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Volume XXXII, No. 7

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE COALITION FOR ADEQUATE SCHOOL HOUSING

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Feather River Academy

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Feather River Academy: Hardship Funding Builds A Learning Village

Sutter County once housed its at-risk 7-12th graders in aging portable classrooms, separated from other school campuses - an environment more reflective of the expulsion hearings that brought the troubled students to Feather River Academy, rather than a contemporary learning environment that could further their educational and life skills. The Sutter County Superintendent of Schools Office changed all that with a decisive commitment to build a new, energized learning village for Feather River Academy's students. This continuation school is anything but low-profile – the County Superintendent's office chose a site immediately adjacent to their administrative offices. A wave of the "facilities magic wand" – and three years of focused planning and construction - built a secure, exemplary school that promotes learning for its students in every indoor and outdoor space; truly a rags to riches story.

County educators designated this project's mission statement succinctly: "Learning in Action". A4E expressed this purpose throughout the project site, dispersing the 24,800 sq. ft. building

program across its 3.9 acres. Following Sutter County's inspired lead, the project's "learning village" design dynamically intermingles outdoor and indoor learning spaces, athletic areas and classrooms, classrooms and administrative offices, recreation areas and gardens. The Multi-Purpose Building takes on an active, contemporary personality with an outdoor stage and a cyber-classroom in its footprint. "Active site design" continues as the basketball court juts out into the Quad - directly outside the principal's office - and the largest recreational field is centrally framed by the Administration Building, the Special Education Building and the Multi-Purpose's Building's amphitheater. Constrained by a modest budget due to State Hardship Funding, this campus takes advantage of every opportunity to engage its students.

Although the State of California has often limited community schools' funding because of their typically "portable" facility status, a concerted effort on the part of the County Superintendent and A4E insured (after many Sacramento visits) that this project received

every dollar it possibly could. Careful categorization of each building program element, in accordance with the State's complex funding matrix, put thousands of additional dollars into action for this unique and much-needed project. A partnership with the accomplished professionals at Carter-Kelly Construction brought an initially over-budget project cost into alignment with FRA's requirements, while including nearly every original design feature in the constructed campus.

Feather River Academy evokes an active approach to learning in every program element. Arriving at the site, the most striking sculptural features to attract the visitor's eye are the building roofs – folding, rising and falling, like the hills and mountains behind them. The roof folds extend into the interior spaces, expressing that active message indoors as well. The six-classroom Quad surrounds a courtyard, anchored at one end by a greenhouse, fish pond, and trellised activity/garden area; the



opposite “anchor spaces” are made up of the basketball court and Administration Building. Roll-up doors cause one wall in each classroom to disappear, connecting indoor and outdoor learning activities and taking full advantage of the temperate Northern California climate.

Building materials, too, were considered part of the action. Durable and economical components reflect a color palette that blends modern and traditional choices. Mixed colors and textures of concrete block display a large, graphic pattern appropriate to the outdoor scale and dramatic natural features backdrop. Ceramic tiles and glazed block provide intense color, with a full-height mosaic highlighting local landmark “The Sutter Buttes” on the Administration Building. Metal roofs and wall panels blend agricultural and contemporary themes, in multiplied combination with glass block and wood siding. Antique farm implements placed throughout FRA’s campus were donated by local residents and further highlight the area’s agricultural heritage and campus “action” theme. Colored and textured glasses in selected window



groupings provide additional visual interest. Building systems and features contribute to the energy of the campus: outdoor “Paths of Knowledge” demonstrate geometry concepts, the metric and English measuring systems, planetary movements, and the life cycle of FRA’s mascot – the crawfish; a glass sink in the cyber classroom demonstrates gravity through water’s flow, and the release of gas pressure via a glass vent pipe.

Feather River Academy’s students were a vital part of the campus’ design process. Interactive workshops invited their ideas and collaborative energies, as they defined program elements and amenities. The students were clear: nothing “old school” about their school - no red brick buildings with small, square windows. It was their intent that Feather River Academy be representative of a contemporary approach to education. Throughout the workshop process, the efforts of one particular student stood out. Though he had no formal architectural training, his input concerning spatial relationships and scale conveyed a considerable innate talent. His concepts, developed further as he worked with A4E staff for a few weeks in our offices, helped to shape the final design.

The Sutter County Superintendent of Schools and County Board of Education put into action what some organizations only speak of – they reached out to serve their at-risk students and backed that effort with an investment of creative and financial resources. Despite hardship funding status, they built a superior learning environment. “Learning in action” is, for the Feather River Academy and Sutter County, both an ideal and a reality achieved. 

