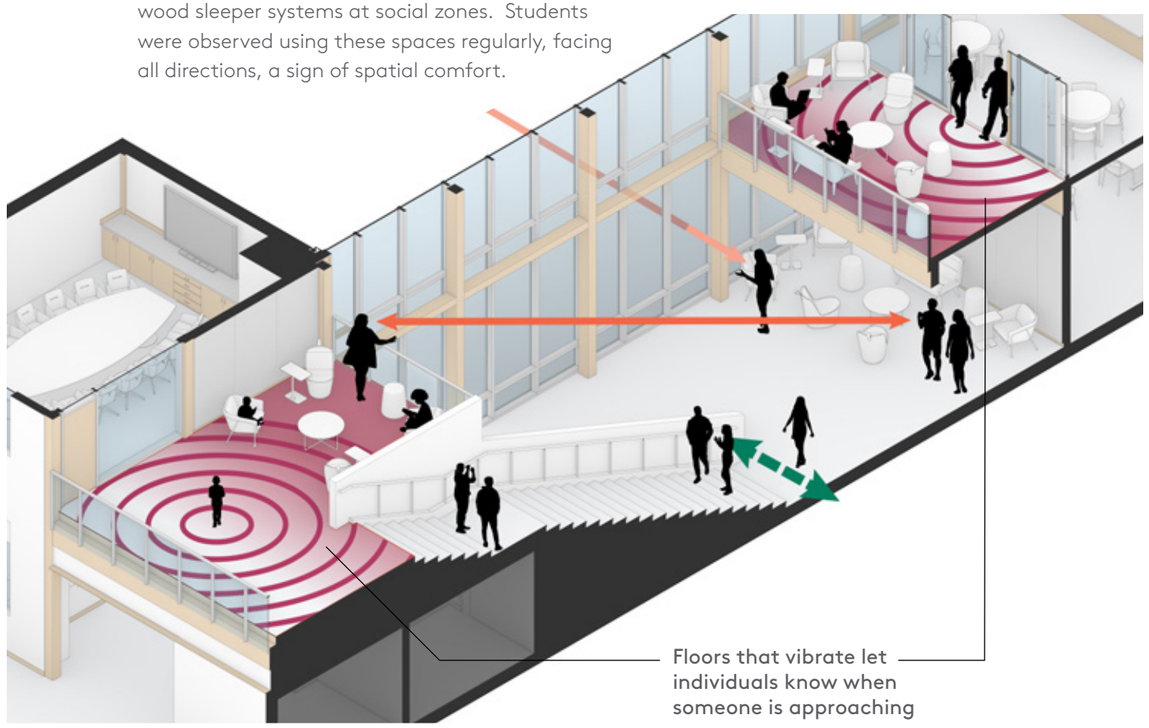
Occupants reported greater spatial awareness in the new building where the elevated wood CLT floor structure was designed to transmit vibration. The majority of users cite it's ability to support communication through stamping of feet to gain attention.

Enhanced Vibrations at Sleeper System

In-place vibration testing confirmed higher vibration transmission at the specially designed wood sleeper systems at social zones. Students were observed using these spaces regularly, facing all directions, a sign of spatial comfort.

Staff Questionnaire: What kind of vibration do you feel, if any?



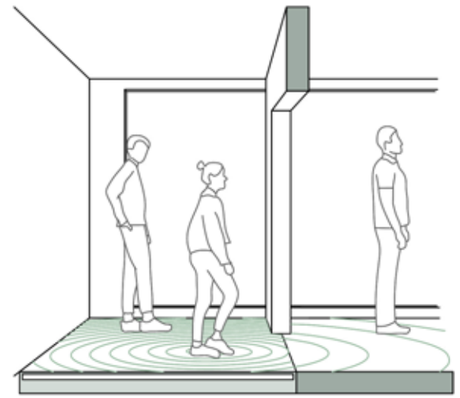


Background Noise & Vibration

Background noise and vibration were closely controlled. Most spaces were free from distracting, structure borne vibration from movement in adjacent spaces and mechanical sources. One area in the norther portion of the second level was reported to have vibration from an unknown mechanical source that negatively impacted concentration and the ability to use the wood floor as a means of communication.

