



Many Future Paths, One Purpose- Built Home

*How design can
restore belonging in
alternative education*

School news.

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Architects

PreK-12 Practice Leader
Brian Meyers LEED AP, BD+C

**PreK-12 Market Leader/
Director, School
Advisors**
Julie Strauss ALEP

**Communications
Director**
Bruce Boul

**Senior
Communications
Specialist**
Justin Panson

Creative Director
Steve Potter

**Design Manager,
Graphics and
Photography**
David Fennema

**Senior Graphic
Designer**
Elaine Danielson

Contributing Writers
Bruce Boul
Lydia Burns AIA, ALEP
Deepa Joshi AIA
Justin Panson
Riley Peck AIA
Kathleen Stanton
Steve Wilkerson AIA



Many Future Paths, One Purpose-Built Home

4

By Lydia Burns



Designing for Belonging

8

By Steve Wilkerson



Meet Project Manager Deepa Joshi

12

Q&A



Phoenix Rising in Lincoln, California

15

By Riley Peck

Defining Moments	18
Design Honors	19
Rankings	20

Editor's Letter



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

By Brian Meyers

LEED AP BD+C
PreK-12 Practice Leader



Alternative education has long been part of public education in the United States—created to serve students whose needs aren't met in traditional settings. Yet these environments are often overlooked or misunderstood, shaped more by stigma than by their potential.

This issue of HMC Architects' *School News* offers a different perspective.

Focused on alternative education, these stories highlight how thoughtful design can create meaningful opportunities for students who are too often forgotten. These are environments where identity is rebuilt, belonging is restored, and education becomes more personal, flexible, and supportive.

Design plays a critical role in that transformation. The built environment can reinforce barriers or help remove them. When spaces are designed with dignity and intention, they send a clear message: every student matters.

In this issue, we feature three projects that reflect this commitment—Hayu Alqi Uyxat, Phoenix High School, and the Orange County Department of Education's Harbor Learning Center North and Harbor Learning Center South. Each creates a supportive framework for students to re-engage, succeed, and move forward with confidence.

These projects do more than support alternative education. They change lives. ●

Brian Meyers

As PreK-12 practice leader, **Brian** is responsible for the strategic planning, direction, and management of the firm's PreK-12 practice. He has over 30 years of experience spanning all aspects of educational planning and design.

Many Future Paths, One Purpose-Built Home

How design can restore belonging, rebuild identity, and redefine what's possible in alternative education

By Lydia Burns

AIA, ALEP

Principal-in-Charge



Lydia leads the planning and design of learning environments that support diverse student needs. Known for her collaborative approach, she works closely with educators and communities to create schools that foster belonging, flexibility, and student success—especially in alternative education settings.

For a long time, students in alternative education have been asked to succeed in environments that were never designed for them.

In my work, I've seen firsthand how many of these students are navigating complex realities, including interrupted academic paths, systemic inequities, family responsibilities, and involvement with the justice system. And yet, the spaces meant to support them have often been temporary, hidden, or adapted as an afterthought. When the environment doesn't reflect a student's value, it can quietly reinforce the idea that they don't belong.

Hayu Alqi Uyxat began with a different premise. We asked whether the building could communicate something more affirming and, in doing so, change outcomes.

Designed as a permanent home for Portland Public Schools' Multiple Pathways to Graduation programs, the 85,000-square-foot facility represents a deliberate shift in how alternative education is supported not just programmatically, but physically.

Its name, drawn from the Chinook phrase meaning "Many Future Paths," reflects our beliefs. Students don't need to fit a single model to succeed. They need environments that recognize who they are and where they are in their journey.

From the beginning, our goal was not simply to consolidate programs. It was to create a place where students could re-engage and stay engaged.

DESIGNING FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN OVERLOOKED

One of the most meaningful shifts in this project was moving alternative education from the margins to the center—both physically and philosophically.

For years, many of these programs operated in borrowed spaces like basements, office conversions, and buildings never intended for teaching and learning. The extraordinary educators' work has always struck me, not only within those constraints but also by how often the environment works against them.

During the modernization of Benson Polytechnic High School, a simple question began to reshape the project's trajectory. Why not create a dedicated facility?

What followed was a shared recognition that these students deserved more than leftover space. They deserved a place designed specifically for them.

That decision carries real implications. A purpose-built environment supports consistency, strengthens program identity, and reduces the friction that often leads to disengagement. Just as importantly, it signals permanence, which is something many students in alternative education have rarely experienced.

