Essex Elementary School Educational Program

Manchester Essex Regional School District

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Introduction

The educational program at MERSD is guided by a shared philosophy that places students at the center of all decision-making and instructional design. Our approach reflects a deep belief in cultivating curiosity, integrity, and intellectual engagement while nurturing the social-emotional well-being essential to learning. We value inclusivity, collaboration, and equity—ensuring every student is seen, supported, and challenged to reach their fullest potential.

Our classrooms are communities of active learners where authentic experiences connect knowledge, skills, and character. Instruction emphasizes inquiry, creativity, and problem-solving, encouraging students to think critically and act responsibly as empathetic global citizens. Through strong partnerships among educators, families, and the broader community, we strive to create learning environments that honor the uniqueness of each child while preparing them to thrive in a complex and interconnected world.

MERSD proudly works to educate each child from his/her own readiness level in order to facilitate the intellectual, social and emotional growth process. There are many measures of success, and we are committed to helping each individual child achieve his/her potential. In addition to a robust core curriculum that balances high expectations for student achievement with the needs of the whole child, we offer specialty programming and a variety of learning opportunities, such as: elementary world language; Integrated Pre-Kindergarten; specialized learning programs for students with dyslexia, autism spectrum disorders, and developmental delays; STEM coursework in coding, engineering, project based environmental studies, FIRST Robotics, Project Adventure; award winning arts and music programs; and, state champion athletic teams.

In collaboration with Mike Pirollo from My Learning Place Integrated Design, Inc., MERSD engaged in a two-day Educational Visioning workshop. Through this process, teachers, community members, and administrators gathered to learn how the organization of physical space within a school can support our educational goals both now and in the future. Through a series of collaborative exercises, we uncovered common themes that will serve as guiding principles for our design team, JCJ Architecture. These design principles support our district's core values and commitment to active, student-centered learning—promoting collaboration and creativity, and empowering students to be the doers and leaders of their own learning. They reflect our goal of creating a learning environment that captures the energy of children, supports multiple modes of engagement, and provides flexible pathways for students and

teachers to work together. It is our hope that the design process will yield an educational facility that is timeless in style but flexible and adaptable to the ever-evolving curriculum and instructional program, while continuing to serve as a hub of the community with spaces for small, large, and whole-school gatherings.

Grade and School Configuration

The Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) provides a high-quality public education for students from the towns of Manchester-by-the-Sea and Essex, serving approximately 1,190 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 during the 2024–2025 school year. The district is organized as a two-town regional system with two elementary schools—Essex Elementary School and Manchester Memorial Elementary School, that feed into a shared Middle and High School campus. This configuration allows MERSD to maintain strong community connections at the elementary level while providing a cohesive, unified educational experience for all students as they progress through the district.
Regional Agreement Requirements for Grade Configuration

The District operates under a Regional Agreement between the towns of Manchester-by-the-Sea and Essex, which establishes several requirements that directly influence grade-level configuration and facility planning. The Agreement mandates that the District shall provide a comprehensive Kindergarten through Grade 12 education program and maintain at least one elementary school facility in each member town. It further guarantees that all pupils in elementary grades—defined as at minimum Kindergarten through Grade 4—must be provided the opportunity to attend school in the town in which they reside. While the Regional School Committee holds authority to designate grade spans beyond this minimum, any change that alters longstanding grade assignments or materially affects the programmatic use of facilities requires formal Committee action and, in many cases, amendment of the Regional Agreement. Amendments require majority approval in both member towns through Town Meeting, ensuring transparency and broad community consent. Collectively, these provisions affirm MERSD's historical neighborhood school model and provide a framework for considering future adjustments based on educational need, enrollment patterns, and facility capacity. (Appendix: *MERSD Regional Agreement*)

Current Elementary Configuration

Essex Elementary School (EES) serves students from the town of Essex in Grades Kindergarten through Grade 5. During the 2024–2025 school year, EES enrolled approximately 215 students across these grade levels. Students in Essex who require integrated preschool programming are served through districtwide early childhood programs located at Manchester Memorial Elementary School.

The Educational Program described in this document is based on a PreK–5 configuration at Essex Elementary School, which aligns with current grade span organization and instructional practices. Where applicable, the plan identifies considerations that would differ under alternate configuration scenarios.

EES operates under a single-classroom teacher model, in which one teacher provides core instruction across all subjects, supported by a collaborative team of specialists in reading, mathematics, special education, and social-emotional learning. Instructional design is grounded in a student-centered, inclusive approach, ensuring that all children learn in environments that promote academic rigor, creativity, and belonging.

Inclusion is a cornerstone of the MERSD philosophy. Students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment, receiving push-in supports within general education classrooms whenever possible and pull-out instruction when individualized services are required. This model reflects the district's belief in the power of collaborative, flexible teaching structures that enable differentiation and maximize access to the full curriculum for every learner.

Historical Context and Task Force Findings

The district's current planning process builds on extensive prior study and community engagement. In response to the aging condition of both Essex and Memorial Elementary Schools, MERSD conducted a Facilities Needs Assessment (Habeeb & Associates, 2013) and subsequently formed the Elementary Configuration Task Force in Fall 2013. The Task Force—comprised of residents, parents, educators, and town officials—was charged with exploring whether the district should maintain its neighborhood school model or transition to a unified elementary configuration.

The group reviewed architectural analyses, demographic data, operational costs, and stakeholder feedback through surveys, interviews, and community forums across both towns. Three primary options were studied:

- **Option A:** Renovate and/or expand each school while maintaining neighborhood K–5 schools.
- **Option B:** Create an early education center (PreK–2) at one site and a Grades 3–5 school at the other.
- **Option C:** Construct a single, unified elementary school for all district students on a new site.

After months of analysis and outreach, the Task Force concluded that the neighborhood school model best meets the educational and community needs of Manchester and Essex. Key themes emphasized by stakeholders included:

- Neighborhood K–5 schools serve as community anchors, promoting civic engagement and walkability.
- Smaller schools allow for stronger relationships between staff, students, and families, supporting academic and social-emotional growth.

- Families expressed a strong preference for local access to elementary education within their town of residence.
- While operational efficiencies were discussed, research and peer-district comparisons revealed no significant cost savings associated with consolidation.

These findings, presented to the School Committee in 2014, continue to guide district planning for facility improvement and educational continuity. The conclusions of the Elementary Configuration Task Force remain foundational to MERSD's current Feasibility Study, affirming the educational and community value of maintaining two neighborhood-based elementary schools. (*Appendix: Elementary Task Force Recommendations*)

Configuration Constraints Defined by the Regional Agreement

The Regional Agreement establishes specific requirements that must be upheld in any future facility or grade-span scenario:

- **Local Access to Elementary Education (Minimum K–4)**
  Students in elementary grades—at minimum Grades K–4—must be guaranteed the opportunity to attend school in the town in which they reside.
- **Requirement to Maintain Elementary Schools in Both Towns**
  The District must operate and maintain at least one elementary school facility in each member community.
- **Assignment Flexibility for Specialized Programming**
  Students with special needs may be served outside their home school as required to meet individualized services.
- **Location of Shared Facilities**
  Any schools serving students from both towns must be located within the geographical limits of the District.
- **Amendment Process for Changes to Grade Configuration**
  Material changes require a Regional Agreement amendment, approved by majority vote at Town Meeting in both Manchester and Essex.