Sound Reverberation

Managing space acoustics was carefully deliberated on the project. A target reverberation time of 0.6 seconds in classrooms and similar spaces was ultimately decided upon, to support hard of hearing individual's audio comfort and communication. Similar targets were upheld in circulation and social spaces. Hearing users reported high degrees of comfort and acoustic clarity compared to their older, non-attenuated spaces.



Enhanced vibration through floor from sleeper system used between Green Room and adjacent classroom

INTEGRATED DESIGN STRATEGIES:

SPACE

TOPICS:

MOBILITY AND PROXIMITY

Connections, Flow, and Transitions Through Space

SPATIAL LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS

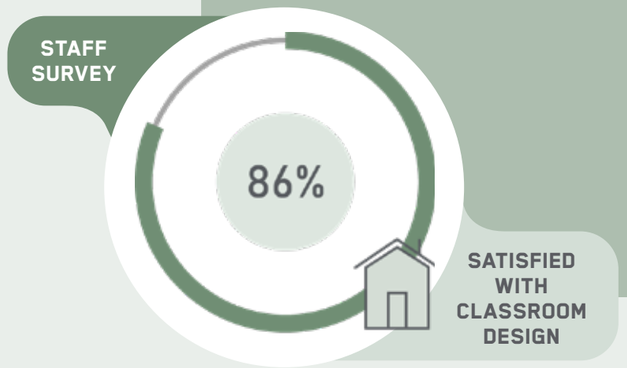
Campus Mobility and Connections

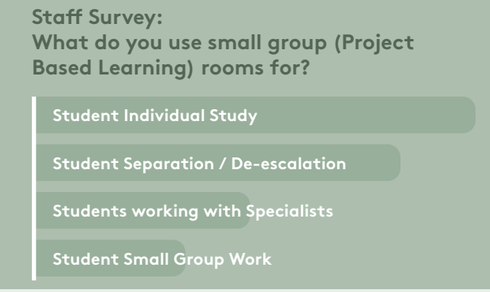
KEY FINDINGS

> *Additional space along paths of travel supports proxemics for ASL communication while in motion and reduces collisions.*

> *All building entries should have clear visual means for communicating*

> *Placing social spaces along primary circulation paths facilitate supervision and create a vibrant space for connection.*

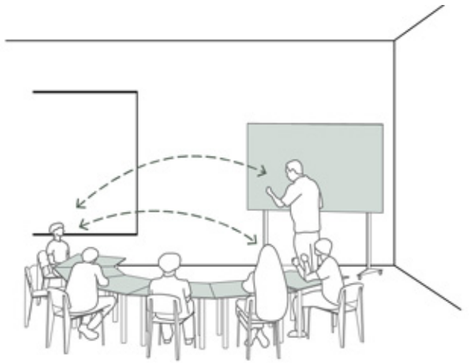


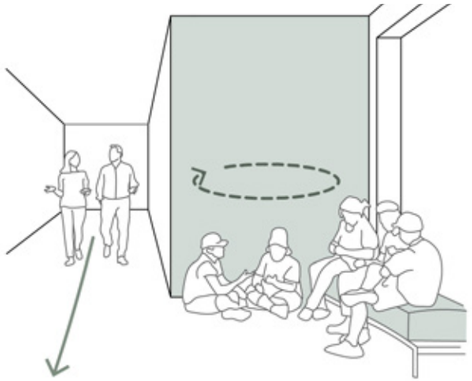


SPACE

Mobility and Proximity

Connections, Flow, and Transitions Through Space





Proxemics of Visual Language

Classroom shape and dimensions larger based on the social distance unique to ASL. Instructors consistently reported satisfaction with the size design of classroom layouts supporting the intended flexibility in furniture arrangements enabling multiple, simultaneous activities.

Circulation and Flow

Wider corridors and more gradual stairs along all major circulation pathways accommodate space needed to support visual language while moving. Social ‘eddies’ provide places to stop and have a conversation and appeared to reduce collisions in hallways.

Universal Site Design

The same principles were applied in the landscape design. Triangular groupings of seating elements set up spaces that facilitate signing, while creating ‘eddies’ for activity to collect outside the main stream of pedestrian traffic. The paving changes and boulder clusters signal these zones, promoting smooth navigation through space while focusing on a conversation.

