

A.E.R.O. Therapeutic Center

Burbank, Illinois

Category: Institutional Educational

Project Data:

Square footage: 150,000
Capacity: 550 students, 375 staff members
Student ages: 3 to 22
Classrooms: 57
Site acreage: 12.75
Project cost: \$50 million
Completion: September 2023

Program Statement

For decades, A.E.R.O. Special Education Cooperative operated from an undersized facility. A nomadic and costly operations scheme had the organization frequently moving in and out of up to 15 rented classrooms at schools within the region.

The organization resolved to build a new flagship facility that would consolidate all programs at one location. The facility would have to meet the needs of its unique population, eliminate overcrowding, and improve efficiency.

The resulting A.E.R.O. Therapeutic Center serves special education students from 11 Chicago-area school districts. The 150,000-square-foot facility brings all 420 students and 375 employees (550 students and 400 employees max) under one roof in a central location. It creates a safe, nurturing environment with connections to daylight and nature for students with cognitive/physical disabilities and behavioral/emotional diversities.

IEd 101-01

The large number above represents the submission category code, the entry number and slide number (*Submission Code, Entry# - Slide#*)

Change ??? to the correct submission category code as indicated below:

Com – Commercial

Health – Healthcare

IEd – Institutional Educational

ICivic – Institutional Civic/Municipal

Rel – Religious

ResSin – Residential Single Family

ResMul – Residential Multi-Family

Pres – Preservation/Renovation

Int – Interior Architecture

Student – Student Work

UB – Unbuilt

IEd 101-02



Copper-colored metal panels and a metal canopy identify the main entry.

IEd 101-03

During planning, administrators shared concerns that the new school's large size could distress some A.E.R.O. students. The design responds by rotating classroom wings 10 degrees to not only lower costs by reducing square footage but also make the building appear much smaller.



IEd 101-04

First-floor plan. The lower level houses severely disabled students (ages three to 22) in one wing and students with varying degrees of disability in the other three.



IEd 101-05

Second-floor plan. Two wings on the second floor accommodate a program for students with behavior disorders. The remainder of the second floor hosts high school and post-high school students enrolled in programs dedicated to building critical academic and life skills.





IEd 101-06

The understated atrium features a staircase with perforated metal panels, a curving soffit, and a birch tree wall graphic.

Preferred slide

IEd 101-07

Metal canopies at each entry make the transition from vehicle to school less unsettling.



IEd 101-08

The building surrounds two internal courtyards, each designed to support the therapeutic needs of students in a safe, enclosed outdoor environment.

Preferred slide





IEd 101-09

A recess beneath the atrium's staircase creates a comfort zone for sensitive students without excluding them from the main space.

IEd 101-10

The wide corridors that embrace the courtyards create light-filled movement space supporting physical therapy.

Preferred slide



IEd 101-11

Corridor features such as uneven lighting, rounded corners, and perpendicular doors reduce the intimidation factor to improve transitions for students. Muted colors on the floors and walls help occupants navigate the building.



IEd 101-12

A harness system enables staff to move students throughout the multineeds classroom.





IEd 101-13

A quiet area in each first-floor classroom offers a place for students to compose themselves.

IEd 101-14

Translucent glass and a curving soffit and floor pattern separate the small first-floor cafeteria from the corridor.



