

# Insite Magazine

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## Classrooms, Culture and Community Heritage Hill Elementary School Goes Beyond Student Learning

Situated between a major thoroughfare, a creek and residential housing, Heritage Hill Elementary isn't a typical elementary school. It's a cornerstone of the community. As a school and community with a large population of students speaking English as a second language, and located in a neighborhood lacking gathering and recreational space, Heritage Hill Elementary was in need of a particular type of facility. The building's purpose was twofold: to serve as a school for elementary-aged children

and to function as a community center to be utilized by the citizens of the community.

"Our goal was to create an environment that fostered student learning, but could also be used for community activities after the last bell," said Tianay Outlaw, principal of Heritage Hill Elementary School. "Culture and community are very important values here, and Heritage Hill helps encourage and cultivate those values."

### Community Feedback Critical

Since the building was to serve multiple functions, SHP Leading Design (SHP) brought several stakeholders into the design process. To ensure each constituent's vision was met, SHP partnered with a Heritage Hill Elementary committee consisting of staff, teachers, community members, parents and administrators. Together, the Heritage Hill and SHP team developed a design that reflected the community's needs while also retaining the Princeton School District's identity.

The design established two wings running parallel to each other, with a courtyard running between the wings. To connect the wings, a hallway filled with administrative offices was built. Further accenting the diverse sections of the building, different flooring was chosen, each providing a separate pattern based on the unique part of the three distinct sections of the building.



Unifying the building under the Princeton City School district, the district's color, red, greets individuals at the entrance, in the gymnasium and in the cafeteria. In addition to red, many natural colors, including browns and golds, are incorporated throughout the building to inspire a sense of calm. The color combinations create an exciting, yet relaxed, space for students and community members alike.

"The process to design this building was very collaborative and hands on. SHP really took the feedback given to them by the committee and designed exactly what we needed. The architects always brought in visuals and samples to help us truly understand the vision they created. It was important that the flow of the building be suitable for both children and adults, not an easy task to accomplish, but that's exactly what was delivered," said Outlaw.

The classroom section of Heritage Hill Elementary runs north and south and has large windows, maximizing the use of sunlight and minimizing the amount of energy needed to light and heat the building. To increase visibility within the wing, windows connect adjacent classrooms, giving a storefront-like feel to the rooms. Additionally, the classrooms are designed with different program areas, indicated by varying paint colors, including a teacher zone designed specifically for teacher use only. In between the classrooms, breakout rooms supplement the classrooms with space for activities such as tutoring, testing or group projects.

The culture and community of Heritage Hill were also taken into account for the exterior of Heritage Hill Elementary. The mod-

est footprint of the school was built to reflect the unassuming neighborhood that surrounds it. Building materials used in the construction of the exterior were carefully considered, ensuring they complemented the surrounding area. A black iron fence separates the play area from the houses directly behind the school, allowing the visual connection to remain intact while safely inviting the community to the grounds. Additionally, a playground for kindergarteners was constructed at the front of the school, providing a distinct area for the youngest students of Heritage Hill Elementary. To ensure the safety of these students while keeping the aesthetics of the exterior, a masonry wall was constructed to surround this playground, separating the play area from the street in front of it. The exterior environment of the school, like the interior, conveys an open and inviting gathering place for the community.

### Community Wing Celebrates Diversity

The community wing of Heritage Hill Elementary reflects the diverse citizens using the space and welcomes community members to the space. There are adult classrooms where English as a second language is taught. The wing also incorporates a fine arts area, a library and gymnasium with a stage for school and community events. The outdoor playground and exterior spaces were also designed with both audiences in mind, ensuring each had access to these spaces at various times of the day.

Throughout any given day, students can be found focusing hard on their studies or playing on the playground. After school hours, the facility stays alive, turning into a place to host



meetings and classes, conduct art or music lessons, or practice soccer. The distinctive design of the building allows the school section to be secured, while other parts of the building are available and accessible after hours for community functions.

The building has been functional since December 2008, and according to Outlaw, "The response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. The new building truly has become a center of our community."

For many communities, a school is exclusively a place for children to learn. Heritage Hill Elementary School exceeds this function, acknowledging the needs of the community and providing all members a place to grow and strengthen their cultural identity. And this small Princeton community couldn't be happier.