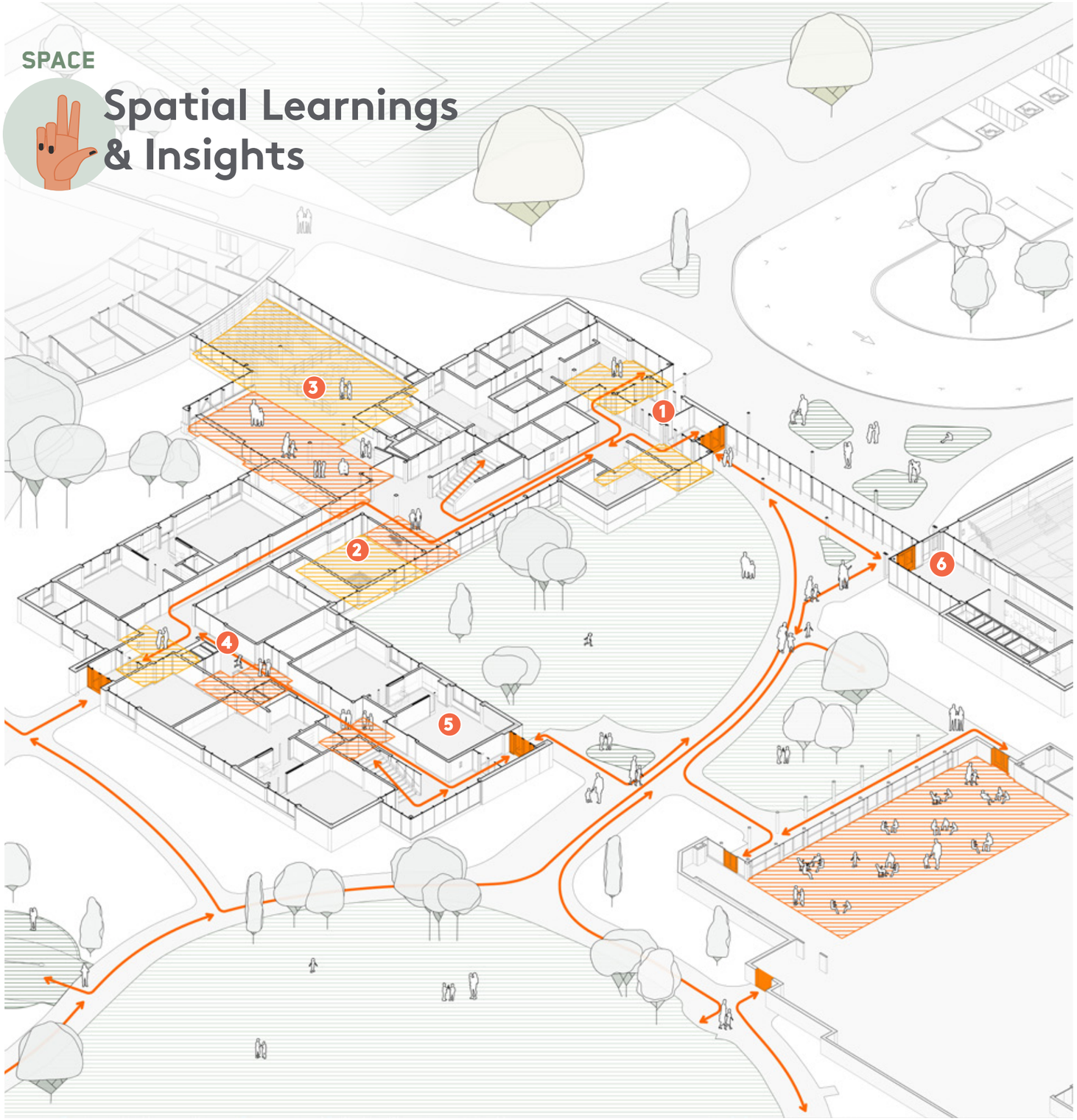
Dynamic, Multi-Story Hub

From site observations and interviews with students and staff the Atrium preforms beyond expectations as a generator of social connection fostering a sense of belonging and community.

Spatial adjacencies, and the variety and extent of sightlines afforded by the two-story space encourages multiple conversations to take place simultaneously over a variety of distances creating a vibrant social setting.