IEd 101-15

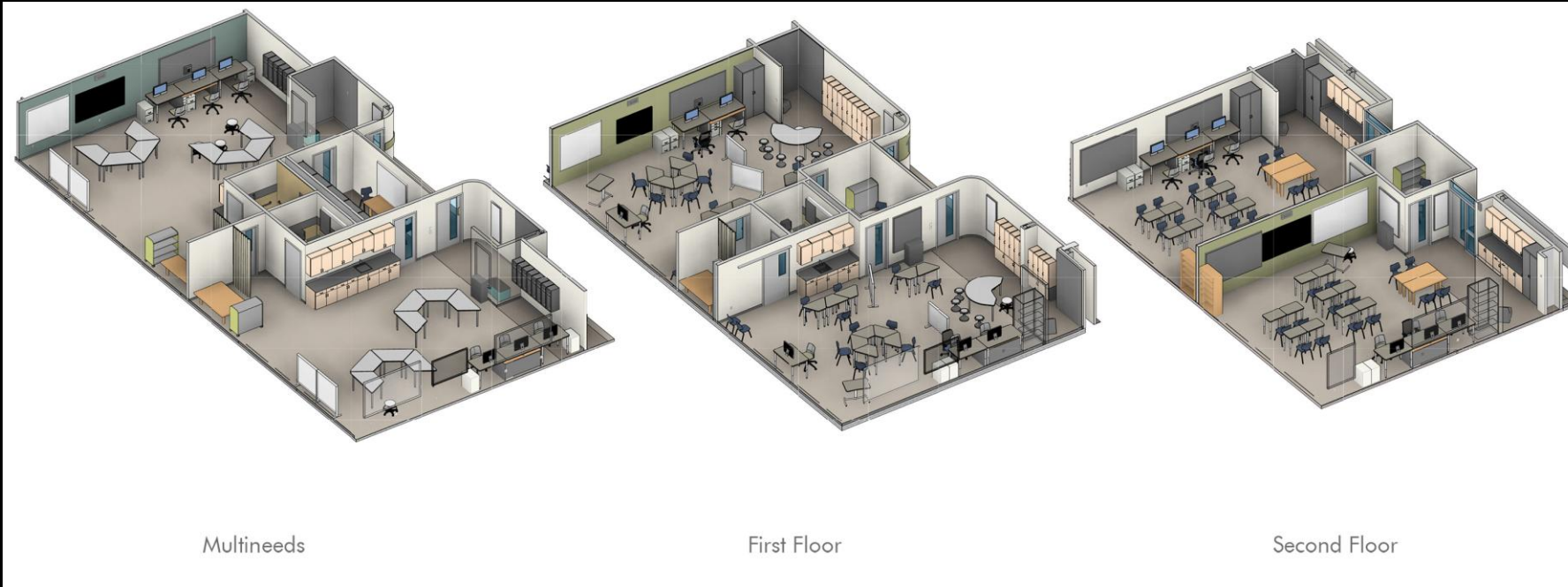
Sensory rooms on both floors enable staff to manipulate lighting and play soothing music for students with special needs. The spaces also have views to the central courtyards.

Preferred slide



IEEd 101-16

Flexible furniture makes every classroom adaptable for different needs. Teachers have access to shared group rooms for pull-out intervention, quiet areas for de-escalation, cubbies or lockers for student belongings, and staff workstations.



IEEd 101-17

Floor plan overlay shows how the six research-based principles that shaped the design appear throughout the facility.



Research-Driven Design for Neurodiversity

A research initiative explored the unique needs of neurodiverse students and resulted in six guidelines that drove design of the special education facility.



SENSORY LOADING

GOAL Create a “graduated” approach wherein students start with highly adapted spaces and progress to more typical spaces for gradual skill development.



LOWER LEVEL



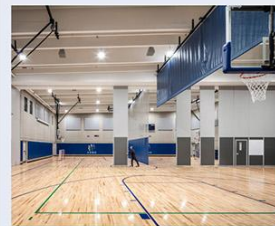
UPPER LEVEL

EXAMPLE Younger students start in the highly customized lower level, then “graduate” to the more traditional second level.



SEQUENCING AND TRANSITIONS

GOAL Ease transitions from one space to another.



EXAMPLE The gym divides into quadrants, each of which can be accessed from a different wing so certain student populations never encounter each other.



GEOGRAPHIC STRESSORS

GOAL Reduce the negative impact of locations where student stress tends to spike.



EXAMPLE Six entries reduce traffic and help quickly deliver students to their destinations. Metal canopies minimize the intimidation factor as students enter the building.



OVERLAPPING APPROACHES

GOAL Design multifunctional spaces that allow anxious students to find safety and security.



EXAMPLE A pocket beneath the main stair in the atrium provides a retreat space for distressed students.



BIOPHILIA

GOAL Embrace biophilia, or the innate human desire to connect with nature.



EXAMPLE Larger corridors that display centralized courtyards support physical therapy and movement-related activities.



CARE

GOAL Consider the well-being of teachers and other staff members.



EXAMPLE Each first-floor classroom has a quiet zone where teachers can calm distressed students without disrupting classroom activity.