A FRAMEWORK THAT SUPPORTS PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Alternative education is not one thing, and it shouldn't be housed in a one-size-fits-all environment.

We knew the design needed to support a range of learning models and student needs, often within the same day. That meant creating a framework for personalized learning that allows educators to adapt instruction and students to move through spaces that support how they learn best.

Classrooms are intentionally smaller to support relationship-based teaching. Breakout spaces allow for differentiated instruction and one-on-one support. Shared commons and specialized environments create opportunities for hands-on, career-connected learning.

In practice, what becomes clear is that the building enables flexibility at the systems level. Educators can shift between instructional modes without leaving the learning environment. Students can access the type of support they need when they need it.

That alignment between space and pedagogy is where I see design begin to directly support student success.

DESIGNING FOR THE WHOLE STUDENT

Academic support alone is rarely enough to re-engage students who have experienced disruption.

From the outset, we approached this building as a place that supports the whole student socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. That required expanding our definition of what a school provides.

Spaces throughout the building accommodate a range of needs, including quiet rooms for regulation, counseling spaces for mental health support, and open areas that encourage connection and community.

The inclusion of on-site childcare is one of the most direct examples of this approach. For student parents, it removes a significant barrier to attendance and persistence. For the district, it represents an investment in continuity, ensuring students can remain on a path to graduation.

These are intentional decisions that acknowledge that barriers to learning are often external to the classroom—and that addressing them is essential to improving outcomes.



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BEINSCHNEIDER

"This is the first time I've ever seen my voice matter."

Hayu Alqi Uyxat Student



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

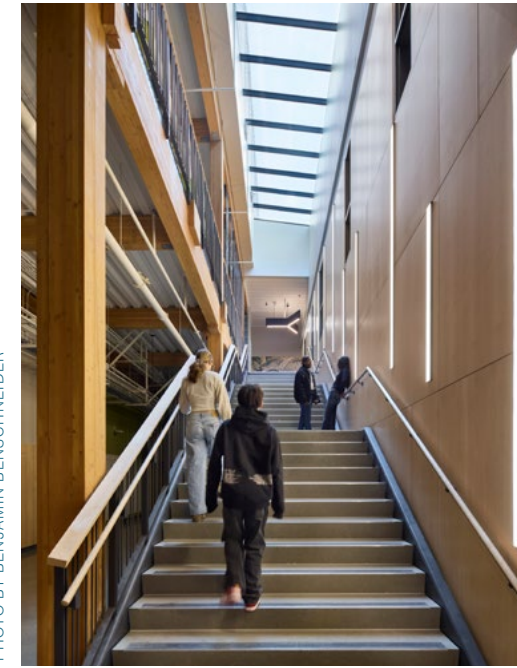


PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

“Most people don’t care what I have to say, and now I get quoted on a wall.”

Hayu Alqi Uyxat Student

LISTENING AS A DESIGN STRATEGY

If there is one lesson this project reinforces for me, it’s that engagement is not a phase. It’s a driver of better outcomes.

Students, educators, families, and community members were deeply involved throughout the process. Their input shaped not only the program, but the experience of the building itself.

That influence is most visible in the experiential graphic design. Student voices are embedded directly into the architecture, creating a sense of ownership and pride that can’t be replicated through programming alone.

The impact is immediate. When students see themselves reflected in their environment, engagement shifts. The building becomes something they identify with and not just a place they attend.

SUSTAINABILITY AS PART OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

This project also demonstrates how sustainable design strategies can enhance both performance and experience.

The building achieved LEED Gold certification and incorporated mass timber, optimized daylighting, and healthy material selections.

These decisions reduce environmental impact while also improving daily conditions for students and staff through better air quality, increased natural light, and a stronger connection to nature.

For districts, this dual benefit matters. Sustainability investments are not only long-term operational decisions but also immediate contributors to well-being and learning.

CHANGING PERCEPTION THROUGH VISIBILITY

The decision to locate Hayu Alqi Uyxat prominently within the city may be one of the most impactful moves we made.

By bringing alternative education into a visible, central location, the district reframed how these programs are perceived internally and externally. And we’ve seen tangible effects. Educators report increased pride in their work. Students demonstrate stronger engagement. The broader community begins to recognize alternative pathways as legitimate, valuable, and necessary.

In this case, design becomes a tool for cultural change.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Projects like Hayu Alqi Uyxat suggest a broader shift in how districts might approach alternative education.