SPACE

Spatial Learnings & Insights



1 Main Entrance(s)

The outward facing primary public entry and inward facing entry for students and staff converge at the front reception to allow staff a single point of entry to manage. This is reported to overall work well. The configuration creates multiple doors adjacent to one another that can be confusing to new occupants and the multiple layers of glazing that separate each zone provide desired visual connection but can be disorienting for low-vision individuals.

2 Instructional Lab

Due to the interactive nature of student activates in lab-based learning classes like the sciences and art require a more rectangular space to accommodate multiple groups of students working together. Orienting tables perpendicular to the teaching wall allow a greater number of students to sit closer to the teaching wall with less oblique sightlines to the teaching wall.

3 Library

The space compartmentalizes areas designed for different ages of users and kinds of use to successfully meets its vision as a multipurpose space serving users across all age groups. The low bookcases defining the younger student's area was highlighted as a particularly successful feature that at once provided visual enclosure for young kids — ideal for learning activity while allowing easy supervising and maximum spatial awareness for staff.

4 Individual Stall Restrooms

Restrooms with full height partitions and doors create a common facility for all users. Overall, these are functioning well and are well received. They require adjusting operating procedures for communicating with occupants in emergency situations. Door closers should be adjusted to allow doors to remain ajar to provide visual cue when unoccupied and reduce opening force for accessibility.

5 Classroom Lighting Controls

Lighting is regularly adjusted to tune light levels to room activities. A second light switch is provided at the teaching wall to allow educators to flick the lights to gain attention in the room. The low voltage control system does not provide instantaneous on/off switching which reduces it's efficacy. It also resets the room's light level settings when flicked, an undesirable trait that may be mitigated by controls reprogramming.

6 Visual Notification at ALL entries

Washington School for the Deaf is a secure residential campus. All building entries are locked throughout the day, managed by timeclocks at key moments of arrival and by staff escorting groups of students. All entries would benefit from visual doorbell or notification system to support interim student movement. The inward facing door at the gymnasium is not initially equipped with visual devices and on occasion students have been locked out of class without an easy means of communication with staff to gain entry.

INTEGRATED DESIGN STRATEGIES:

LIGHT & COLOR

TOPICS:

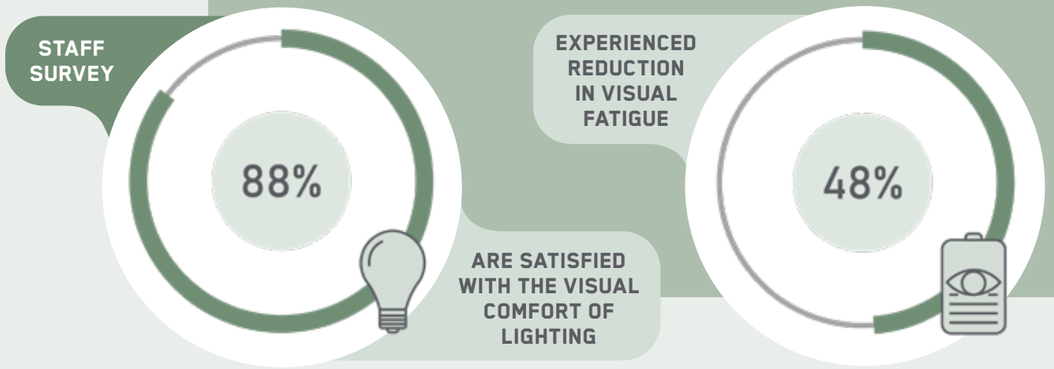
FUNDAMENTALS OF VISION

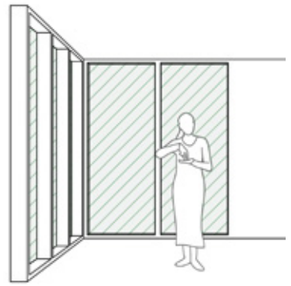
Sight, Communication,
and Reducing Fatigue