These constraints ensure that grade-span planning remains aligned with statutory requirements, governance structures, and community expectations.

Feasibility Study and Configuration Options

As part of the ongoing MSBA Feasibility Study, MERSD is revisiting potential grade-level configurations and site options to ensure that long-term solutions align with both educational goals and fiscal responsibility. The current options under consideration build upon the foundation established by the 2013–2014 Task Force:

Feasibility Study Essex Elementary Student Enrollment Configurations to be Studied		
Grades PreK–3 165 Students *Sited in Essex w/ Grades 4 & 5 integrated into Memorial*	Grades PreK–5 250 Students *Sited in Essex*	Grades PreK–5 515 students *Sited at Manchester Memorial with all Essex & Manchester students in one school*
SC Program Vote / Redistricting		SC Program Vote / Redistricting
SC Vote to Amend Regional Agreement		SC Vote to Amend Regional Agreement
Essex & Manchester Town Meeting Vote to Approve Regional Agreement Amendment		Essex & Manchester Town Meeting Vote to Approve Regional Agreement Amendment
Essex & Manchester Town Meeting Full Project Vote & Debt Exclusion Vote		

1. **PreK–3 Configuration (Essex-based)**
    - Approximately 165 students housed in Essex.
    - Grades 4 and 5 transition to Manchester Memorial.
    - Divides Essex elementary students across two sites.
    - Requires School Committee vote, Regional Agreement amendment, and approval in both towns.

Under a PreK–3 configuration, Essex students would transition to Manchester Memorial beginning in Grade 4. To accommodate this shift, Memorial would require four Grade 4 classrooms (currently three) and five Grade 5 classrooms, necessitating the reclamation of three general classrooms presently used by other grade levels, shared instructional spaces, or programs. In this model, the project room may need to be repurposed for world language instruction or special education services. Full implementation would require the utilization of approximately 16–18 general education classrooms at Memorial, reducing scheduling flexibility and limiting the school's ability to absorb future enrollment variability.

Under this scenario, the District would need to split both the ACE and RISE specialized programs between buildings, placing the lower elementary cohorts at Essex and the upper elementary cohorts at Memorial. This division decreases programmatic efficiency, reduces opportunities for staff collaboration, and introduces scheduling and supervision challenges. Co-located staffing, shared therapeutic spaces, and interdisciplinary collaboration are integral to effective delivery of services; splitting programs diminishes these advantages and increases operational complexity.

While core instructional practices would remain consistent, shifting Essex students at Grade 4 introduces additional complexity for school culture, family engagement, and social-emotional development. Memorial's curriculum and community programming are grounded in

partnerships with local agencies and civic organizations, and successful integration would require intentional planning to support belonging and continuity of experience. Typically, peer communities merge in Grade 6 as students transition to middle school. Advancing this convergence to Grade 4 compresses developmental readiness and would necessitate programming to support relationship-building, family onboarding, and shared identity development.

Splitting Essex's elementary cohort across two buildings also introduces operational burdens. Transportation needs increase, daily drop-off and pick-up become more complex for families with multiple children in different grade spans, and scheduling coordination becomes more challenging. While extended-day calendars and specials schedules can be managed equitably, daily logistics represent a meaningful shift in family experience.

2. **PreK–5 Configuration (Essex-based)**
    - Approximately 250 students housed in Essex.
    - Maintains the current neighborhood school model.

This configuration preserves existing instructional structures and maintains neighborhood school identity. Students remain connected to their community for the full elementary span, supporting social-emotional development, family engagement, and continuity of services. Grade-level staffing remains co-located, supporting collaborative planning, interdisciplinary teaming, and effective implementation of specialized programming.

3. **Unified PreK–5 Model (Manchester Memorial Site)**
    - Approximately 515 district elementary students in a single expanded building.
    - Requires multiple Regional Agreement amendments, dual Town Meeting votes, and debt exclusion approval.

Of the alternative proposals, full consolidation at Manchester Memorial aligns most directly with existing program delivery and maintains the current PreK–5 grade structure. This model would provide access to all grade-level teams for collaborative instructional work and support coherence in curriculum implementation. However, associated impacts include increased transportation for Essex families, concentrated traffic on Lincoln Street, and the relocation of tennis courts, which are used regularly for both school and community programming. Neighborhood circulation patterns and site capacity would require further study to ensure safety and accessibility.

Because this option would create a single elementary school serving approximately 515 students, the leadership team would require the addition of an assistant principal to support instructional leadership, staff evaluation, student services coordination, and supervision of daily

operations. The scale of the program would also increase the number of classroom teachers and related service providers at this site, necessitating expanded common planning spaces and collaboration areas.

Should this configuration be pursued, the District would need to develop comprehensive culture-building strategies to support the merger of two school communities. Subsequent District Improvement Plan cycles (particularly 2028–2031) would prioritize belonging, transition support, and community integration. School Improvement Plans would correspondingly emphasize climate, communication, and conditions for learning as students and families adapt to a unified environment. Identifying a leadership team experienced in organizational change will be essential.

A significant design challenge associated with this configuration is the need to maintain the neighborhood or cluster instructional model in a facility originally constructed to serve only one town. Grade-level teams would need to be grouped in multi-classroom "neighborhoods," supported by adjacent small-group rooms, breakout spaces, and shared instructional resources. While this is feasible, it poses complexity within the current footprint. Alternatively, space could be organized into lower-school (PreK–2) and upper-school (3–5) wings if this structure better aligns with an addition or renovation strategy.

District Core Values and Strategic Alignment

All configuration planning aligns with MERSD's core values:

- **Student-Centered Learning** – placing students at the heart of decision making.
- **Student Achievement** – maintaining high expectations and equitable access to rigorous learning.
- **Equity and Inclusion** – fostering belonging and opportunity for all learners.
- **Family and Community Partnerships** – engaging parents and towns as active partners in student success.
- **Responsible Use of Resources** – ensuring fiscal stewardship and long-term sustainability.

These principles ensure that facilities planning reflects both educational priorities and the character of the two-town district. *(Appendix: Strategic Plan Overview & District Improvement Plan)*

Space Implications: The grade configuration selected will directly shape the design and organization of learning environments at Essex Elementary School. Regardless of the final model, the facility must support flexibility, collaboration, and inclusion across grade levels.

Class Size Policies

The Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) adheres to the philosophy that small class size is essential to supporting student-centered, hands-on, and differentiated instruction. Research and district

experience have consistently demonstrated that maintaining small, balanced class sizes enables teachers to build strong relationships with students, tailor instruction to individual learning needs, and promote active engagement in the learning process.

To support this philosophy, the MERSD School Committee has established class size benchmarks that serve as the foundation for scheduling, staffing, and facility planning. These benchmarks ensure equitable access to resources and consistency across grade levels while reflecting the distinct developmental needs of students as they progress from early childhood through the upper elementary years.

MERSD Elementary Class Size Benchmarks

Grade Level	Class Size Benchmark
Kindergarten	17–19
Grade 1	17–19
Grade 2	18–20
Grade 3	18–20
Grade 4	19–22
Grade 5	19–22

These benchmarks are used as the first building block of the scheduling process, guiding annual decisions about staffing, classroom allocation, and cohort organization. MERSD's scheduling and enrollment practices are designed to maintain educational quality and consistency even as small shifts in population occur.

