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The Little School's expanded campus encourages kids to get outside

By [JOURNAL STAFF](#)

The Little School, at 2812 116th Ave NE. in Bellevue, was founded in 1959 as an elementary school that “cultivates authentic learning in community and the natural world.” Located on 12.5 acres of forest land, collaboration, exploration, and getting outside are central to the curriculum. Just in time for the 2021-22 school year, work was completed on a significant campus expansion and improvement project designed by architect Studio Meng Strazzara.

The most prominent addition to the campus is the new Rivers Building — a single-story, 14,808-square-foot multipurpose facility that serves as a gateway to the campus. The new building includes an entrance lobby with a sitting area for parents and visitors, gender-inclusive restrooms, and a freshwater tank where children watch salmon grow from roe to smolt. A large multipurpose room is the primary place for activities. The building also features a new art studio, specialist classrooms, a teaching kitchen for light food prep, and an administration wing with staff offices, student services and conference rooms. All students, staff, parents, and visitors enter from either end of the lobby, which can fully open to the outdoors using operable glazed walls.

The expansion also includes 18 additional parking stalls, improved vehicle queuing, extended fire lanes, and significant landscaping by landscape architect Weisman Design Group. Meandering footpaths evoke a walk through the woods while improving circulation between buildings. Stump stools enhance outdoor gathering spaces and a new commons area rests in the heart of the campus. There is also a new small outdoor amphitheater with tiered seating. The amphitheater is made with inlaid bricks engraved with the names of donors who contributed to the project. Importantly, the landscape design retained mature trees and vegetation to reinforce the organic character of the school's natural setting. Renovations have also been made to existing Meadows, Woods and Cedars buildings.



Photos by Andrew Storey, LightCatcher Imagery [\[enlarge\]](#)

Extensive use of wood in the Rivers Building echoes the forests surrounding the campus.



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Designers worked with the Campus Planning Committee to gather feedback from questionnaires, surveys, community events, and staff workshops on the campus design.

The campus design is anchored in the values of the school, especially its focus on the environment and how getting outside can foster children's natural playfulness and curiosity.

“We were in the initial stages when one of the teachers slipped me a note that said ‘Play is the work of children.’ I kept it taped to my wall as a touchstone from design through construction,” project architect Kris Feliciano reflected. “All of this work was for the children...We created spaces where they can be themselves, explore, get dirty, learn, and play.”

The project team includes, The Little School, owner; Bayley Construction, general contractor; Coughlin Porter Lundeen, civil/structural engineer; BCE Engineers, MEP Engineer; AESI, geotechnical engineer; Wetherholt and Associates, envelope; SSA Acoustics, acoustics and SSNW, security systems.

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