KEY FINDINGS

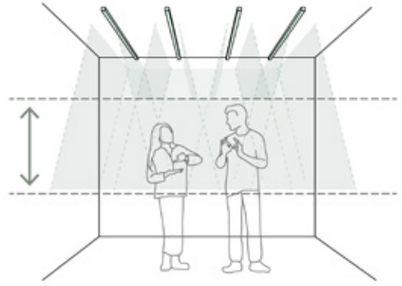
> *Well designed electric and daylighting are critically important and impactful for occupants, especially for Deaf individuals who more heavily rely on sight as a primary means of sense.*

> *Glare, color, texture and contrast need to be carefully designed to create a 'clean' visual environment to unimpede the nuanced visual acuity of ASL communication. Reducing visiblity of systems and providing a uniform finish pallete also reduces visual fatigue.*

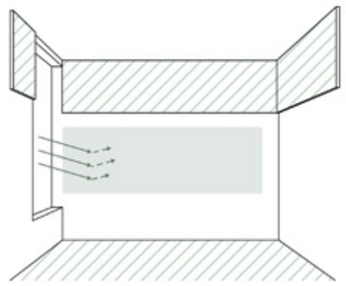




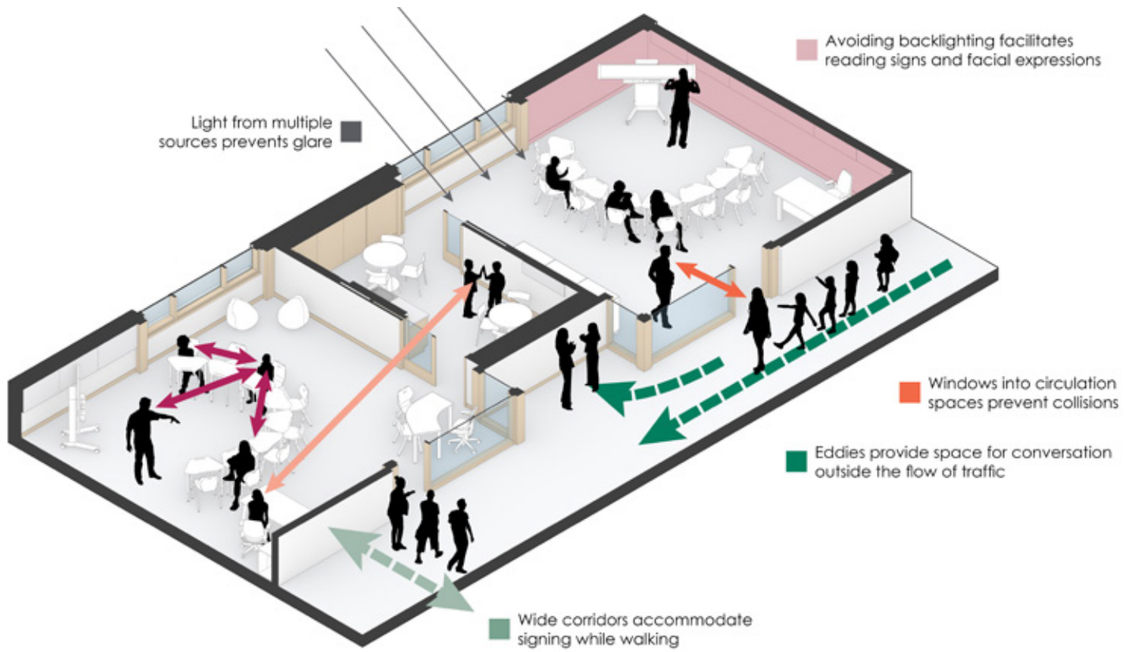
High performance exterior glazing



Low glare lighting



Low glare materials



LIGHT & COLOR

Fundamentals of Vision

Sight, Communication, and Reducing Fatigue

Lighting

Evenly illuminated spaces support clear ASL communication. Fixture selection and placement were designed to a Uniform Glare Rating (UGR) of 20 in classrooms to reduce eye fatigue. Dimmable lighting controls are regularly adjusted throughout the day depending on daylighting conditions, classroom activities and/or setting a classroom mood.

High Performance Glazing

Exterior glazing was selected with a lower visual light transmission level, specifically designed to reduce contrast and glare on the interiors. It largely removes the need for window shades. Where possible, spaces are arranged to reduce backlighting of individuals which impedes ASL communication. Daylighting should be limited across teaching or other visual display surfaces.