Developmental Design Alignment

The district's class size philosophy directly informs the educational and architectural design of its elementary facilities. Learning environments are organized around three developmental groupings:

- **PreK–K:** Classrooms support exploration, play, and growing independence through flexible open space, zones for small-group activity, and safe, visible connections to outdoor learning areas.
- **Grades 1–3:** Classrooms emphasize active, connected learning environments with flexible groupings that encourage collaboration, literacy development, and foundational academic skills.
- **Grades 4–5:** Spaces are designed to support increased independence, problem-solving, and leadership opportunities through collaborative work zones and cross-grade interaction.

Planning and Flexibility

Essex Elementary School maintains twelve core K–5 academic classrooms within the elementary program, with two sections per grade as a baseline for planning and an occasional need to add a third section due to enrollment bubbles. Grade-level enrollment patterns fluctuate annually due to demographic variation, resulting in cohorts that, at times, may require three sections. These "bubble

classes" advance through the grades together, creating potential variability in the number of classrooms needed at each level.

While enrollment can fluctuate from year to year, MERSD's historical patterns demonstrate the importance of maintaining sufficient core classrooms to preserve consistent cohort sizes as students advance through the grades. The design of the new facility must therefore include enough general classrooms to accommodate occasional enrollment bubbles without exceeding local class-size benchmarks or disrupting instructional groupings. Although MSBA space guidelines provide a baseline allowance for classroom count, maintaining one additional core classroom beyond the recommended minimum is necessary to ensure adherence to local class-size expectations, cohort continuity, and equitable access to high-quality instruction.

This additional instructional capacity supports master schedule efficiency, prevents oversized sections in bubble years, and allows specialist and intervention services to be scheduled equitably across grade levels. Moreover, it strengthens the district's ability to implement a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) by increasing flexibility for small-group instruction, targeted intervention, and temporary instructional groupings without displacing existing classroom programming.
By aligning the facility design with educational expectations, MERSD will ensure that class-size benchmarks remain attainable and that every student continues to experience a personalized, engaging, and developmentally responsive learning environment throughout their elementary experience.

School Scheduling and Methodology

Essex Elementary School (EES) operates on a five-day schedule designed to provide consistent instructional time, predictable routines, and equitable access to enrichment and student support services. The schedule is structured around clearly defined instructional blocks that preserve uninterrupted time for core academic learning while ensuring students have access to specialists, movement, and social-emotional development opportunities.

Daily and Weekly Structure

The student day runs from 8:25 a.m. to 2:55 p.m. (a total of 6 hours and 30 minutes, or 390 instructional minutes). The schedule ensures balanced time across all subjects while allowing teachers flexibility to adjust pacing and grouping based on student needs.
Each grade level includes six 45-minute specialist blocks per week, increasing to seven when World Language is offered. Specialist subjects—Wellness/Physical Education, Visual Arts, Music, Library/Research, Technology/Engineering, and World Language—are strategically placed to support both student enrichment and teacher collaboration.

Scheduling Methodology

The EES schedule is built upon core instructional blocks that guarantee sufficient time on learning in literacy, mathematics, science, and history/social studies. These blocks are protected in the master schedule to maintain instructional continuity across the school and alignment across the district.
Once instructional blocks are established, specialist periods, lunch, recess, and common planning times are layered in to create a cohesive daily rhythm. This approach allows for sustained, high-quality instruction and predictable transitions for students.

All classrooms in grades PreK–5 are self-contained, giving teachers flexibility to extend or shorten lessons based on formative assessment and student engagement. This design supports MERSD's philosophy of student-centered, differentiated learning, emphasizing responsive teaching and strong relationships.

Student Support

MERSD implements a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to ensure that all students receive proactive, evidence-based instruction and intervention. MTSS provides a comprehensive structure that offers a continuum of supports organized into three tiers of increasing intensity:

- Tier 1: High-quality, differentiated core instruction for all students.
- Tier 2: Short-term, targeted support to address academic and social emotional skill gaps within or outside the classroom setting.
- Tier 3: Intensive, frequent, and explicit focused interventions for students in need of more support and instruction.

Interventions are designed to be delivered within or adjacent to the classroom by teachers and interventionists using research-based programs aligned to student data. Continuous progress monitoring informs instructional adjustments and ensures timely, responsive support.

Currently, the physical layout of the existing Essex Elementary School limits the efficiency of this system. Students often travel across the building to access shared intervention rooms or work at tables within active classrooms. These settings can create distractions, reduce instructional time, and isolate intervention from core learning routines.

The new facility will address these limitations by incorporating localized breakout spaces adjacent to classrooms. These areas will:

- Bring supports directly to students, minimizing transition time;
- Normalize small-group instruction and flexible learning for all students, including those receiving MTSS, MLL, and special education services;
- Provide private, well-equipped environments for targeted instruction and assessment; and
- Strengthen collaboration between classroom teachers, specialists, and support staff.

This approach reflects MERSD's commitment to inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning environments that respond to individual student needs.

Illustrative Weekly Time on Learning

Content Area	Approximate Weekly Time Allocation
Social-Emotional Learning & Morning Meeting	5 × 15 min
Literacy (Reading, Writing, Word Study)	K–2: 5 × 90 min + 4 × 25 min 3–5: 5 × 90 min
Mathematics	5 × 75 min
Science / Social Studies	K–2: 5 × 45 min 3–5: 4 × 70 min + 1 × 45 min
Specialists	6 × 45 min (7 when World Language is offered)
Lunch / Recess	5 × 45 min

Specialist Programming

Students participate weekly in a range of specialist classes that enrich the academic program and foster creativity, movement, and inquiry:

- Wellness / Physical Education (twice weekly)
- Visual Arts
- Music
- World Language (when offered)
- Library / Research
- Technology / Engineering
- Instrumental Music (individual or small-group pull-outs)

Instructional Coherence and Collaboration

The EES schedule balances student learning needs with teacher collaboration. By aligning specialist blocks across grade levels, teams share common planning periods to analyze data, coordinate MTSS supports, and plan interdisciplinary instruction.
This structure reflects MERSD's strategic priorities of Authentic Learning, Social-Emotional Wellness, and Inclusive Culture, ensuring that daily practice embodies the district's mission of rigorous, responsive, and relationship-based instruction.

Space Implications: The EES scheduling model and instructional philosophy have direct implications for the design of the new facility. The emphasis on protected instructional blocks, flexible grouping, and integrated student supports requires spaces that are adaptable, interconnected, and conducive to both focused and collaborative learning.

Grade-level classroom neighborhoods should be organized to promote seamless transitions between instructional settings. Each cluster of classrooms should include:

- Small breakout rooms for Tier 2 and Tier 3 MTSS interventions, English Learner instruction, and small-group special education support;
- Shared collaboration areas that support flexible grouping, cross-class projects, and team teaching;
- Teacher planning and prep spaces located within the neighborhood to foster collaboration among general educators, specialists, and interventionists;
- Visibility and accessibility that enable supervision, inclusion, and smooth student movement between spaces.

Specialist areas such as Art, Music, Wellness/PE, and Technology/Engineering should be located to balance student access, acoustic separation, and cross-disciplinary connections. Their adjacency to grade-level neighborhoods will reduce transition time while maintaining dedicated zones for creativity, movement, and exploration.

By incorporating localized intervention spaces and shared instructional zones, the new Essex Elementary design will reduce lost learning time, strengthen inclusion, and create a learning environment that fully embodies MERSD's vision for student-centered, equitable, and future-ready education.

