



MILLBROOK EARLY LEARNING CENTER

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

the caterpillars at millbrook

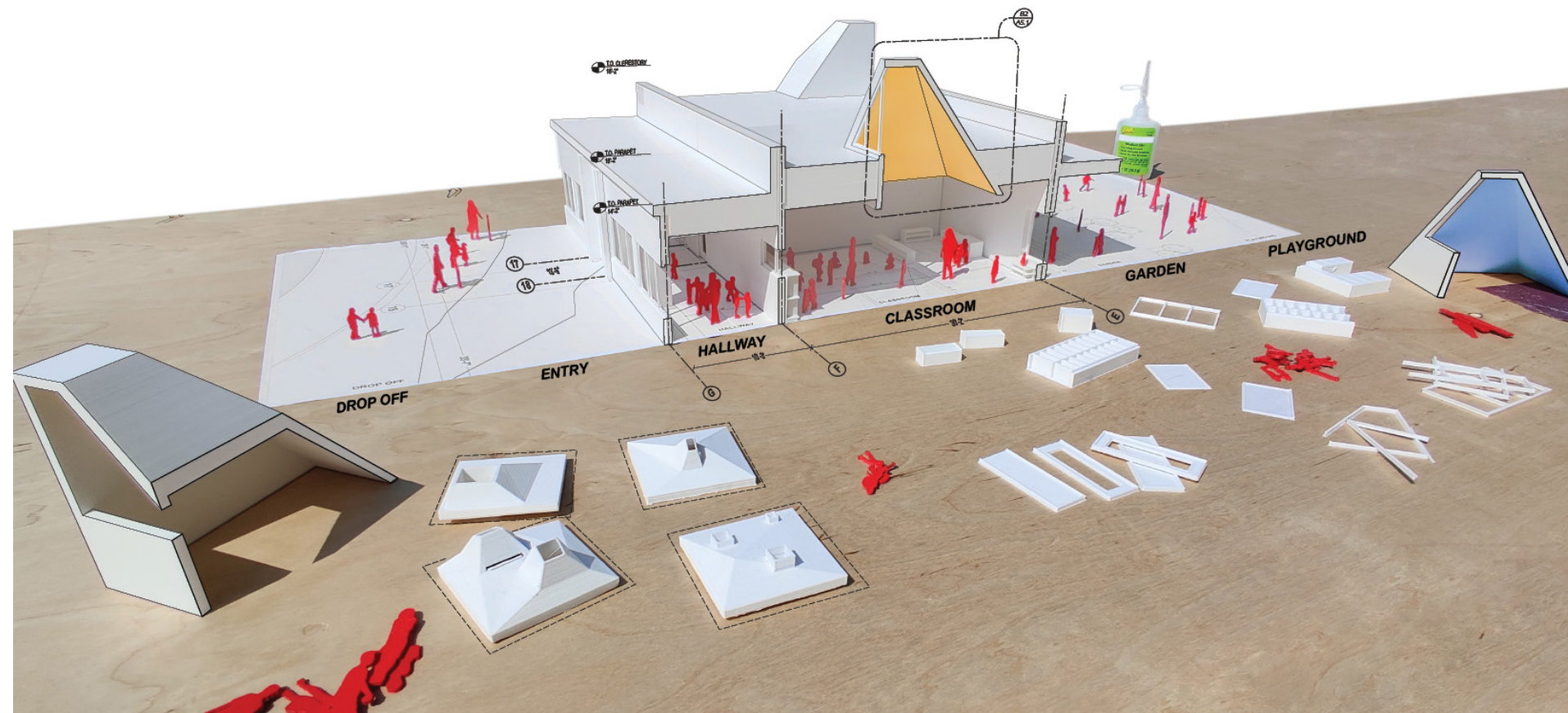
we grow, learn, and transform...



eric carle

QUICK SPECS

OWNER	WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM
AGES SERVED	3-5
COST TO FAMILIES	\$0
DAYLIT CLASSROOMS	8
STUDENTS SERVED	132
BUILDING FOOTPRINT	25,730 SQ FT
AREA PER STUDENT	189 SQ FT
OUTDOOR PLAY AREA	31,000 SQ FT
RESTORED WETLAND	40,000 SQ FT