Surface Reflectivity

Limiting reflectivity of surfaces reduce glare and unhelpful reflections. Low reflectivity whiteboards are effective but require special cleaner. Polished concrete is ideally limited to a 200 grit grind to limit reflections. Matte wood finish reduces glare in gymnasium flooring.

Contrasting Surfaces

Low contrasting, color matchings surfaces within classrooms and other spaces provide a clear backdrop for ASL communication. High contrasting and/or changes of materials provide visual indications of circulation paths and obstacles like freestanding columns.

Glazed connections

Glazing between classrooms, corridors, small group spaces, social eddies and one another need to be carefully located to minimize distraction while offering important visual connection. When used to provide screening, window film should be semi-translucent to not inhibit visibility.

BELONGING

TOPICS:

INTEGRATING CAMPUS WITH A HEART

Embedding Meaning in Design Concepts and Details

UNIVERSAL SITE DESIGN

Inclusive Campus

PLAY FOR EVERYONE

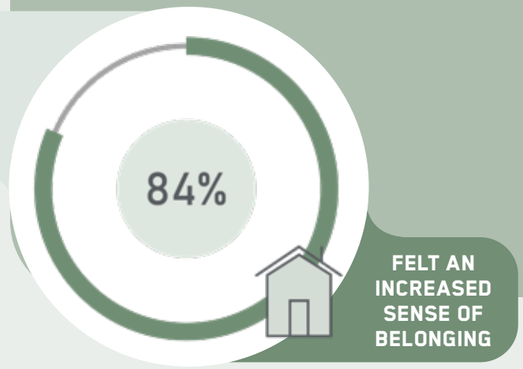
KEY FINDINGS

> *Broadly and prominently including cultural representation in the built environment promotes a strong sense of belonging.*

> *Playgrounds are vital learning environments where children develop physical, emotional, social, and problem-solving skills through shared, challenging experiences. Design inclusive access to diverse play opportunities, balancing accessibility with meaningful challenge and risk for children of all abilities, social connection requires careful balance of access.*

STAFF SURVEY

How has the project influenced your sense of belonging in the WSD community?



BELONGING

Integrating Campus with a Heart

Embedding Meaning in Design Concepts and Details

Campus Culture & Legacy

Schools for the deaf are the heart of Deaf culture. The incorporation of historic campus artifacts, elements that honor the community past and present and strong presences of school identity, and the physical representation of ASL language in the built environment dramatically increased a strong sense of belonging and connection within students, staff and create a sense of pride for alumni.

Welcoming Arrival

The process of arrival and departure can be an emotionally charged experience for both staff and students. Deaf schools may be the only place where communication is fully accessible, and many students experience isolation in communities where signers are few and far between. Space and time for deep emotional connection between staff and students requires more than just a front door, in the traditional sense. A sheltered campus gateway invites lingering, interpersonal connection, and relays the importance of Deaf culture — welcoming all home.

Warm, Biophilic Environment

Generously daylit spaces and direct views to nature have shown in multiple studies improvements in well-being and an 12-24% increase in learning outcomes. These implemented design elements were especially important for WSD to support residential students as well as counteract years of institutionalization of the Deaf community.

BELONGING

Universal Site Design

Inclusive Campus

Visibility, Light and Sight Lines

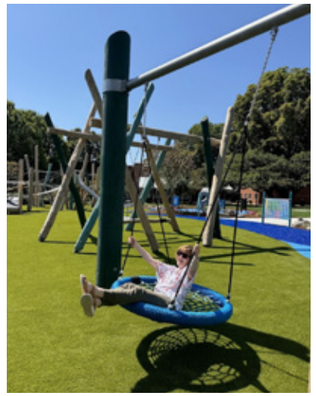
As a new heart of campus, the courtyard captures daily moments of interaction that strengthen community culture. Clear sightlines along pathways and gathering spaces facilitate visibility from a distance, supporting visual communication and spontaneous interaction. Lighting is carefully positioned to reduce glare and shadows, and trees were selected to provide even, dappled shade, enhancing safety and ensuring faces and hands remain visible for ASL communication.