Teaching Methodology & Structure

MERSD blends progressive pedagogy with time-tested practices. Instruction is differentiated based on formative assessment and delivered through whole-group, small-group, and individual learning with "anywhere, anytime" technology access. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) provide timely interventions and extensions across academic and social-emotional domains. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices ensure equitable access.

The Manchester Essex Elementary Schools employ a broad range of teaching methodologies that balance progressive practices with proven traditional approaches. Our curriculum and instructional program are designed to support our mission, vision, and core values.

Organization of the School

Essex Elementary School is organized to support student-centered, inclusive, and developmentally responsive learning experiences. The current model is structured around grade-level classroom cohorts, with students grouped by grade and supported by classroom teachers, specialists, and student services staff. As the district plans for the renovation or replacement of the building, the future vision shifts toward multi-grade learning neighborhoods that create more flexible pathways for collaboration, targeted instruction, and peer-to-peer interaction. These neighborhoods are designed to harness the natural energy of young learners and promote student agency by supporting a full range of engagement types—student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher—within a purposefully interconnected environment.

Primary student learning experiences are organized within two instructional wings: a PreK–3 wing supporting early childhood and early elementary development, and a Grades 4–5 wing supporting upper-elementary readiness for middle school. Each wing is intentionally designed to create space for small-group collaboration, quiet individualized work, and whole-school community experiences, allowing students to experience both intimate learning environments and shared celebrations that build belonging.

Within these wings, learning neighborhoods will serve as shared environments that extend instruction beyond single classrooms. These spaces will include visually connected commons areas, flexible furnishings, and transparent sightlines that allow teachers to supervise while enabling students to engage in hands-on, project-based learning. Neighborhoods support cross-grade partnerships, integrated service delivery, and access to community partners—all of which align with the district's instructional vision and project goal of creating environments where students take active ownership of their learning through meaningful collaboration.

To strengthen access to academic and social-emotional support, the new design integrates small-group rooms and breakout spaces directly adjacent to classrooms. These areas support MTSS intervention, multilingual learner instruction, special education services, quiet testing environments, and teacher-student conferencing. This configuration reduces transition time, increases privacy for assessment, and keeps students meaningfully connected to Tier 1 instruction. It also normalizes flexible movement and access to support, reinforcing instructional equity.

The school is led by a Principal and supported by an Administrative Assistant, School Psychologist, Special Education Team Chair, School Adjustment Counselor, and School Nurse. This interdisciplinary team coordinates academic, behavioral, and mental-health supports and serves as a central resource for students, staff, and families. Locating these roles within a shared office suite in the new facility will enhance communication, privacy, and timely response to student needs.

Staff collaboration is supported through common planning time three times per month, cyclical data meetings, and shared prep periods. These structures enable teams to analyze student learning, align instructional strategies, and adjust supports based on data. Teachers, specialists, and interventionists collaborate to design flexible grouping structures and enrichment cycles that promote personalized learning.

The new Essex Elementary School should be designed to remove structural barriers that currently limit timely access to academic and social-emotional supports. By embedding small-group rooms, sensory spaces, and collaboration zones directly within each learning neighborhood, the building itself becomes an extension of the district's Multi-Tiered System of Support. This approach minimizes transitions, reduces distractions, preserves valuable instructional minutes, and normalizes differentiated learning as

part of school culture. Thoughtful spatial organization ensures that every student can access targeted support, enrichment, and opportunities for connection within a coherent, flexible, and inclusive environment—advancing MERSD's commitment to equitable outcomes for all learners.

Curriculum Delivery Methods and Practice

The Essex Elementary School employs a broad- range of teaching methodologies that strive to balance the best of progressive methodology with tried and true approaches. Our curriculum and instructional program are designed to support our District mission, vision and core values. To that end, we provide a rigorous core curriculum that is grounded in a rich program of experiential and exploratory learning experience, designed to utilize an interdisciplinary approach, and to create connections between learning and the real world. It is our intent that through this process we can create deeper more meaningful learning as well as expose students to a broad range of experiences that may help them to identify areas of interest or strength and form the foundations for the development of individual pathways to success.

Administrative & Academic Organization

Overall, MERSD elementary level curriculum and instruction is delivered through heterogeneously grouped inclusive classrooms in which the elementary classroom teacher is responsible for the delivery of all core content instruction. All classroom lessons are differentiated based on formative assessment data and whole group, small group, and individual work is integrated into all lessons with an increasing number of lessons relying on anywhere, anytime access to technology. In addition to general differentiated instruction, students receive a variety of support services that are provided through inclusion and push-in services whenever possible.

Academic Program Description & Space Needs Considerations

The curriculum program titles may change over time, our educational philosophy and methodology will require that future program considerations will also be based on differentiated, hands-on, and experiential learning strategies that require space for movement, demonstration, and small group work. We have provided summaries of each of the core content and program areas, and grade level curriculum guides. (Appendix: *Grade-Level Curriculum Guides*). Through the Education Visioning process we identified the following principles that guide our practice and align with our District Core Values as well as our District and School Improvement Plans. (*Appendix: Strategic Plan, District & School Improvement Plans*)

English Language Arts / Literacy

The English Language Arts program is grounded in evidence-based instructional practices aligned with the science of reading and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Instruction is

explicit, systematic, and intentionally sequenced, with rich text experiences that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening across multiple genres. Students engage in authentic literacy tasks that develop comprehension, written expression, oral language, and academic vocabulary. Writing is embedded as a daily practice across content areas and revisited through drafting, conferencing, and revision cycles.

Multi-tiered systems of support allow for targeted small-group and one-to-one instruction driven by ongoing data analysis and progress monitoring. The Wonders 2020 program serves as the district's core literacy resource and has been rated "Meets Expectations" by DESE's CURATE and highly by EdReports. In grades K–1, teachers use the multisensory Heggerty curriculum to build foundational phonemic awareness skills, supported by Wonders decodable texts that reinforce early reading behaviors. As students progress, instruction expands to complex texts, writing across genres, and collaborative discourse.

All classrooms promote student choice through diverse classroom libraries stocked with trade books representing a wide range of topics, genres, reading levels, and perspectives. Choice-based reading fosters motivation, independence, and a love of literacy. Speaking and listening are developed through partner work, small-group dialogue, shared reading, presentations, and collaborative discussions.

ELA instruction requires flexible, student-centered learning environments that support multiple instructional modes—whole-group mini-lessons, guided reading, conferencing, collaborative writing workshops, and independent literacy work. Classrooms should provide defined areas for classroom libraries, conferencing, and small-group instruction, along with adaptable furniture that can be easily reconfigured for different activities. Transparent sightlines and proximity to adjacent breakout spaces allow for small-group intervention, coaching cycles, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Writable surfaces, access to digital projection, and student devices support drafting, revision, shared publishing, and presentation.

Collectively, these design features create a literacy-rich environment that fosters communication, collaboration, and engagement—key components of MERSD's instructional philosophy—and ensure that every student can access the individualized support necessary to become a confident, capable reader and writer.

Mathematics

Mathematics instruction at Essex Elementary School is founded in the MA Curriculum Frameworks and promotes hands-on, learning designed to build conceptual understanding and confidence in mathematical thinking. We seek to center student discourse and encourage students to view themselves as problem solvers who value and enjoy mathematics while

engaging in the Standards for Mathematical Practice. Teachers employ a variety of manipulatives, visual models, and flexible groupings to support conceptual development through exploration, discourse, and application. Current instructional methodologies include the use of vertical non-permanent work surfaces that allow students to share thinking visibly, take intellectual risks, and learn from peer strategies.

