



CASE STUDY

Making What's Old New Again

A historic high school becomes a modern learning environment

By CHANDRA V. NILEKANI, MRAIC, LEED AP

A national report by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door*, projects that recent years of high school population growth soon will be followed by declines in many states. This trend likely will force more educators to confront the same issue faced by Delaware's Brandywine School District—how to obtain maximum value for younger students by renovating a former high school.

Achieving this goal begins by identifying how existing resources in the building and its features can help support current educational goals and strategies with limited modification. Careful analysis and a measure of creativity helped do just that at Pierre S. duPont School in Wilmington, resulting in some unusual ways to enrich students' educational experience.

Population in progress

When P.S. duPont School opened in 1935, it was widely recognized for its distinctive design and wide array of subject areas. Originally built to serve 2,000 high school students, the school's population grew to 4,000 by the 1950s. But following steady declines, elementary students began moving into classroom space in 1978.

In 2006, after years of continuously evolving to meet the need of the changing student population, P.S. duPont School became the center of the school district's most expensive renovation in state history. The goal was to transform P.S. duPont School into a state-of-the-art educational facility for 900 students in elementary and early childhood education, while preserving its innate character and place on the National Historic Register. There were three key issues, however, that the district had to weigh before undertaking the renovation project:

- What educational resources could this historic structure provide now that could benefit present-day students, particularly given the age group?
- What were the most cost-effective, basic upgrades for creating a fully supportive environment in a flexible and durable structure?



Greg Sachs

Classrooms in P.S. duPont School feature original wood floors and cabinetwork.

- What was the best way to realize sustainable design benefits within funding limits?

These and many other questions about design and renovation strategies were an important part of the planning process, and resulted in a “new” school that meets the needs of administrators, teachers, and students.

Resources review

To start, the district produced a detailed analysis of all of the building's available spaces and their conditions, along with a compilation of historical records and artifacts. This information was reviewed in tandem with new program requirements to identify opportunities and constraints. Key decisions included:

- Scaling down the building's volume for the elementary age population by dividing the upper three floors into grade-level clusters with central gathering places.
- Providing a separate space—with its own entrance and identity—on the ground floor for early childhood education by converting what was formerly an automotive repair shop.
- Transforming the original student bookstore into a history room available to students, alumni, and visitors as a repository of historical materials.
- Retaining the historic character and look of the original building while also upgrading technological components, including power outlets, computers, projectors, and wireless data, in non-obtrusive ways.

The district also weighed its needs, priorities, and associated costs as it developed an upgrade program to resolve the most pressing issues. Upgrades included: new mechanical, plumbing, electrical, and communication infrastructure throughout the building; masonry, window, and roofing repairs; a new security system; full life-safety and accessibility code compliance; and special cleaning of intricate exterior stonework and interior patterned terrazzo.

Sustainable strategies

The renovation of P.S. duPont School took all affordable strategies for sustainability into account. Such strategies included:

- Reuse of existing wood floors in many areas.
- Reuse of wood from existing cabinetwork for tackboard and marker board trim as well as trim at corridor lockers.
- Removal of recently added ceilings to open up original skylights and attic light wells.

Last fall, Brandywine School District unveiled the new and improved P.S. duPont School and received positive reactions from students, parents, and educators. Additionally, the school's project data is under review for LEED certification. ■

Chandra V. Nilekani, MRAIC, LEED AP, is a principal with ABHA Architects. Reach her at cnilekani@abha.com.