The question is no longer whether these programs are needed, but how well they are supported. And that support must extend beyond curriculum and staffing to include the physical environment.

Purpose-built facilities can improve engagement, strengthen program identity, and reduce barriers that contribute to student disengagement. They can also clearly and consistently signal that every student is valued.

DESIGNING POSSIBILITY

Design alone cannot solve every challenge in education. But in my experience, it can remove obstacles, create stability, and reinforce the work educators are already doing.

At Hayu Alqi Uyxat, those shifts are already visible in how students use the space, how educators teach within it, and how the community understands the role of alternative education.

The building doesn’t define students’ futures. It supports them as they begin to define their own. That shift matters. It turns the school into something more purposeful—a place where possibility becomes tangible. ●

The Bigger Picture

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- / 85,000 sq. ft. purpose-built alternative education facility
- / 4 programs unified under one roof (Alliance High School, Reconnection Services, Portland DART School, Teen Parent Services)
- / 1 integrated childcare center supporting student parents
- / Previously dispersed programs were centralized into a single, visible campus
- / LEED Gold certified with mass timber, daylighting, and healthy materials

DESIGN STRATEGIES THAT DRIVE IMPACT

Personalized Learning Environments

Spaces are intentionally scaled and organized to support individualized instruction, differentiated teaching, and relationship-based learning, allowing students to move through education in ways that align with their needs.

Flexible + Responsive Spaces

Classrooms, breakout areas, and shared commons are designed to shift throughout the day, supporting small-group learning, one-on-one mentoring, and whole-student support across academic, social, and emotional needs.

Designing for the Whole Student

Integrated counseling spaces, sensory rooms, and on-site childcare remove barriers to participation and persistence, supporting students beyond the classroom.

Sustainable, High-Performance Design

Mass timber structure, optimized daylighting, and healthy material selections contribute to a LEED Gold target while enhancing student well-being and daily experience.

Experiential Graphics + Student Voice

Student quotes and layered visual storytelling embedded in the building reinforce identity, belonging, and pride—turning the environment into a reflection of the community it serves.

WHAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN TAKE AWAY

- / **Environment influences engagement.** Purpose-built spaces can help re-engage students who have struggled in traditional settings.
- / **Flexibility is not optional.** Diverse learners require environments that adapt in real time.
- / **Support services must be integrated.** Removing barriers like childcare and access to wellness services directly impacts student success.
- / **Visibility matters.** Locating alternative education programs prominently helps shift perception and build community value.
- / **Design is a strategy—not an afterthought.** When aligned with educational goals, the built environment becomes an active contributor to outcomes. ●

Designing for Belonging

Supporting Alternative Education in Orange County, California

By **Steve Wilkerson** AIA
Principal-in-Charge



With more than 30 years of experience designing educational environments, **Steve** leads projects spanning master planning, new construction, and modernization. His work focuses on creating safe, supportive campuses that respond to diverse student needs, integrating security, flexibility, and student well-being into every design.

The Harbor Learning Centers in Orange County, California, illustrate how school environments can reshape outcomes for students who have not thrived in traditional settings. As part of the Orange County Department of Education alternative education system, the North and South campuses provide structured, supportive environments designed to re-engage students academically while addressing broader social needs.

Completed in 2022, the Harbor Learning Center North campus was designed as a centralized, purpose-built facility to replace a collection of smaller, scattered learning environments. The 26,000-square-foot campus sits on 3.8 acres and serves approximately 350 students, with 13 classrooms, administrative offices, a library and learning commons, a multipurpose room, and indoor and outdoor dining areas. The campus reflects a shift toward models that bring academic instruction and support services together in one location, improving both access and continuity for students.

By contrast, the Harbor Learning Center South campus operates on an existing site in Fountain Valley and is known for its emphasis on experiential learning, including garden-based education. Together, the campuses provide flexible environments that integrate academics, counseling, and hands-on learning. The model emphasizes smaller learning communities, adaptable spaces, and access to resources that help students stay engaged and on track toward graduation.

What began as a facilities effort to consolidate programs has evolved into something more meaningful: a model for how design can support students who have struggled to find their place in traditional schools.