Flexible instructional spaces are essential to support this approach. Classrooms must accommodate whole-group mini-lessons, small-group explorations, partner tasks, and mixed-ability collaborative work. Adequate storage for concrete manipulatives, games, consumable resources, number tools, and formative assessment resources is necessary to ensure materials are accessible and consistently incorporated into daily instruction. Technology integration, including projection tools and digital platforms, supports problem solving, data exploration, and real-world applications.

Design Considerations: To effectively support high-quality mathematics instruction, classroom and neighborhood spaces should include:

- Flexible layouts that enable rapid transitions between whole-class instruction and multiple small-group breakouts.
- Adjacent breakout rooms for targeted intervention, enrichment, assessment, and conferencing aligned with MTSS tiered supports.
- Adequate, organized, and easily accessible for students storage for manipulatives, math tools, and instructional materials.
- Vertical non-permanent work surfaces (e.g., whiteboard walls) to promote mathematical discourse, sense-making, and visibility of student thinking.
- Writable table surfaces and access to digital projection to support modeling and student demonstrations.
- Robust device access and reliable wireless connectivity to support simulations, interactive tasks, and digital fluency and access to adaptive online learning.

Collectively, these design features create an environment that fosters deep conceptual understanding, student agency, and positive math identities—key priorities within MERSD's instructional philosophy.

Science

Science education at Essex Elementary School builds real-world connections by centering learning around phenomena-based instruction, emphasizing hands-on inquiry, experiential learning, and the integration of engineering and environmental literacy. In grades K–2, students engage with the Mystery Science curriculum, which introduces foundational scientific thinking through investigations, observations, and modeling. In grades 3–5, students use the KnowAtom program, which deepens conceptual understanding through inquiry and applies discipline-

connected engineering design processes. Across all grades, students design experiments, construct prototypes, test variables, and revise their thinking based on evidence, fostering curiosity, persistence, and creativity.

Instructional approaches require learning environments that support whole-group lessons, collaborative small-group investigations, and long-term project work. Students regularly use scientific tools, manipulatives, large amounts of consumables through inquiry and experimentation, technology platforms, and engineering materials that must be accessible, storable, and safely managed. Project work is iterative and often spans multiple days or weeks, making secure storage and flexible space essential for preserving student learning over time.

Environmental awareness is a central tenet of MERSD's vertically aligned K–12 environmental literacy strand. At Essex Elementary, gardens, a greenhouse, and outdoor learning areas provide opportunities for interdisciplinary projects. Partnerships with local organizations expand field-based learning and connect students to authentic environmental stewardship. Additional outdoor spaces support both science instruction and social-emotional well-being, offering settings for quiet reflection, observation, and nature-based exploration.

Looking ahead, MERSD plans to deepen its Science, Technology, Engineering, as well as Digital Literacy/Computer Science programming to support enhanced integration across STEM learning at the elementary level. Students will engage in design thinking and interdisciplinary problem solving that draw on science, mathematics, and engineering concepts. As this program grows, facilities will need to support increasing complexity, providing durable work surfaces, tool storage, electrical access, and zones for project iteration.

Design Considerations: Science and engineering instruction at Essex Elementary requires learning environments that are flexible, durable, and intentionally equipped for hands-on investigation. Classrooms and shared STEM spaces should include:

- Access to sinks, counter space, and water sources to support experimentation, safe cleanup, and material handling.
- Durable, non-slip, easy-to-clean flooring appropriate for spills, tools, and frequent reconfiguration.
- Generous storage, including closed cabinets, open shelving, mobile bins, and secure areas for in-progress lab work.
- Distributed electrical access along perimeter walls and within work zones to support microscopes, robotics systems, sensors, and testing equipment.
- Flexible furniture and large work surfaces that accommodate multi-student collaboration and prototype building.
- Clear sightlines to promote safe supervision and facilitate co-teaching and coaching.

- Space for long-term investigations so materials can remain set up without disrupting other routines.
- Adjacency to outdoor learning areas to support field observations, environmental data collection, and nature-based inquiry.

To accommodate the expansion of elementary Technology & Engineering, a dedicated STEM laboratory is recommended, featuring:

- Ventilation and safety equipment, including eyewash access and protected storage for tools or low-grade consumables.
- Zones for design, construction, and testing aligned with the Engineering Design Process.
- Appropriate flooring and durable worksurfaces able to withstand adhesives, cutting tools, and moisture.

  Collectively, these design features remove current spatial limitations—such as limited sink access, long travel distances, and insufficient storage—and allow students to engage deeply in authentic STEM experiences. The result is a science and engineering program that fosters investigation, encourages persistence, and prepares students with the habits of mind essential for future learning.

History / Social Studies

The History and Social Sciences program at Essex Elementary School is designed to help students develop as civic-minded, responsible members of society who understand and appreciate both the diversity and commonality of human experience. Instruction is inquiry-based and project-oriented, emphasizing relevance, engagement, and interdisciplinary connections. Students learn to ask compelling questions, analyze primary and secondary sources, construct arguments supported by evidence, and communicate their thinking in a variety of formats.

At the elementary level, MERSD uses DESE-vetted resources to build a coherent, vertically aligned program aligned to the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework. In Grades K–2, teachers implement the Private i History Detectives curriculum as a foundational resource, which introduces core disciplinary concepts through developmentally appropriate investigations, artifacts analysis, and community-based inquiry. In Grade 5, MERSD has begun implementing Investigating History, a DESE-endorsed program that emphasizes source analysis, civic discussion, and writing from evidence. A phased rollout of this program in Grades 3 and 4 is scheduled for the 2026–2027 school year, ensuring consistent instructional design across the upper-elementary grades.

Across all grade levels, units integrate history, geography, civics, and economics to deepen students' understanding of culture, community, and the ways societies change over time. Students explore the roles of individuals and groups in shaping history, build empathy and perspective-taking, and engage in collaborative projects that connect past and present. Activities

may include community interviews, map making, simulations, and service-learning experiences, creating authentic connections to students' lives.

Effective implementation of an inquiry-based, project-oriented model requires:

- Flexible instructional spaces that support whole-class discourse, small-group collaboration, and interdisciplinary project work.
- Writable surfaces, breakout rooms, and access to digital resources to facilitate research, drafting, peer feedback, and revisions.
- Technology integration that supports digital research, primary source analysis, and multimedia presentation tools.

These design features enable teachers to differentiate instruction, promote active learning, and foster the civic discussion, analysis, and collaborative problem solving outlined in the History and Social Science Framework.
By engaging students in meaningful investigations rooted in real-world contexts, Essex Elementary's History and Social Sciences program cultivates curiosity, empathy, and an emerging sense of agency. Students learn how community systems work, why diverse perspectives matter, and how their voices contribute to a stronger, more equitable society—reflecting MERSD's commitment to developing thoughtful, informed, and compassionate citizens.