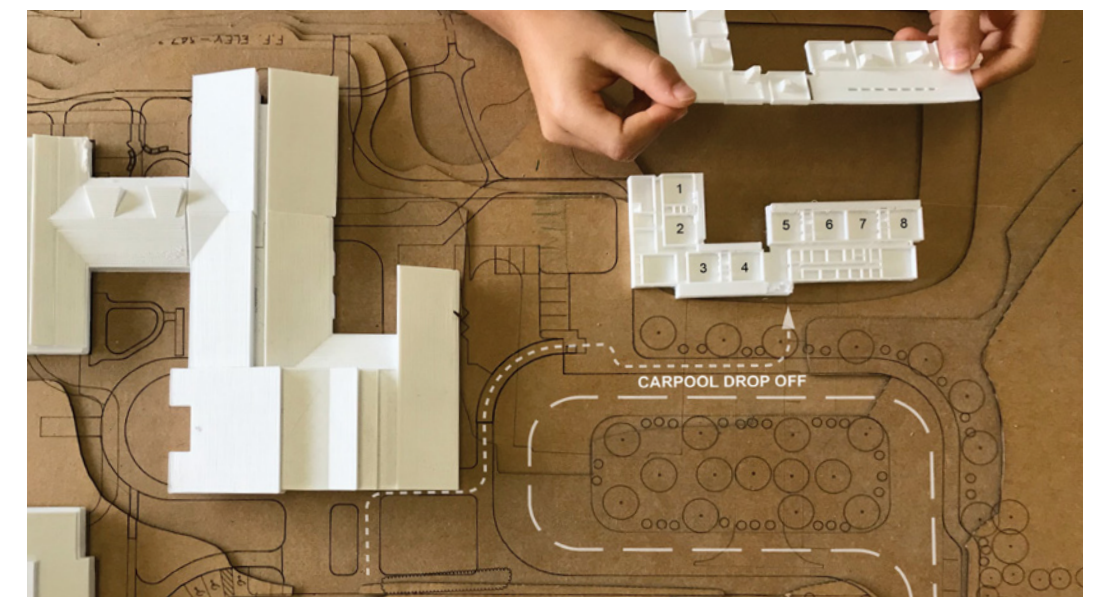
PROJECT PURPOSE:

Co-located on the Millbrook Elementary campus, this Early Learning Center is the **first freestanding public preschool** in WCPSS, setting a new standard for early childhood environments. Eight daylit classrooms are arranged around a central outdoor play landscape, creating a continuous connection between indoor and outdoor learning while prioritizing safety, visibility, and exploration.

The design responds to **North Carolina's Early Childhood Action Plan** by supporting not only education, but also food security, emotional well-being, and access to services. Exceeding local Pre-K standards and meeting Five Star Daycare requirements, the facility establishes a high-quality, flexible learning environment for diverse needs.

At its core, the project is driven by a commitment to equity. Strategically located to serve a high concentration of low-income and special needs students, the center expands access to high-quality early education at a critical developmental stage. Flexible learning environments support a wide range of abilities, responding to a more than 30% increase in demand for early childhood special education services since 2019.

The outdoor play environment functions as an extension of the classroom—supporting unstructured play, social development, and connection to nature. Carefully scaled spaces, natural materials, and abundant daylight contribute to a calming, inclusive atmosphere that supports both students and educators—serving as a replicable model for future early learning facilities across a growing public school system.





“The Early Learning Center is an inviting environment for families and children. This is a wonderful way to introduce families to the school system so they can be an active partner in their child’s educational journey.”

Sherry Williams
Director, Millbrook Early Learning Center

“This project is setting a new standard for educational design. What was once a simple parking lot has been transformed into a vibrant pre-kindergarten facility, complete with outdoor classrooms that seamlessly integrate with the natural landscape. This project beautifully demonstrates what is possible when creating an inviting and inspiring space for our youngest learners while prioritizing both safety and transparency.”

Sir Walter Raleigh Awards Jury

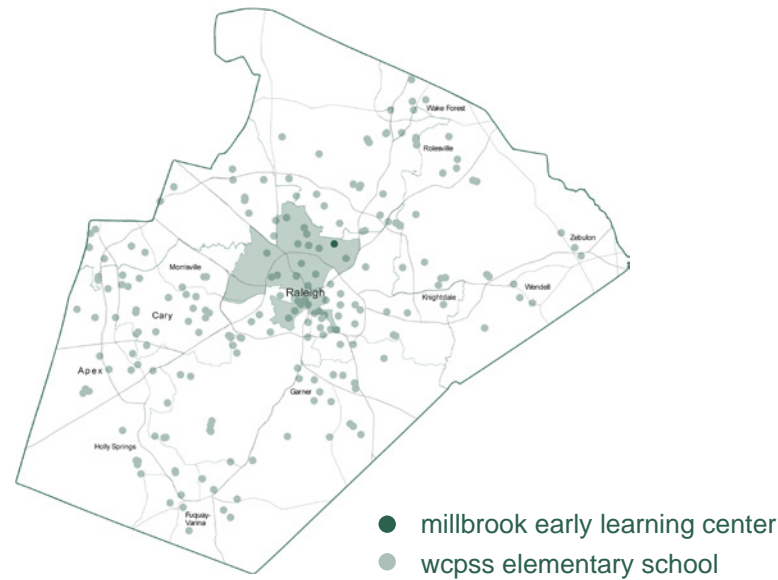


“The vision of the Early Learning Center is to be recognized as a high-quality, collaborative early learning environment that empowers each individual student to thrive and achieve their full potential through data-driven decision-making, hands-on developmentally appropriate experiences, and meaningful engagement.”