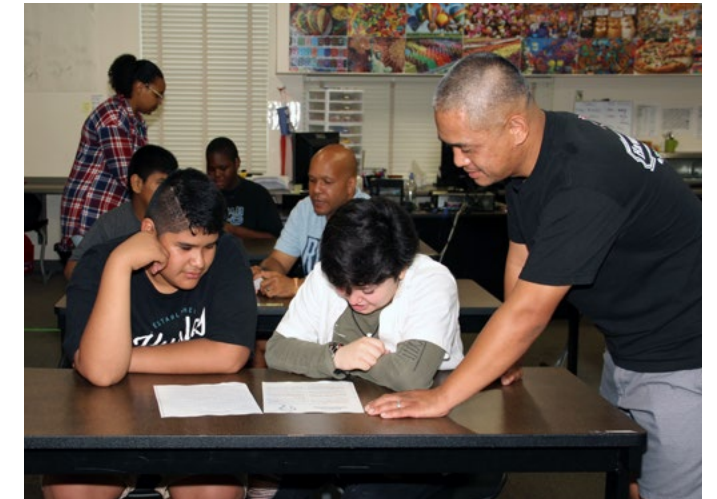
DESIGNING FOR BELONGING

At Harbor, the physical environment plays a critical role in shaping student experience. The campuses are designed to create a sense of belonging for students who may not have felt successful in conventional school settings. Spaces for collaboration, family engagement, and hands-on learning reinforce that these are places where students are supported and valued.

The educational approach extends beyond academics. Students have opportunities to recover credits, re-engage with learning, and explore career pathways through programs such as digital media, culinary arts, and other career and technical education offerings. These experiences help students build practical skills while developing confidence and a renewed sense of purpose.

Equally important are the relationships formed within these spaces. While the facilities provide the framework, it is the connection between students and educators that ultimately drives success. As one administrator noted, it is often these relationships that students describe as life-changing.

PHOTOS BY ORANGE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



As a county-operated program, Harbor works in close partnership with local districts, serving students who may be expelled or who need an alternative to traditional campuses. This structure allows the campuses to function as both academic environments and support systems, addressing a wide range of student needs.

A CAMPUS THAT SIGNALS VALUE

Before Harbor Learning Center South was established, many students attended classes in scattered storefront locations—spaces never intended for education. Wedged between retail tenants, these environments lacked both the physical qualities and psychological cues of a school, reinforcing a sense of disconnection. For students already facing academic and personal challenges, the setting made it difficult to feel part of a meaningful institution.

The decision to invest in purpose-built facilities marked a significant shift. Despite funding constraints, the goal extended beyond consolidation to transformation. The intent was to create a place where students could feel safe, supported, and valued—an environment that signals that their education matters.

The students served by Harbor reflect a wide range of needs. Many have experienced instability at home, struggled with behavioral challenges, or been involved with the juvenile justice system. Others are enrolled in specialized programs supporting students with disabilities. For many, Harbor represents a critical opportunity to re-engage with education.

The campus design responds directly to these realities. Organized around a central promenade with clear sightlines, the layout minimizes isolated areas and supports supervision. Controlled entry sequences establish a sense of routine and stability from the moment students arrive.

Early classroom layouts reflected a cautious approach, with features intended to reduce conflict and maintain structure. Over time, however, the use of the spaces evolved. As trust developed, classrooms shifted toward more collaborative arrangements, and movement across campus became more fluid. The approach moved from control to connection, with the physical environment supporting a more open and interactive culture.

INTEGRATION, COMMUNITY, AND GROWTH

A defining feature of the Harbor model is the integration of diverse student populations. Rather than separating students by need, the program brings together those with behavioral challenges alongside students in special education, including those with autism, hearing impairments, and physical disabilities. This approach reduces stigma and fosters a culture of acceptance, where students begin to see shared experiences rather than differences.

The physical design reinforces this sense of community. Spaces are scaled to feel approachable, with strong connections between classrooms, outdoor areas, and common spaces. Natural light, landscaping, and open sightlines contribute to a calm, cohesive environment that supports both learning and well-being.



PHOTO BY ORANGE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

“We want our students to see that their past does not define them—and that there is more ahead for them.”

Maria Martinez-Poulin,
Chief of ACCESS Programs,
Orange County Department
of Education

Hands-on learning plays a central role in the student experience. A learning garden, for example, provides both therapeutic and educational value, allowing students to cultivate food and see tangible results from their efforts. These experiences connect directly to career pathways, such as culinary arts, where students move from growing ingredients to preparing them.

Programs like these reflect the school’s evolution from a focus on stabilization to one of preparation, equipping students with skills that extend beyond graduation. The facility’s durability and quality further reinforce this message. Years after completion, the campus remains well-maintained, signaling permanence and care. For students, this communicates that they are valued and that their education is worth investing in.