World Languages

The World Language program at Essex Elementary School will introduce students to world languages, begin to build skills to develop fluency and proficiency, while fostering curiosity about global cultures and communication. Instruction emphasizes listening and speaking in the early grades and gradually builds toward reading and writing proficiency. Lessons integrate songs, stories, games, movement, and role-play to make language learning engaging and developmentally appropriate. Cultural exploration helps students build empathy, perspective-taking, and global awareness—supporting MERSD's mission to develop responsible, connected citizens prepared to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

Although elementary World Language instruction is not currently offered due to historic budget constraints, the district is committed to restoring this specialist course at the elementary level as part of the long-term academic program. When implemented, instruction will be delivered by a certified World Language teacher and scheduled as part of the specialist rotation.

Aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for World Languages, the elementary program will use a proficiency-based approach that builds student skills across the domains of communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. Students will develop foundational vocabulary, language structures, and cultural knowledge through authentic listening and speaking tasks, while making meaningful connections to peers, community, and

global contexts. Over time, experiences at the elementary level will serve as a bridge to the district's vertically aligned 6–12 World Language pathways.

To support interactive and engaging language learning, instructional spaces should include:

- Flexible furniture arrangements that accommodate movement, pairing, and small-group dialogue.
- Projection and audio systems that allow students to hear authentic models of target-language pronunciation and intonation.
- Breakout areas for partner practice, conferencing, and oral proficiency tasks.
- Access to digital tools for multimedia exploration, cultural immersion, and linguistic comparison.

The design of these spaces should reflect the program's emphasis on active participation, communication, and collaborative learning. By introducing multiple languages and cultural perspectives early in students' educational careers, Essex Elementary builds strong foundations in global citizenship, cultural competency, and lifelong language learning.

Academic Support Programing Spaces

Essex Elementary School's approach to academic support reflects the Manchester Essex Regional School District's commitment to providing equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities for every student. The academic and social-emotional supports offered at EES are delivered through a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and aligned with the district's core values of student-centered learning, inclusion, and wellness.

EES's support model integrates explicit social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction, targeted academic intervention, and environmental features that promote readiness to learn. These systems work together to ensure that each child's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral needs are met within a supportive and inclusive school community.

Social-Emotional Learning and School Climate: EES emphasizes the importance of developing the whole child—fostering emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-regulation alongside academic achievement. The school incorporates multiple evidence-based frameworks and practices that build emotional awareness and a strong sense of belonging:

- **RULER:** Explicit instruction in recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions.
- **Responsive Classroom:** Daily community-building routines that create safe, joyful, and engaging classrooms.
- **Second Step:** Structured lessons in anti-bullying, emotion management, decision-making, and collaboration.

- **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Emphasizes academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness through ongoing professional learning and reflective practice.
- **Individual and Group Counseling Services:** Targeted supports that strengthen coping, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Environmental supports for SEL are woven into the fabric of the school design. Sensory paths, calming nooks, natural light, and outdoor learning extensions will promote emotional regulation and readiness to learn. These physical features will be located within each learning neighborhood and will reinforce instructional practices such as RULER and Responsive Classroom by linking the emotional environment to the physical environment.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS): MERSD's vision for MTSS is to ensure that all students experience high-quality, inclusive instruction across both academic and social-emotional domains. MTSS provides a proactive and systematic framework that allows educators to identify, monitor, and respond to student needs before they escalate into more significant challenges. The model is organized across three tiers of support:

- **Tier 1:** Core instruction designed to be universally accessible and differentiated to meet diverse learning needs.
- **Tier 2:** Targeted, small-group interventions for students requiring additional reinforcement in specific skill areas.
- **Tier 3:** Intensive, individualized supports tailored to students with significant or persistent learning or behavioral needs.

Implementation depends on collaboration, continuous data collection, and progress monitoring to ensure that interventions are responsive and evidence based. Student progress is reviewed regularly to determine instructional adjustments, resource allocation, and the need for additional support.

Interventions are delivered by classroom teachers, interventionists, and specialists both within and adjacent to the classroom, ensuring that supports remain connected to core instruction. Research-based programs are selected and differentiated based on assessment data and aligned to each tier of support.

Currently, the configuration of the existing Essex Elementary School poses challenges for effective intervention delivery. Students often transition long distances across the building to access shared instructional spaces or receive services at small tables within active classrooms. These conditions can create distractions, limit privacy, and reduce instructional time.

The new school design will address these barriers by incorporating localized breakout spaces within each classroom neighborhood. These spaces will:

- Bring supports directly to students, reducing lost time and improving instructional continuity.
- Normalize flexible, small-group learning for all students, including those receiving MTSS, MLL, or special education services.
- Provide quiet, well-equipped environments for focused intervention, assessment, and conferencing.
- Strengthen collaboration between general education teachers, interventionists, and support staff.

This integrated model reflects MERSD's ongoing commitment to inclusive, data-informed, and student-centered instruction, ensuring that every learner has the opportunity to succeed within their classroom community. By creating space for flexible small-group instruction, student collaboration, and teacher conferencing within each neighborhood, the design strengthens our goal of positioning students as active leaders in their learning, supported by environments that adapt to multiple modes of engagement.

Space Implications for Academic Support

The design of the new facility must reflect MERSD's educational philosophy by incorporating flexible learning environments that support student agency, small-group collaboration, and movement. These goals require spaces that enable multiple types of engagement, including quiet reflection, hands-on exploration, peer collaboration, and teacher-facilitated conferencing. Thoughtful adjacency between classrooms, breakout rooms, and shared learning spaces will allow students to work as leaders within their learning community.

Each grade-level neighborhood should include:

- **Localized breakout spaces** directly adjacent to classrooms for small-group and one-to-one instruction aligned with MTSS.
- **Dedicated calming and sensory zones** to support regulation and readiness for learning.
- **Collaborative work areas** for staff to analyze data, plan interventions, and coordinate services.
- **Visibility and proximity** that promote supervision, inclusion, and minimal disruption during transitions.

As we adjust our intervention and student support services to go to students in their learning spaces, the adults providing support will shift from a classroom to a group office. This will provide our support staff, including Math Specialist, Reading Specialist, Instructional Coaches, MLL teacher, and Title 1 staff, to have a location for planning and peer collaboration in a centralized office location while ensuring student supports are provided at point of learning locations. Shared resource rooms for counseling, speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and other related services should be centrally located within the instructional core to

ensure accessibility and collaboration. Design features such as natural light, acoustic control, and flexible furnishings will enhance the effectiveness of these learning environments.

By embedding support spaces within classroom neighborhoods and aligning the physical environment to instructional practice, the new Essex Elementary School will model MERSD's vision of a responsive, inclusive, and future-ready learning community—one that supports every child's academic growth and emotional well-being.

Student Guidance & Support Services

The Manchester Essex Regional School District is committed to fostering the academic, social, emotional, and physical well-being of all students. Essex Elementary School provides a comprehensive network of guidance and health services that emphasize prevention, early intervention, and responsive care. These supports are integral to the district's whole-child philosophy and are aligned with state and national best practices.

Counseling and Guidance Services

EES provides a range of counseling and adjustment services to promote emotional health, social development, and student success. Counseling programs are designed to build resilience, foster self-awareness, and support students in developing positive relationships and coping strategies. Services include:

- Individual and small-group counseling to address social, emotional, or behavioral needs.
- Screenings, consultation, and crisis intervention in collaboration with teachers and families.
- Classroom-based lessons and community-building activities that reinforce SEL instruction and promote a positive school climate.
- Collaboration with external mental health providers and community agencies to ensure continuity of care when needed.