Wake County Public School System



WAKE COUNTY



WAKE COUNTY

no freestanding pre-k

127 pre-k classrooms distributed amongst
wcpss elementary schools

only 36 public pre-k sites

class size: 28 students

less than 50% public pre-k need met

WCPSS SCHOOL DISTRICT 6

first standalone pre-k

demonstrated pre-k and daycare need

existing centrally located site

census block demographics include high
number of low income families

MILLBROOK EARLY LEARNING CENTER

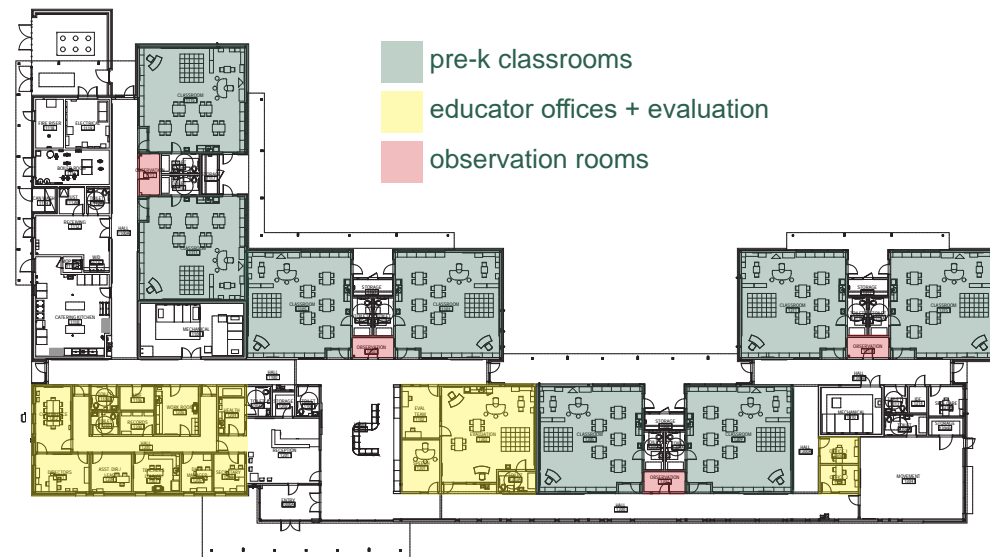
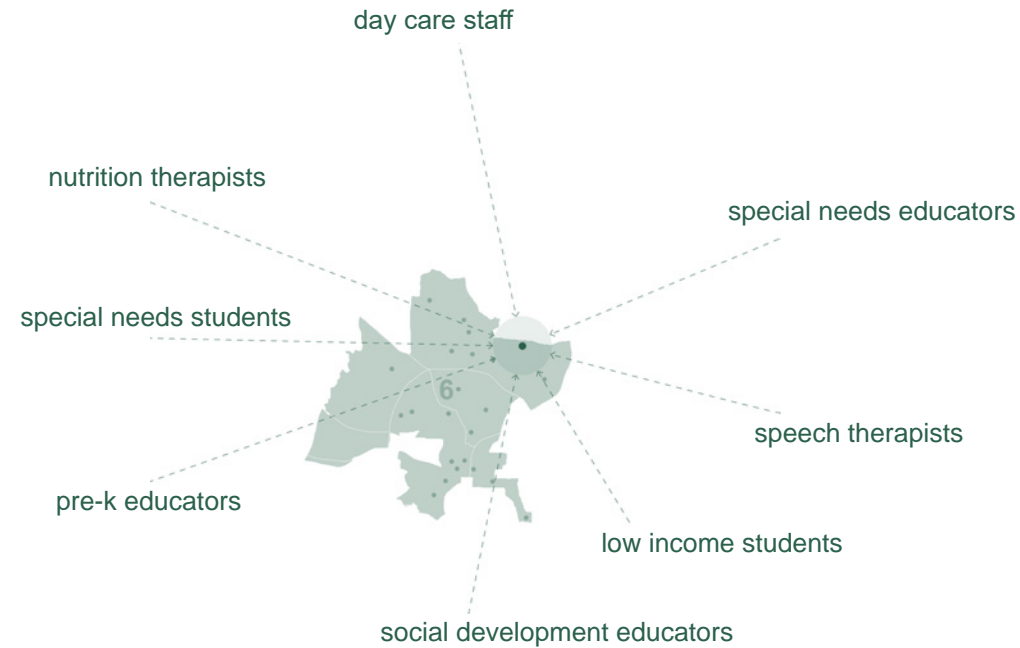
median income 20% below raleigh average

+ 8 additional classrooms (+22%)

class size: 16 students

offices and observation space for specialized early learning educators

WCPSS SCHOOL DISTRICT 6



SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT: CONTEXT

A purpose-built public preschool that transforms fragmented early education into an equitable, centralized model supporting the full spectrum of child development.

