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CSO Architects Nears Completion on New Tri-North Middle School

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A FLEXIBLE & COST-EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENT

CSO Architects Partners with R.E. Dimond Engineering to Create a State-of-the-Art Facility for Tri-North Middle School



CSO Architects is nearing completion on a cutting edge new educational facility called Tri-North Middle School in Bloomington, Indiana. In collaboration with Monroe County Community Schools (MCCS), R.E. Dimond Engineering, and an educational consulting company

from Chicago called Brainspaces, CSO is developing a state-of-the-art building that provides flexible and cost-friendly learning environments to seventh and eighth grade students. Construction on this new building is more than halfway complete and will be finished by May of 2021.

A Need for Improvements

Tri-North Middle School currently operates in a building that was constructed almost 70 years ago. As mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems from past decades started becoming obsolete, MCCS requested that CSO do a facility assessment on around 50 buildings within the

district to determine which buildings were in most need of improvements.

“From that facility assessment, the district determined which schools were of greatest need and Tri-North made its way to the top of the list,” said Brent Hite, CSO Associate Principal and Project Manager for this development.



When looking at the site initially, Hite said his team faced challenges due to the prominent slope that the old building was constructed on. This significant grade change made the school barely accessible, so CSO and MCCA ultimately decided to construct an entirely new building.

Hite said newly constructed educational facilities in this community are typically used for the next 50 to 70 years, so it was important for MCCA to invest a large amount of capital in this project to ensure the sustainability of their new buildings.

“You can renovate the school at a lesser cost,” said Chris Ciolli, Director of Facili-

ties for MCCA. “But when it’s all said and done, are you going to be happy with the end product and is it going to get us where we need to be for the next 50-plus years?”

The decision was ultimately made by MCCA to construct an entirely new facility instead of renovating the old building. In an effort to create efficient

learning spaces for Tri-North students, Hite said his design team worked closely with Brainspaces and MCCA to determine how the building’s design will affect a student’s ability to learn.

“When you survey students about where they learn best, the last answer you’re going to get is a desk in a classroom,” Hite said.



“They’re going to show you a picture of their bed or their home, so we’re trying to create environments that are conducive for kids to learn.”

CSO accomplished this task by implementing a number of design features aimed specifically at improving the student experience. One of these features is an open media center that sits directly in the middle of the build-

ing. For Hite, this is one of the most interesting features of the new school because it focuses on more than just teaching.

“We’re really trying to create a learning hub for students and create a space where they want to hang out,” Hite said. “There’s no reason students should have to go to Starbucks after school when we have a space in the school for them to hang out.”

Tailoring the Design to Fit a Need

Hite also said that Tri-North’s new building will include sustainable design features like a solar array on the roof of the gymnasium and a geothermal well system to help heat and cool the building throughout the year. He said these design choices, in addition to the open media center, come as a direct response

to the wishes outlined by the district. “That was really driven by the superintendent wanting to create space where kids want to be and where they’re comfortable,” Hite said. “A year from now, when you can walk around the building and see it, you’ll really be able to tell where there was thoughtful consideration on how to make these spaces work for the most students possible.”



For both CSO and MCCS, it was important for the new building to reflect the needs of students and teachers. Ciolli said during the design process, CSO met with each teaching department at the school and asked questions about how teachers want their classrooms to look. He said CSO asked every department about their curriculum and class sizes and used the input from

educators to help guide the design process. “We’re not just handing them a building saying, ‘Here, go look what we did,’” said Ciolli. “It’s ‘Here, go look at what we all did together.’”

A specific concern expressed by MCCS to Hite was the need for a performing arts center. As a community, Bloomington values the arts more than some other cities,

so Hite wanted to provide the school with an environment that suits their needs.

Building a modern performing arts center is quite expensive, however, and they often lay dormant for most of the day when students are in class. To solve this issue, Hite worked with MCCS and Brainspaces to design a large space that serves multiple purposes. The new Tri-North building

features an auditorium that, along with a large stage, includes retractable theater seating. Seats in this room can be pulled back to reveal a flat floor space that can be used for a variety of purposes throughout the day. This multi-use room is a cost-effective solution, and it allows the school to regularly use a space that would otherwise be vacant for most of the day.



“This is an example of us taking the ideas, needs, and desires of the educators and figuring out how to make them work as multi-purpose and as flexible as possible,” Hite said.

CSO’s Value to the Project

CSO frequently works with schools across Indiana to improve their educational facilities. With projects like Brownsburg High School, Willow Lake

Elementary School, and the Imagination Lab in their portfolio, architects from CSO take pride in their firm’s ability to design creative and effective learning environments.

“I think CSO has established itself as one of the more progressive education firms, and we’re very good at listening and translating ideas from educators into built-in environments or space,” Hite said.

Their expertise in designing educational facilities has proved valuable to the school and its district as the project continues.

“CSO was more than accommodating when trying to think of unique ways to keep everybody on a level playing field but also satisfied,” Ciolli said. “It was pretty cool to see that they valued their input.”

After working with so many schools to build facilities that meet specific

needs, architects from CSO know how to design learning environments that reflect the wishes of those who use the building the most.

“Often times, other firms come with this ‘We’re the experts, we’re going to provide what you need,’ said Hite. “The educators, teachers, and administrators we meet with – they’re the experts, and we’re here to try to make their vision a reality. I think that’s what sets us apart.”