The school psychologist and school adjustment counselor play key roles in delivering these services. Their work supports both individual student needs and broader school-based initiatives related to mental health, inclusion, and positive behavior support.

To ensure accessibility and confidentiality, counseling and psychology offices should be located within or adjacent to the main office suite, allowing for seamless coordination with the principal, nurse, and administrative staff. Each office should be large enough to accommodate individual meetings or small groups of 6–8 students in a private, welcoming environment conducive to therapeutic work and group discussions.

Health Services

Health Services at Essex Elementary School operate under the comprehensive framework established by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) School Health Manual,

which provides the roadmap for ensuring compliance with state regulations and promoting student wellness. The goal of the Health Services program is to appraise, protect, and promote student health and to ensure that each child is ready to learn each day.
Core functions include:

- Preventive care through screenings, immunization monitoring, and disease prevention.
- Care coordination with families and community healthcare providers to ensure continuity of services.
- Emergency response and first aid for illness or injury during the school day.
- Health education and counseling to build student understanding of wellness and self-care.
- Support for attendance and engagement, ensuring that students' health needs do not become barriers to learning.

The health suite will provide both semi-private and private areas to address a wide range of daily needs—from first aid to medical assessments and confidential consultations. The design will include:

- A dedicated nurse's office with exam space, cot areas, and secure medication storage.
- Separate areas for rest, isolation (when required), and confidential health assessments.
- Access to handwashing stations, refrigeration, and basic medical equipment for screenings and routine procedures (such as vision and hearing tests).
- Proximity to the main office suite and administration, allowing for efficient communication and student supervision while maintaining privacy.

The health suite will be equipped with modern tools and designed to meet all Massachusetts DPH mandates, ensuring compliance with state guidelines while providing a calm, child-friendly environment that supports student safety and well-being.

Space Implications for Guidance and Health Services
To deliver high-quality guidance and health services, the counseling and health suite should be designed as an integrated component of the main office area, supporting collaboration between student support staff and building administration.

- Counseling and psychology offices should each provide space for individual and small-group work, equipped with soft seating, acoustic privacy, and access to natural light.
- The health suite should include both public-facing and private areas, including waiting space, examination areas, isolation rooms, and secure medical storage.
- Proximity to the main entrance and administrative offices will allow quick access for emergencies while maintaining privacy for students receiving care.

This configuration ensures that guidance and health services are centrally located, accessible, and aligned with the district's vision for a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment.

Together, these spaces will foster physical and emotional well-being and strengthen the school's ability to respond proactively to the diverse needs of its students.

Teacher Planning

Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) recognizes that the quality of instruction is strengthened by providing teachers with dedicated time and collaborative spaces to plan, reflect, and refine their practice. At Essex Elementary School (EES), teacher collaboration is a cornerstone of the instructional program and a key driver of continuous improvement in student learning.

Collaborative Planning and Professional Practice
EES teachers engage in collaborative planning cycles that bring together classroom teachers, specialists, and interventionists to analyze data, design instruction, and monitor student progress. Grade-level teams meet daily to review formative assessment data, plan differentiated lessons, and coordinate intervention and enrichment activities. These ongoing conversations ensure that instruction remains responsive to the needs of individual learners and aligned to district goals for student achievement and inclusion.

Every teacher has common planning time five days per week, providing the opportunity for regular collaboration within and across grade levels. In addition, extended Wednesdays are built into the district calendar to allow for professional learning, curriculum development, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This structured time supports the district's teacher-centered model of continual improvement—one that values reflection, shared practice, and innovation in teaching and learning.

Through these structures, teachers work in grade-level and cross-disciplinary teams to design flexible grouping models, intervention cycles, and project-based learning experiences. Data analysis is used to inform decisions about instructional pacing, resource allocation, and support services within the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework.

Planning Spaces and Collaboration Environments
To support professional collaboration, the new Essex Elementary School will include adult-friendly common workspaces located within or near grade-level neighborhoods. These spaces will provide comfortable, technology-equipped environments where teachers can plan, meet, and engage in professional dialogue.

Design considerations include:

- Shared work areas for grade-level teams and specialists to collaborate on lesson planning and data review.

- Dedicated spaces for professional development sessions, department meetings, and full staff gatherings.
- Access to technology and instructional materials that support data-driven decision-making and resource sharing.

By embedding collaboration and planning spaces within the instructional core, MERSD will ensure that teachers have immediate access to colleagues, resources, and student data—promoting a culture of professional learning, continuous reflection, and instructional excellence.

Space Implications for Teacher Planning: The design of the new Essex Elementary School must reflect the district's commitment to collaboration, professional learning, and instructional coherence. MERSD is committed to implementing current, research-based instructional practices and supporting the ongoing professional growth of educators. Through the district's embedded coaching model, instructional coaches provide in-the-moment feedback, modeling, guidance, and targeted support to strengthen classroom practice and improve student outcomes. Because this coaching model is integrated into the academic day, teachers require adult-friendly spaces that are intentionally designed to support professional dialogue. These spaces should comfortably accommodate small groups, provide reasonable privacy for observation debriefs and data discussions, allow access to digital resources, and be located in close proximity to classroom neighborhoods to support efficiency and instructional continuity.

These spaces should include:

- Team planning rooms with technology access for data analysis, lesson design, and virtual collaboration.
- Flexible meeting areas that can accommodate both small-group discussions and larger professional learning sessions.
- Storage and resource areas for curriculum materials, student data binders, and shared instructional tools.
- Sound-mitigating finishes and natural light to create comfortable, productive work environments.

In addition to neighborhood-based collaboration zones, a centralized professional workroom or staff commons should be included to support all-staff meetings, professional development, and interdisciplinary work. The inclusion of these adult-centered learning environments ensures that collaboration—an essential component of MERSD's instructional model—is embedded into the daily rhythm of school life.

This design approach underscores the district's belief that supporting teacher collaboration directly enhances student learning outcomes, aligning physical space with MERSD's culture of continual reflection, shared leadership, and professional growth.

Professional Development

Manchester Essex Regional School District is committed to cultivating a culture of continuous improvement through high-quality professional learning. Instructional growth is supported through ongoing coaching cycles, collaborative planning structures, curriculum review processes, and data-informed reflection. Teachers participate in regular collaborative teams that examine formative assessment data, refine instructional strategies, and strengthen alignment across grades.

Extended Wednesdays are built into the district calendar to provide dedicated time for districtwide professional learning, team-based curriculum development, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Continual curriculum reviews ensure vertical alignment and support ongoing implementation of evidence-based practices and high-quality curriculum. Instructional coaching in literacy, mathematics, and student services provides teachers with embedded opportunities to reflect on classroom practice, analyze student progress, and receive real-time feedback.

Educators transitioning between grade spans or instructional roles receive targeted support, including mentoring, observation cycles, and specialized training aligned to their new assignments. When programmatic changes impact licensure or instructional models, the district offers retraining and certification pathways to ensure staff are fully prepared. Professional development prioritizes inclusive practices, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), social-emotional learning, multilingual learner supports, and culturally and linguistically sustaining practices—all central to MERSD's vision for equitable access.

The new facility will reinforce professional learning by providing flexible collaboration spaces, technology-equipped meeting rooms, and areas for demonstration, reflection, and coaching. By aligning physical design with instructional priorities, Essex Elementary will continue to foster a collegial environment where educators grow together, innovate, and respond to student needs.