Previously, pre-K education in Wake County was distributed across 67 elementary schools, limiting the ability to provide specialized and consistent care for more than 3,500 students. With only a few classrooms per site, children—particularly those with special needs—lacked access to coordinated services, while educators and specialists were required to travel between schools, reducing the effectiveness of support.

This Early Learning Center consolidates those resources into a single, purpose-designed facility, enabling integrated delivery of education, speech and emotional therapies, and family support services. Developed in response to North Carolina's Early Childhood Action Plan and shaped by years of educator feedback, the project establishes a new model for accessible, high-quality early learning. Title I funding further ensures that underserved and at-need populations are prioritized.

Located on the Millbrook Elementary campus in central Raleigh, the site was selected for its proximity to working families and high concentration of need. As the first of four planned centers, it serves as a prototype for scalable implementation across a rapidly growing district of more than 200 schools.

The building itself reflects this mission: daylit classrooms organized around a shared outdoor learning environment foster inclusion, safety, and exploration while exceeding Five Star Daycare standards. Close collaboration with early learning staff informed every aspect of the design, aligning the physical environment with developmental and educational goals.

Now operating at full capacity with 132 students, the center demonstrates both the urgency and impact of investing in early childhood infrastructure—creating a foundation for lifelong learning while redefining how public systems can support their youngest learners.

SCHOOL + COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN



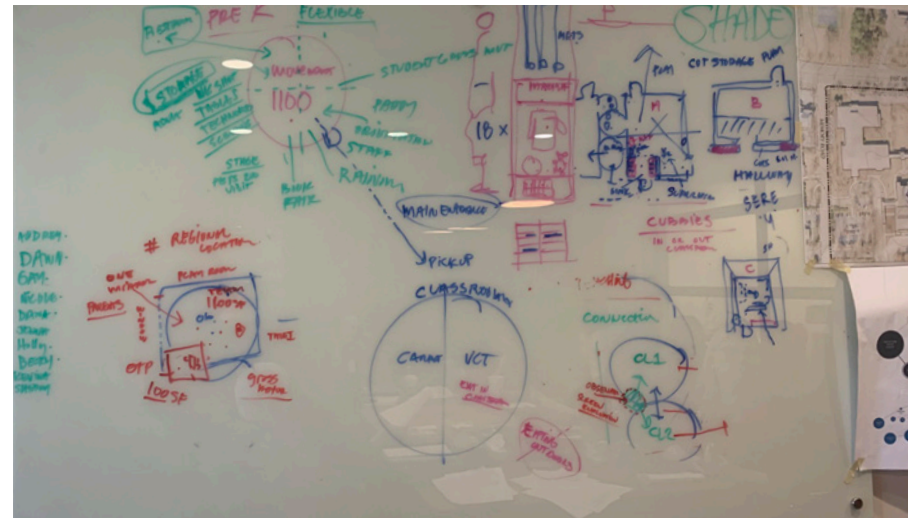
Early learning vision board is created with educators input



Early plans were adjusted per feedback from county and city planning staff.



Pre-k educators provide feedback on material and color palette



Necessary program and amenities are discussed + diagrammed



Educators and WCPSS department heads become acquainted with newly constructed spaces and skylights



Engagement with educators and school leadership on-site informed both the placement and vision of the project, grounding design decisions in a deep understanding of existing campus assets. The building's location and organization were further shaped by the educational mission of Millbrook Elementary's Environmental Magnet program



Educators and administrators provide feedback on the new building location



School leaders and educators tour the classrooms with building contractors present to observe and plan for their new teaching environments



“[Millbrook Early Learning Center] gives me a lot of hope for not only my child but for other children that are going to be entering preschool and entering the public school system in our county”