REDEFINING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Harbor challenges conventional perceptions of alternative education. Rather than isolating students, it creates a cohesive community where differences are normalized, and belonging is prioritized. For many students, it offers their first experience of school as a place where they truly fit.

At the same time, programs like Harbor operate within significant funding constraints. Alternative education is often funded at the same level as traditional high schools, despite serving students with more complex needs and requiring more specialized spaces and services. Limitations in funding eligibility, particularly for career and technical education programs, can further restrict opportunities for students who would benefit most from hands-on, career-connected learning.

Even within these constraints, Harbor demonstrates what is possible when design is aligned with educational purpose. By moving beyond makeshift environments and investing in spaces that reflect the dignity and complexity of the students they serve, schools can create new pathways for engagement and success.

The Harbor Learning Centers show that architecture, when thoughtfully applied, can do more than support education. It can help restore confidence, build connections, and create a foundation for students to move forward with greater stability and possibility. ●

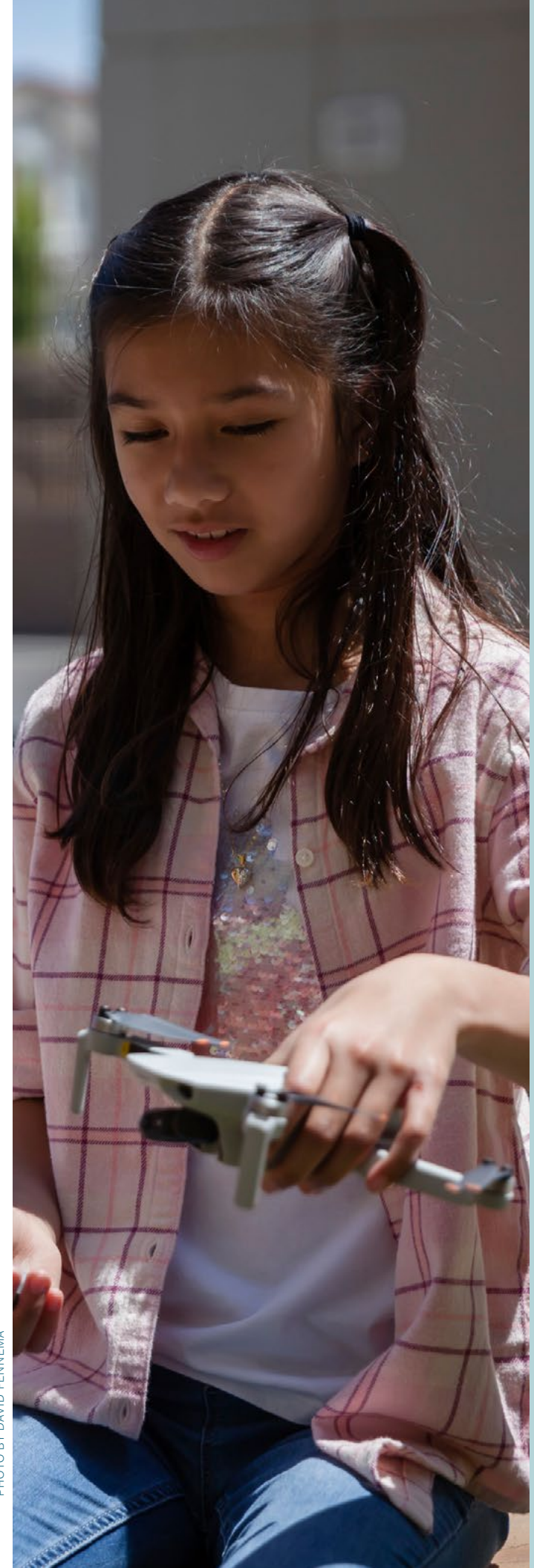


PHOTO BY DAVID FENNEMA

Understanding Alternative Education: Key Terms and Models in California

Alternative education includes a range of student-centered programs designed to provide additional flexibility, support and pathways to success for students whose needs may differ from those served in traditional school settings.

CONTINUATION EDUCATION

Designed for high school students who are behind in credits or need a more flexible setting to complete graduation requirements. Programs often feature smaller class sizes, personalized support and credit recovery opportunities.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS / COMMUNITY DAY PROGRAMS

Serve students who may benefit from additional structure, counseling and academic support due to attendance challenges, behavior concerns or other barriers to success. These schools emphasize student growth, accountability and re-engagement.