Space to Sign, Visual Cues

Dark paving bands along walkways provide clear visual cues that guide movement and support safe, independent wayfinding. This visual rhythm supports DeafSpace principles by creating cues that guide foot traffic and support safe navigation — both for those with low vision, and for anyone navigating a busy campus — especially while signing. These everyday design choices respect diverse ways of moving and seeing, and express the story and culture of this community.

Story and Culture

The landscape concept draws on natural materials and forms — boulder clusters evoke glacial erratics carried from across Washington by ancient floods, just as students come from many places to build community here. Plant communities on site reflect this idea too, echoing the diverse places students call home, now rooted together on campus.

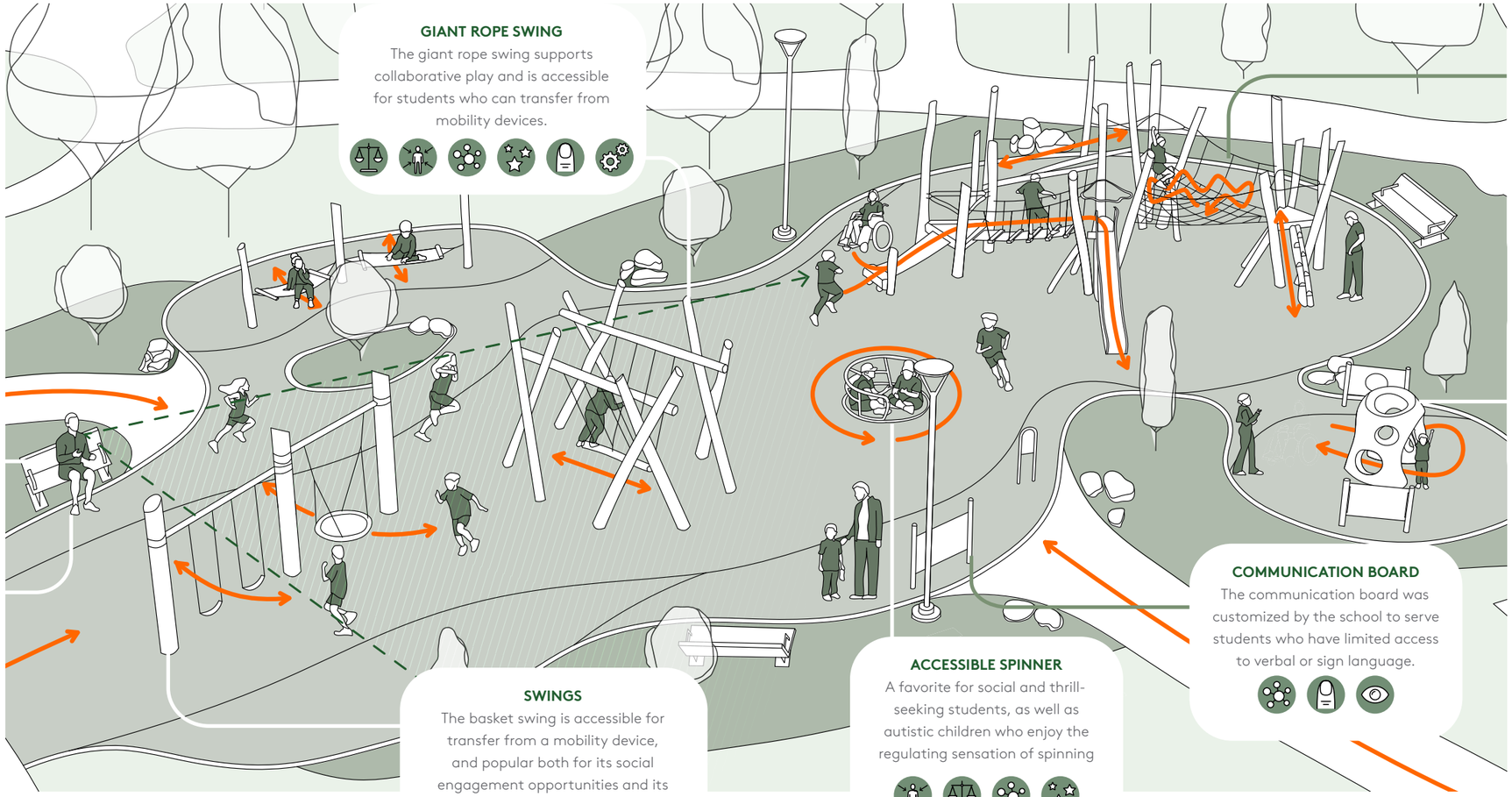


BENCHES

Benches offer respite — a place to read, chat, or step away for a sensory break.