Ms. Aaron, Millbrook Early Learning Parent

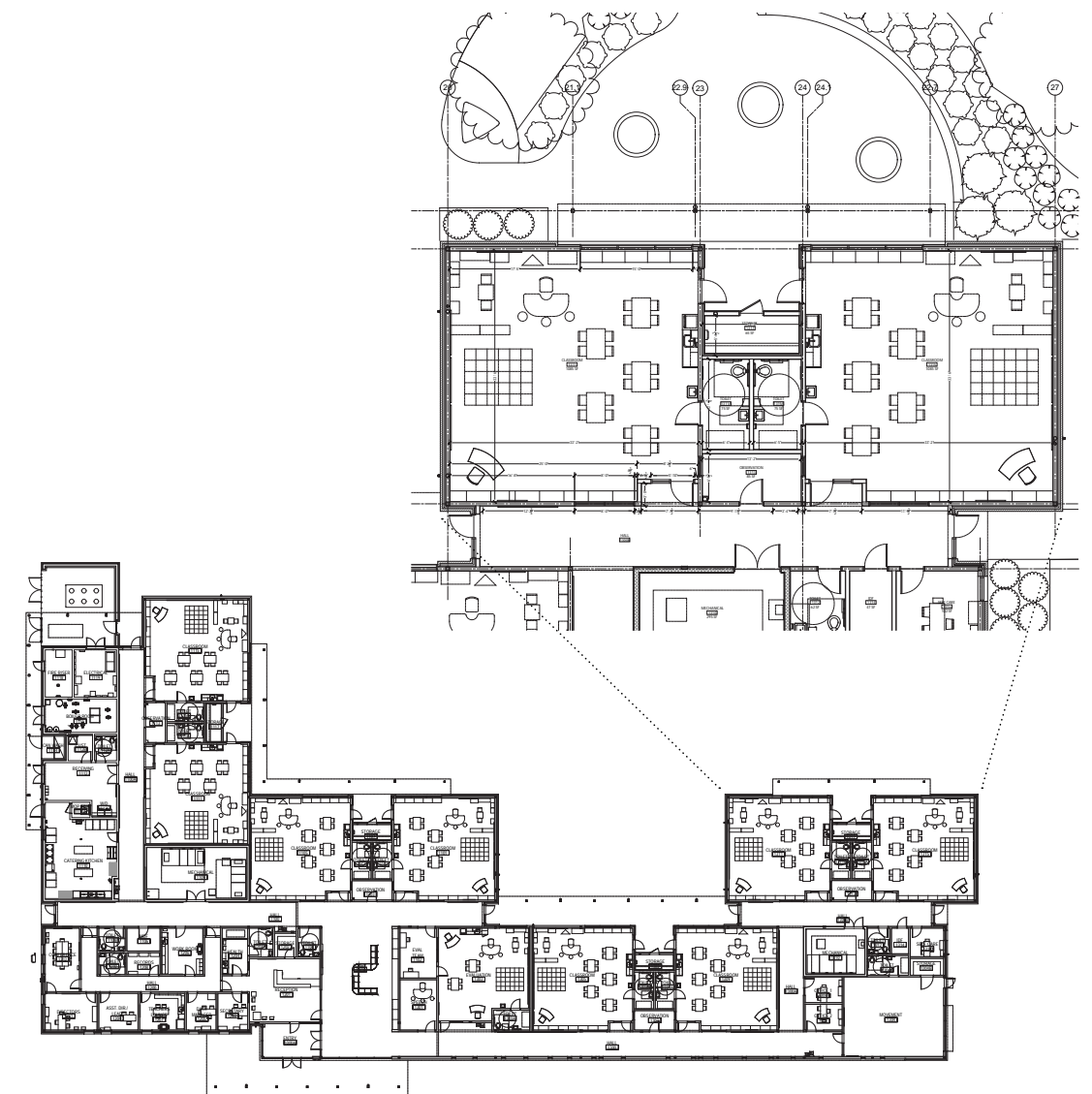


EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT: CONNECTIONS

The building is designed around the spatial and developmental needs of early learners, prioritizing access to outdoor space and shared environments. A single-loaded plan organizes classrooms along a central outdoor learning landscape, creating a strong sense of enclosure and community. This approach intentionally sacrifices efficiency to foster connection—avoiding the separation typical of double-loaded corridors and instead supporting social interaction and collaborative development.

Each classroom is enriched with a dedicated skylight, a large window seat, and an in-room bathroom, providing comfort, autonomy, and consistent access to daylight. Classrooms are paired into pods of two, strengthening relationships between small groups of students as they transition between indoor and outdoor learning.

Shared observation spaces within each pod support educators in monitoring development and identifying student needs early, reinforcing the building's role as both a learning environment and a tool for assessment and care.