COURT AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Operated by county offices of education for students involved in the juvenile justice system or referred through probation and partner agencies. Programs focus on academics, stability, transition planning and successful reentry into school or the workforce.

INDEPENDENT STUDY AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS

Offer learning options through a combination of teacher guidance, scheduled check-ins, online coursework and in-person support. These models can benefit students needing schedule flexibility, personalized pacing or an alternative environment.

PARENT PARTNERSHIP / HOME-BASED LEARNING

Public school programs that partner with families who choose home-based education, providing credentialed teacher support, curriculum guidance and enrichment opportunities.

CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAYS WITHIN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Many alternative education settings include hands-on career pathways such as culinary arts, construction, digital media and other workforce-focused fields. These opportunities help students build job skills while earning credits.

YOUNG ADULT COMPLETION AND TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Serve older youth and young adults working toward diplomas, career readiness, life skills or a pathway back into education and employment.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT ACADEMIES

Structured programs that combine academics, mentoring, leadership development and career preparation for students who benefit from a highly supportive setting.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS

Some students with disabilities receive services in specialized environments that combine academic instruction, therapeutic supports and individualized programming tailored to their learning needs.

TRANSITION AND RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Support students returning from expulsion, incarceration, chronic absenteeism or other disruptions. These programs help students rebuild routines, reconnect with learning and plan next steps. ●

Q+A

Meet Project Manager Deepa Joshi, AIA

As a project manager in the Portland office of Bassetti Architects, a Design Studio of HMC Architects, Deepa Joshi sees PreK–12 projects as an opportunity to serve some of the most important people we design for—children. She is focused on creating schools that are enriching for their users and serve as meaningful landmarks within their communities.

Q What is your educational background, and what made you want to enter architecture?

A As the daughter of a language major and a mechanical engineer, I was exposed early on to both creative and analytical ways of thinking. That contrast led me to pursue a career that could bridge the two. Once I discovered architecture through an insightful counselor, I never looked back. As my career has progressed, I've become increasingly interested in how architecture can help heal the world by making meaningful, even if small, differences.

Q What's a design decision you've seen consistently improve the everyday experience for students and staff—and why?

A Decisions that prioritize the human experience—how we perceive spaces through our senses and emotions—consistently make the greatest impact. The spaces we occupy become the backdrop for life's moments, shaping how those experiences are felt and remembered.

For younger users especially, everyday environments influence their sense of belonging, safety, community, and joy—or the absence of those things. Designers have both the responsibility and the opportunity to create spaces that support well-being, connection, and delight.

Q You co-authored our workbook, *Architecture of Healing: Trauma-Informed Design*. What should districts understand about trauma, and where do you see the greatest opportunity to apply trauma-informed strategies?

A Trauma affects approximately 60 percent of learners across all social structures, often disrupting their daily lives, well-being, and sense of emotional security. For many, academic success, graduation, and long-term stability can feel out of reach. Yet trauma is often unrecognized and rarely addressed. *Architecture of Healing: Trauma-Informed Design* creates space for these experiences and provides districts with the vocabulary, data, and strategies to respond meaningfully. The opportunities range from simple interventions—like a quiet nook with soft seating—to larger, campus-wide strategies that establish trauma-informed design principles and supportive learning environments.

“The spaces we occupy become the backdrop for life's moments, shaping how those experiences are felt and remembered.”



Download the Digital Book
*Architecture of Healing:
Trauma-Informed Design*

design
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“Designers have the responsibility and opportunity to create spaces that support well-being, connection, and delight.”

Q What are your clients’ biggest challenges right now, and how are we helping them solve them?

A Districts are navigating multiple challenges at once. They are facing teacher shortages, budget constraints, and complex facility needs, while also working to re-engage students who may feel disconnected or disillusioned. Many students are dealing with significant personal challenges, and schools are increasingly stepping into roles beyond education—serving as counselors, caretakers, and support systems. In this environment, maintaining a focus on education can be difficult. Architects can support districts by helping secure funding, optimize capital spending, and design learning environments that inspire confidence and reinforce the value of education as a foundation for the future.

Q In the design of Hayu Alqi Uyxat, you participated in significant student engagement through “Your Street, Your Voice.” What was that process like, and how did it inform the final design?

A “Your Street, Your Voice” introduces high school students from underrepresented communities to careers in the built environment and encourages them to use design as a tool for equity.

Through this process, Hayu Alqi Uyxat was envisioned as a permanent home for four alternative education programs that had previously been scattered across the district. The new facility brings visibility, identity, and dignity to students whose needs were not met in traditional settings.