VISIBILITY AND SUPERVISION

Clear sightlines allow two or three adults to supervise the whole playground, while students still find pockets for small group privacy.



GIANT ROPE SWING

The giant rope swing supports collaborative play and is accessible for students who can transfer from mobility devices.

SWINGS

The basket swing is accessible for transfer from a mobility device, and popular both for its social engagement opportunities and its regulating effect for autistic students. Students say there are never enough swings — a clear lesson to prioritize universally loved, inclusive equipment.

ACCESSIBLE SPINNER

A favorite for social and thrill-seeking students, as well as autistic children who enjoy the regulating sensation of spinning

COMMUNICATION BOARD

The communication board was customized by the school to serve students who have limited access to verbal or sign language.

ROPE NET CLIMBER

Staff initially worried about the risks posed by the rope net climber, but it has proven vital for students to challenge balance, learn limits, and build confidence.

STAINLESS STEEL SLIDE

Steel does not create static build-up, which is critical for students using cochlear implants.

SENSORY PLAY AREA

Designed as a calm escape from overstimulation, it has also become a valued hangout for intimate ASL conversations. This area includes sensory plants with gentle scents and fuzzy leaves to engage smell and touch.

Sensory Experiences in Play

TACTILE · VISUAL · AUDITORY · PROPRIOCEPTION · VESTIBULAR · MOTOR PLANNING · SOCIAL/ IMAGINATIVE · SENSORY STIMULATION · SENSORY CALMING

BELONGING

Play for Everyone

Play is Essential for All

Through play, children learn essential physical, emotional, social and problem-solving skills. When a playground excludes a child, they also lose access to those invaluable learning opportunities. All children deserve access to multiple forms of play, a range of experiences that meet their abilities to challenge and engage them, and opportunities to play with others.

Range of Challenge, Ease of Access

Many accessible playground designs over-emphasize certain kinds of access while neglecting to cultivate shared experiences or create risk and challenge. Play should challenge users at a range of ability levels to practice their physical skills and grow their minds. This playground creates access to participation in a wide range of equipment, challenge, and risk.

Natural Materials

Natural wood play elements in calming blue and green tones contrast with skin tones, providing an ideal backdrop for ASL and softening the bold red of the campus architecture. The colors blend with the surrounding landscape. Durable synthetic turf complements the wood while ensuring easy access for students using mobility devices; it's treated with antistatic to reduce risks for cochlear implant users.

Reflections —

Conclusion and Summary

This report is not an endpoint, but a beginning. It is meant to spark questions, provoke curiosity and inspire careful exploration of how design can be tailored to the needs of unique communities. By sharing findings from a Deaf-centered approach, it lays the groundwork for broader conversations about universal design — how buildings can be shaped to embrace diverse ways of experiencing the world.

Ultimately, this work is about making a difference in the lives of the people who use these spaces every day. When design starts with listening and centers on lived experience, it has the power to transform not only buildings, but the wellbeing of their occupants.

Student Insights from Before & After:

“This is more than a school, it is home. And for many, the only place they have full access to information.”

“When school feels like an institution, I feel institutionalized.”

“For a long time, our buildings were old and derelict. I sometimes felt like people saw us the same.”

“We want a beautiful, Deaf-centered design, that fills us with pride.”

“WE’VE SURPASSED OUR DREAMS. IT IS EMOTIONAL; THE STAFF THAT WORK HERE INVEST THEIR HEART INTO THE WORK THEY DO. YOU SEE A LOT OF OUR STUDENTS COME FROM DISADVANTAGED PLACES AND THIS REPRESENTS HOME, THAT SENSE OF BELONGING. WE NOW HAVE A BEAUTIFUL SCHOOL THAT IS UNIQUE TO OUR COMMUNITY. THIS WILL BE A NATIONAL MODEL.”

SHAUNA BILYEU
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
CENTER FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING YOUTH

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