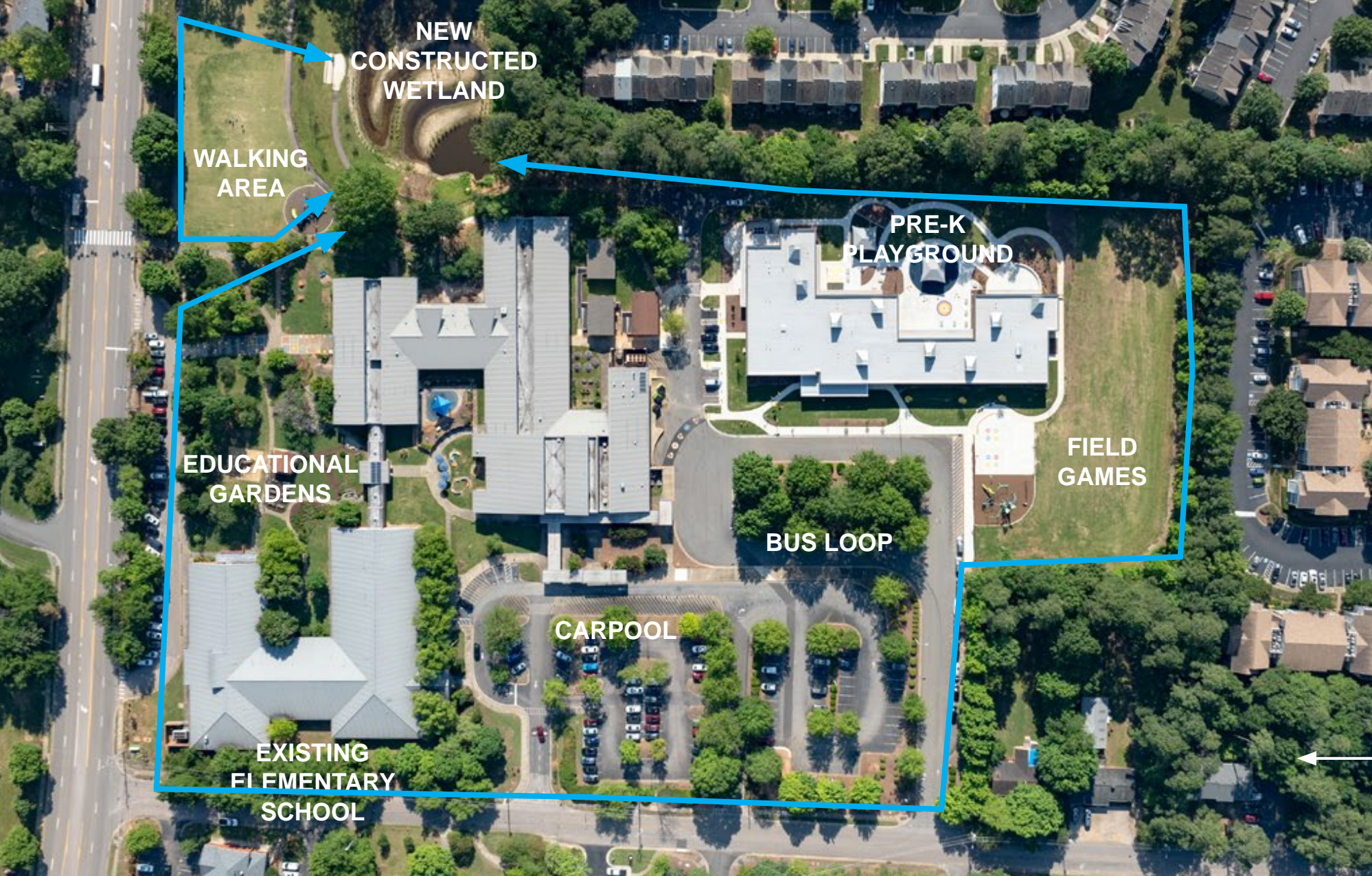
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: SUSTAINABILITY + WELLNESS

The project extends campus-wide wellness at Millbrook Elementary through new playgrounds, a playfield, and a wetland education area with an outdoor classroom accessible to all grade levels, reinforcing environmental learning.

Within the Early Learning Center, age-appropriate play areas, specialized care spaces, and abundant daylight create an engaging pre-K environment. Design strategies emphasize early environmental awareness through solar studies and safe, direct connections to the outdoors. Glare analysis ensures visual comfort while maintaining strong daylighting.

Sustainable strategies reduce resource use and environmental impact. Meals are prepared in the existing school cafeteria, eliminating the need for a separate kitchen. Low-flow fixtures and an air-cooled chiller further reduce water consumption, addressing the absence of on-site rainwater collection.