Over a 12-week program, students developed ideas for their future school. It was powerful to see them find their voice and shape that vision. Their input became the foundation for the design, reflected in concepts such as the “treehouse”—a space that represents home, sanctuary, and possibility. Their priorities, including soft, adjustable lighting, access to daylight, student art displays, and natural materials, are integrated throughout the building. The engagement process—and the resulting project—has since received significant recognition.

Q What are your passions outside of work?

A Becoming a mother has been a transformative experience and has deepened my motivation to make a positive impact through my work. That sense of purpose carries into my yoga practice and teaching. I also find balance and clarity in the mountains, whether I’m trail running, hiking, or backpacking with my puppy, Bodhi. ●



Phoenix Rising

A New Model for Alternative Education in Lincoln, California

In August, Western Placer Unified School District (WPUSD) dedicated a new two-story, 14,000-square-foot classroom building at Phoenix High School in Lincoln, California. The project replaces a campus once defined by aging portable classrooms with a permanent facility that has quickly become a focal point for student life and identity.

For an alternative education campus, the impact is significant. What was once a collection of temporary structures now has a sense of permanence, visibility, and pride. The new building serves not only as a functional upgrade but also as a signal to students that their education and their experience matter.

The compact site required a thoughtful response. A two-story design maximizes space while helping establish a clearer campus presence. As planning progressed, priorities shifted from secondary features, such as food service, to more critical needs, such as supervision and safety. The design emphasizes passive oversight, including single-user restrooms and strategically placed administrative spaces that support visibility while maintaining student independence.

At the same time, classrooms were intentionally designed to align with those in traditional high schools. This approach reinforces a sense of normalcy and equity, ensuring that students in alternative education settings do not feel defined by a different or lesser environment.

Subtle architectural variations, including window placement and access to daylight, create a more engaging and comfortable learning atmosphere, while covered outdoor areas expand usable space and support year-round activity.

LEADERSHIP THAT SHAPES CULTURE

While the building plays an important role, the story of Phoenix High School is ultimately about people. The campus culture is shaped by a leadership approach grounded in connection, consistency, and belief in student potential.

Principal Chuck Whitecotton brings more than three decades of experience in alternative education. His perspective reflects a shift away from traditional measures of success toward a more individualized approach. Drawing from a background in coaching, he emphasizes growth, resilience, and the idea that each student can succeed with the right support.

At Phoenix, this philosophy is evident in students’ daily experience. Relationships between staff and students are central to the school’s approach, creating an environment where students feel seen, supported, and capable of progress. In many cases, this sense of connection allows students to re-engage with learning after struggling in more conventional settings.

By Riley Peck AIA
Architect



Riley has more than 12 years of experience working with school districts. His work spans new construction and modernization projects, with a focus on translating the needs of students and educators into thoughtful, buildable design solutions.



PHOTOS BY PHOENIX HIGH SCHOOL

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND CONFIDENCE

A defining feature of the Phoenix campus is a weekly student-led assembly known as “the huddle.” During these gatherings, students take on roles as emcees, presenters, and performers, building communication skills and confidence in a structured but flexible environment. The format creates space for students to share their voices, recognize one another, and develop a stronger sense of community.

When the new building was dedicated, the event followed this same model, placing students at the center. This approach reflects a broader philosophy that prioritizes belonging as a foundation for success. Rather than focusing solely on academic performance, the school emphasizes the development of communication, confidence, and social awareness—skills that support long-term growth.

Alternative education is often misunderstood, with assumptions that students are less capable or less motivated. At Phoenix, the opposite is true. Students want to succeed, but many have experienced frustration or repeated setbacks in traditional settings. Within a supportive environment, they can reconnect with that motivation and begin rebuilding confidence over time.

As Whitecotton notes, progress is not always immediate. It requires patience, consistency, and a willingness to meet students where they are. “You don’t give up,” he says. “You keep believing.”

CONNECTIONS BEYOND CAMPUS

Although Phoenix operates as a distinct campus, it maintains a strong connection to neighboring Lincoln High School. Students can access shared courses and extracurricular activities, expanding their opportunities while remaining supported within a smaller, more personalized environment.

This relationship reflects a more flexible model of education—one that allows students to move between settings based on their needs. Compared with traditional high schools, Phoenix offers smaller class sizes, more individualized instruction, and closer relationships with educators. These conditions make it easier for students to stay engaged and less likely to feel overlooked.

