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EDUCATION DESIGN

AMDG Architects Creates a Beautiful Mess With New School Design

TACKABLE SURFACES, SHOWCASES AND BLANK PALETTES WERE INCORPORATED IN THE SCHOOL DESIGN TO CELEBRATE STUDENT WORK.

by Emily Clingman

Students at South Christian High School in West Michigan are enjoying a new state-of-the-art school. Funded mostly by cash gifts from the community, the \$43 million facility in Byron Center, Michigan, was designed by AMDG Architects and built by Dan Vos Construction.

The new building is 175,000 square feet and sits on a 140-acre campus. A few of the features include enough accommodations for 700 students, 56 classrooms, a 1,100-seat auditorium, STEM facilities, two football fields, a baseball diamond and two gyms.

“One thing that is very unique about this project is that the South Christian community has a lot of constituents in the trades,” said Travis Williams, AMDG architect. “A lot of the people who were working on the job site were of the South community. They really had a very large investment with their level of craftsmanship and skill, and their gifts in kind of labor and materials.”

Williams said the other significant factor which required a team effort was communicating with focus groups within the school community — teachers, students, parents, all the people involved — to gain their input, then synthesize everybody’s needs and wants.

“So, we didn’t work in a vacuum in any way, shape or form,” Williams said. “It was an incredible team effort.”

When it came to designing the interior of South Christian High School, Head of School Jim Peterson had four objective points. The first, as a Christ-centered school, was to have a “Visible Mission” throughout. The other objectives included “Agile Innovation,” “Community Building,” and “Beautiful Mess.”

South Christian High School was designed with flexibility and the future in mind. “Since the future of learning is unknown, just as it was extremely



different 50 years ago, we used furniture and space solutions that were kind of undefined — highly usable in many different configurations,” Williams said.

The emphasis of the furniture — which was supplied by Grand Rapids, Michigan-based Custer, a Steelcase dealer — was to be mobile and flexible, like seats and tables on wheels or pieces that nest and cluster together. A lot of seating includes bendable and springy features for fidgety students who pay attention better if they are moving around.

“Traditionally, from the middle of the 20th Century on, you’ll find a lot of millwork in schools, built-in cabinetry and built-in furniture,” Williams said. “The educational spaces we design today lean heavily on furniture systems that cater toward the idea of reconfiguring spaces. We set up the architecture to support that, but we didn’t want to overdesign the space from an architectural standpoint, to where it prohibits the flexibility.”

The school is designed with a rotunda at the center and pathways that pass through the center, creating a series of common spaces that promote the gathering of students and mixing of people moving through the building — a way for students to develop their own sense of community.

The idea of “beautiful mess” was Peterson’s brainchild. He noted learning and teaching is a messy process and not super organized and clean. When



students are working on things, learning and uncovering answers, it’s a messy process.

Tackable surfaces, showcases and blank palettes were incorporated in the school design to celebrate student work.

“Jim felt strongly that he did not want to hide that from the students and the people from the community moving around the school,” Williams said. “He wanted to showcase it.”

As a result, there’s a lot of transparency between classrooms and corridors. The abundance of glass inside the building and on the outskirts create a lot of natural light.

The light definitely helps, as the building is made of precast concrete, which is fairly innovative, especially for West Michigan schools, according to Williams. “The school has a lot of hard surfaces with the concrete, so it could be a cold and sterile place,” he said.

What helps even more, he noted, is the furniture.

“There’s a lot of richness in the interior that ended up happening,” Williams said. “Lots of soft furniture pieces offset the hard building shell, and all the colors and different kinds of pieces bring vibrancy to the whole space.” **BoF**