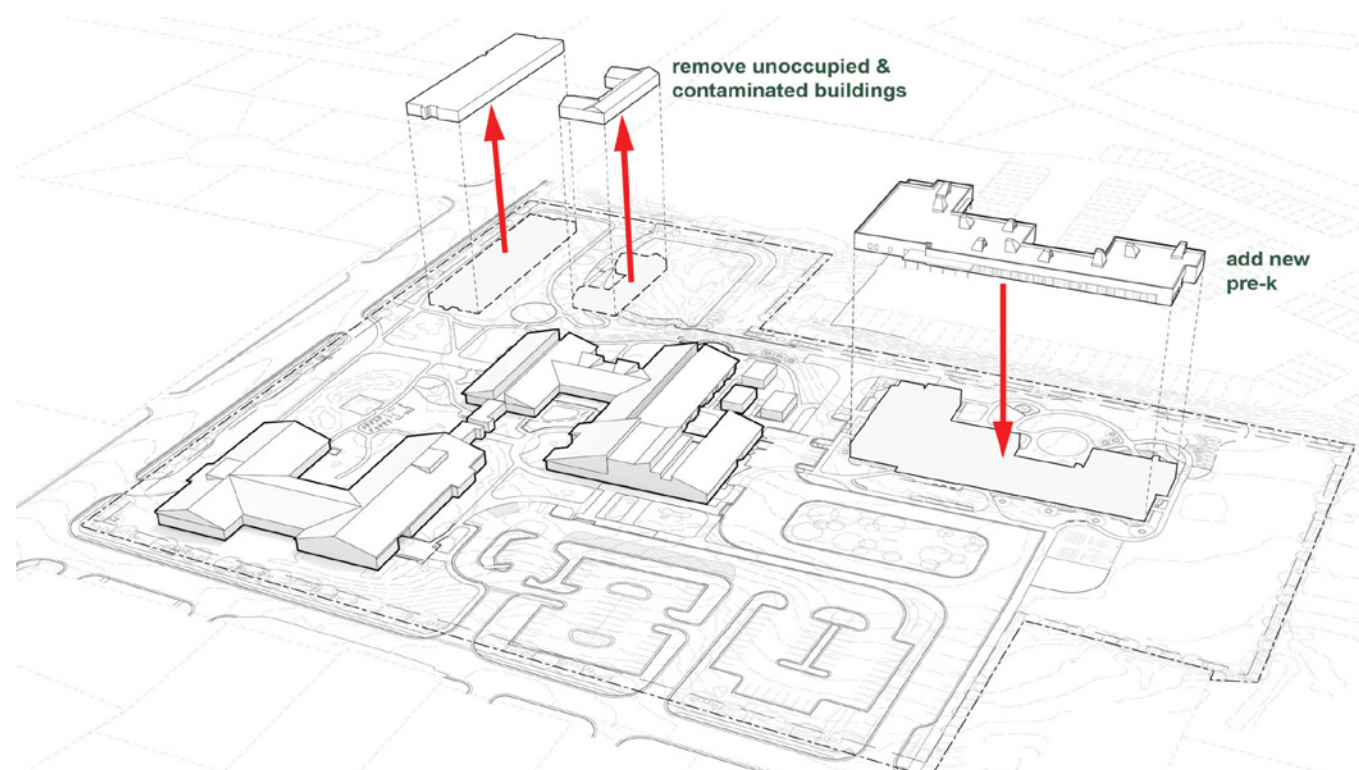


RESULTS: SUSTAINABILITY

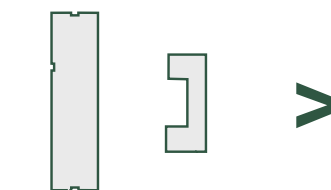
Located on an existing elementary school campus, the project minimizes its footprint by replacing uninhabitable structures and leveraging shared infrastructure, including carpool, bus, and parking systems. By integrating with existing campus resources such as nutrition services and playgrounds, the design significantly reduces the environmental impact of new construction.

Stormwater strategies enhance site performance without increasing runoff. A new wetland and retention pond improve water management while supporting environmental education, offering students direct engagement with natural systems and reinforcing the school's broader learning mission.

Within the constraints of a public school budget, the project prioritizes practical and impactful water conservation strategies. Low-flow plumbing fixtures are used throughout, and a high-efficiency air-cooled chiller reduces freshwater consumption by eliminating the need for a cooling tower—an important consideration in the absence of reclaimed water infrastructure.