TWO DISTINCT PROGRAMS, ONE COMMUNITY

The campus supports two programs: Phoenix High School and Atlas Learning Academy. Phoenix follows a traditional daily schedule, while Atlas offers an independent study model that allows students to design more flexible learning pathways.

Despite their differences, both programs share the same physical environment. The building serves as a central hub where students can access resources, meet with instructors, and remain connected to a broader school community. This integration allows for flexibility without sacrificing a sense of belonging.

DESIGNING THE “FEELING TONE”

A guiding concept in the design is what Whitecotton describes as “feeling tone”—the emotional impression a space conveys. The goal was to create an environment that feels welcoming, positive, and reflective of the surrounding community.

The result is a campus that students and staff consistently describe as a place that “feels good.” Natural light, material choices, and the building’s overall scale contribute to an atmosphere that is both comfortable and uplifting. These qualities, while less measurable than square footage or capacity, play an important role in shaping how students experience their environment each day.

LOOKING AHEAD

The new classroom building represents the first phase of a broader vision for the Phoenix campus. Plans include replacing remaining portable classrooms and enhancing outdoor spaces, which are currently dominated by asphalt. Introducing landscaped areas and outdoor learning environments will further support student engagement and expand opportunities for flexible use.

Even in its current form, Phoenix High School offers a compelling example of how thoughtful design, strong leadership, and a focus on belonging can support student success. The project reflects a broader shift toward more responsive educational models—ones that recognize different learning paths and provide the environments needed to support them.

At Phoenix, the result is more than a new building. It is a redefinition of what an alternative education campus can be. One grounded in connection, possibility, and a renewed sense of purpose. ●

“The project reflects a broader shift toward more responsive educational models—ones that recognize different learning paths and provide the environments needed to support them.”



PHOTO BY HMC ARCHITECTS

Defining Moments



*Jennifer Huang graduated from the CASH Leadership Academy and gave a keynote address at the CASH Academy Graduation
Sacramento, California*



*San Mateo-Foster City School District Celebrates New Multi-Purpose Building at Parkside Montessori
San Mateo, California*



*HMC Architects at the Los Angeles County Office of Education Green School Series
Los Angeles, California*



*Stockton Unified School District Breaks Ground on Weber Institute of Applied Sciences & Technology Gym Addition
Stockton, California*



*West Sound Technical Skills Center Celebrates Major Expansion
Bremerton, Washington*



*Sacramento PreK-12 Team Tours New Classroom Building at Manteca High School
Manteca, California*

Design Honors



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER



Benson Polytechnic High School — 2026 USGBC Leadership Award for “Project Excellence in Oregon”



PHOTO BY ALEX NYE



El Rodeo Elementary School — 2026 Los Angeles Conservancy Preservation Award

Los Angeles

633 W. 5th Street, Third Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90071
213.542.8300

Ontario

3546 Concourse Street, Suite 200
Ontario, CA 91764
909.989.9979

Portland

721 NW 9th Avenue, Suite 350
Portland, OR 97209
503.224.9162

Sacramento

2101 Capitol Avenue, Suite 100
Sacramento, CA 95816
916.368.7990

San Diego

201 Lomas Santa Fe Drive, Suite 200
Solana Beach, CA 92075
619.744.4077

San Jose

333 W. San Carlos Street, Suite 750
San Jose, CA 95110
408.977.9160

Seattle

71 Columbia Street, Suite 500
Seattle, WA 98104
206.340.9500

HMC School Advisors

3546 Concourse Street, Suite 200
Ontario, CA 91764
909.989.9979



Founded with the purpose of anticipating community needs, HMC Architects aims to create designs that have a positive impact, now and into the future.

As a 100 percent employee-owned firm, we focus primarily on opportunities to have the most direct contribution to communities — through healthcare, education, and civic spaces.

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RANKINGS

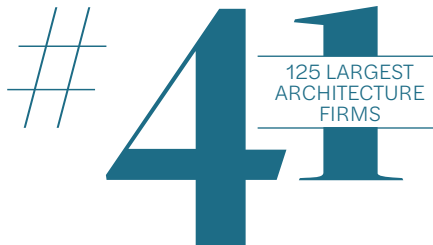
Puget Sound Business Journal's Architecture Firms in the Puget Sound Region List



Sacramento Business Journal's Architecture Firms in Sacramento Area List



San Jose Business Journal's Greater Bay Area Architecture Firms List



Engineering News-Record (ENR) 2026 Top Design Firms