NO INCREASE IN
IMPERVIOUS SURFACE
ON CAMPUS

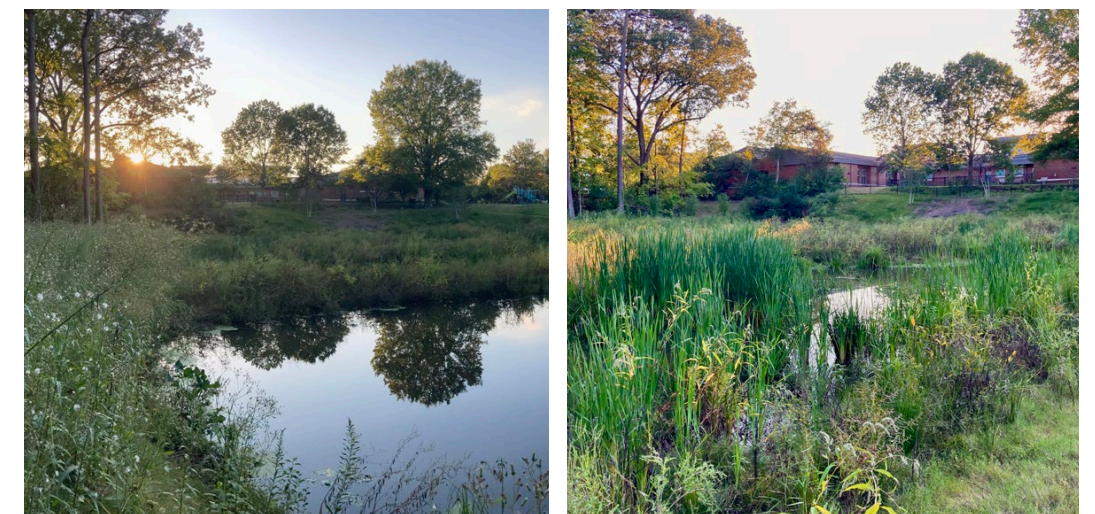


DEMOLITION
26,091 SF



NEW CONSTRUCTION
25,730 SF

100% of the Millbrook Elementary site now drains to and is filtered by a new wetland area with educational opportunities





RESULTS: ACHIEVEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The Early Learning Center was created to serve 3-5 year-olds with greater needs than the existing system of public pre-k classrooms could serve. Parents have seen their children's academic and social skills grow since their time at the Center. The goal of creating an "equal playing field" has been achieved, as students with Title 1 financial need have access to after-school care, speech therapy, emotional support, and academic support.

Early Childhood Action Plan's goals:

Goal 3: Food Security:

Free breakfast and lunch are distributed to students' classrooms each day

Goal 5: Safe and Secure Relationships:

Full time early learning and special needs educators create a sense of security and permanence amongst students, leading to strong relationships.

Goal 7: Social-Emotional Health and Resilience:

Collaborative social lobby, shared outdoor play area, grouped classrooms, access to emotional and behavior therapists on site ensure safe social and emotional development.

Goal 8: High Quality Learning:

Dedicated office space for pre-k staff at a single location, eliminating travel time for educators and providing a high-quality working environment that aligns with WCPSS recruitment efforts for the best early educators. Classroom size is half the county pre-k average.

Goal 9: On Track for School Success:

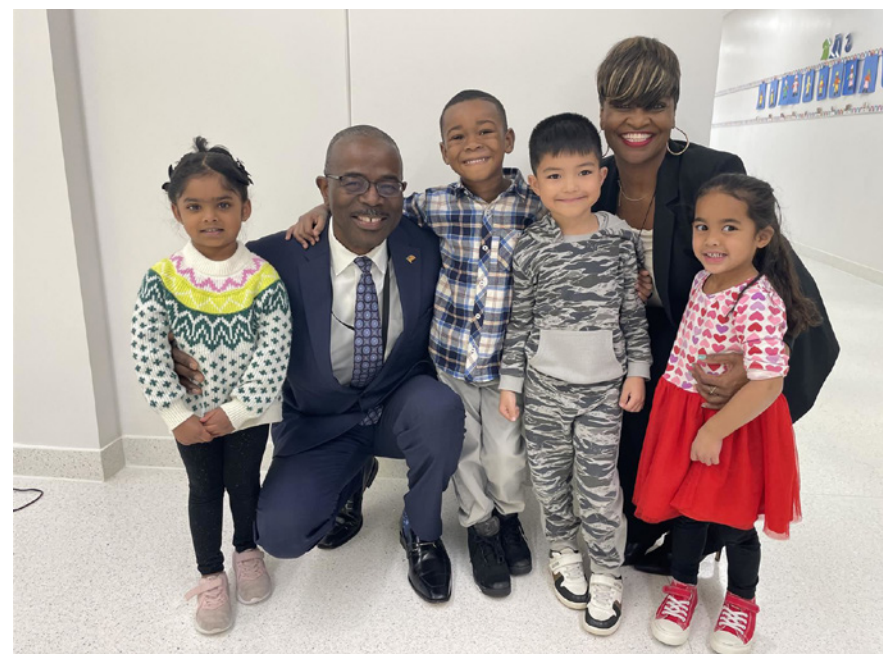
Students's needs can be clearly identified and served at the Early Learning Center, ensuring that no child is left behind in this critical developmental stage. Affordable daycare programs on site mean that more students of working families are able to be served by early learning.

Goal 10: Reading at Grade Level:

Student needs can be identified before students fall behind.



EDUCATION
How this new Raleigh center 'equalizes the playing field' for pre-K students
The News Observer



Oh wow, this is a great article. You and your team were a huge part of its success. Thank you for the creativity, patience and love you and your team bring to every project. This is what it's all about!!! 🥰🥰🥰