Pre-Kindergarten Program (Integrated)

The Manchester-Essex Regional School District (MERSD) currently operates a district-wide integrated preschool program housed at Manchester Memorial Elementary School. As established during the Memorial Building Project, two preschool classrooms were constructed at Memorial, with an additional two classrooms to be included in the future renovation or replacement of Essex Elementary School. This expansion will fulfill the district's long-term goal of providing equitable Pre-K access in both communities, ensuring that all families with three- and four-year-old children have the opportunity to participate in high-quality early learning within their town.

The preschool program serves approximately 30–40 students, including both tuition-paying peers and students with disabilities, fostering an inclusive environment that supports social, emotional, and academic growth for all learners. Enrollment is currently limited by space; however, demographic

projections indicate a potential capacity of 45–75 students once the additional classrooms become available. The district has transitioned to a five-day, full-day model for three- and four-year-olds (8:30 AM – 2:55 PM) to better meet family needs and to provide extended opportunities for play-based learning, early literacy, and social development.

The Manchester-Essex Regional School District Preschool is an integrated early-childhood program where children of all abilities learn socially, intellectually, and physically within a developmentally appropriate and nurturing environment. Students with identified special needs receive speech and language, occupational, and physical therapy within the classroom as part of the daily curriculum and through individualized instruction. Students without special needs, known as peer pals, serve as role models while learning at their own pace. This purposeful mix of peers and students with disabilities fosters empathy, social awareness, and a strong sense of self-worth for all children.

Play is an essential focus of the program, as children learn about their world through exploration, discovery, and collaboration. Because the preschool is part of the Manchester-Essex Regional School District, children not only acquire foundational academic and social skills for entering kindergarten but also develop an early sense of belonging and familiarity with the district community.

Pre-K Curriculum and Instructional Model

The MERSD integrated preschool program follows a developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum aligned with the Massachusetts Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences. Instruction is organized around whole-group and center-based learning, with six structured centers that promote early literacy, numeracy, fine- and gross-motor development, and social-emotional growth through purposeful play. Within this environment, children are encouraged to explore, investigate, question, and take appropriate risks in their learning. Teachers provide opportunities for communication, creativity, and problem solving through a balanced schedule of child-initiated and teacher-guided experiences. Speech, language, and motor development are embedded within daily routines, and learning experiences are individualized based on each child's needs and interests.

Classrooms are designed to support this model through purpose-built features such as child-height sinks, accessible bathrooms, and adjacent outdoor play areas that extend learning beyond the classroom walls. The environment includes sound panels and amplification systems to support students with hearing impairments, as well as dedicated storage, cubbies, and flexible furnishings that allow teachers to adapt the space for whole-group, small-group, and independent activities.

The program incorporates applied behavioral analysis (ABA) methodologies to support students with autism and other developmental disabilities, ensuring that all children can access the curriculum in a structured and supportive way. In addition, related services—including speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy—are integrated throughout the school day and delivered through a combination of whole-class, small-group, and individualized sessions.

Peer pals benefit equally from this inclusive model, learning alongside their classmates with special needs. Through shared play, communication, and collaboration, they develop empathy, cooperation, and confidence. The result is a supportive, language-rich environment that nurtures curiosity, independence, and a lifelong love of learning.

Space Considerations: To support the integrated preschool model, the new Essex Elementary School should include two dedicated Pre-K classrooms, each designed for up to 15–18 students. Classrooms should be flexible, welcoming environments that accommodate a range of developmental and instructional needs while ensuring accessibility and compliance with ADA standards.

Each classroom should include:

- Flexible, reconfigurable space to support six small-group learning centers, circle time, and whole-class instruction.
- Child-scaled design features such as low sinks, accessible bathrooms, and cubbies for personal storage.
- Separate areas for meals/snacks, art projects, and play, including a tiled section for messy activities and a carpeted area for circle time and movement.
- A designated quiet zone within one of the learning centers for reading, calming, or independent play.
- Space for individual and small-group therapies, or adjacency to therapy rooms within the same building to minimize transitions.
- An adjacent sensory or de-escalation room to support regulation and individualized needs.
- Ample classroom storage, including shelving and a large closet to minimize visual clutter and maintain organization.
- Sound-mitigating finishes, carpeting, and amplification systems to accommodate students with hearing impairments.
- Accessibility features, including wheelchair access and ramps, to ensure barrier-free movement throughout the preschool and school building.
- Direct access to a secure, developmentally appropriate outdoor learning and play space with shade, varied surfaces, and handicapped-accessible equipment designed for physical, sensory, and social development.

The addition of an after-school daycare program is under consideration and should be factored into the design for future flexibility of use.

Together, the preschool classrooms in Manchester and Essex will form a unified, inclusive early learning system that nurtures the district's youngest learners and ensures equitable access for families across both communities.

Kindergarten Program

The Essex Elementary School Kindergarten program is a full-day, non-tuition program that provides a developmentally appropriate bridge between early childhood education and the formal academic experience of the primary grades. The program emphasizes cooperative learning, exploration, and play as integral components of early academic and social development. Instruction is designed to nurture curiosity, creativity, and foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning while fostering independence and confidence in young learners.

Classrooms are designed to support a variety of instructional approaches, including whole-group lessons, small-group collaboration, and individual exploration. Each space must provide ample room for movement and flexible grouping, allowing students to engage in hands-on, inquiry-based learning throughout the day. To accommodate the wide range of activities characteristic of early learning, significant built-in storage is essential for organizing instructional materials, manipulatives, and creative play resources.

In keeping with best practices for early childhood education, each Kindergarten classroom should include a child-sized restroom and an area for creative free play, along with distinct spaces for large- and small-group instruction. Classrooms should also include a gathering area for shared instruction, such as a carpeted circle space or small amphitheater-style tier, that allows students to come together for stories, discussions, and group learning experiences. Multiple breakout areas are also necessary to support differentiated instruction, literacy stations, and small-group work.
The design of Kindergarten learning spaces should reflect the program's emphasis on active engagement and community, providing a safe, welcoming, and flexible environment that supports collaboration, creativity, and the developmental needs of young learners.

Lunch Programs

Essex Elementary School provides both breakfast and lunch service aligned with district wellness policies and designed to support student health, nutrition, and readiness to learn. Breakfast is offered each morning to ensure students begin the school day nourished and prepared to engage academically, supporting focus, stamina, and emotional regulation. Lunch is paired with integrated recess blocks—typically totaling 45 minutes per day—which promote movement, peer interaction, problem-solving, and social-emotional skill development. Multiple recess opportunities throughout the day reinforce students' ability to return to learning calm, focused, and ready to participate.

Food services at Essex Elementary are delivered through a contracted, on-site cooking model that complies with all state and federal nutritional guidelines. The district's long-term goal is to increase the amount of scratch cooking and incorporate more fresh, whole foods; however, the current age and

condition of the kitchen infrastructure limits the type and variety of meal options available to students and staff, constraining menu flexibility and restricting the ability to expand healthy, freshly prepared offerings.

A renovated or newly constructed facility would provide a modern kitchen and streamlined serving area capable of supporting expanded breakfast service, increased scratch cooking, improved cold and dry storage, and more efficient traffic flow through the serving line. Updated infrastructure should include adequate electrical capacity, food-preparation workstations, durable stainless-steel surfaces, commercial dishwashing equipment, and clearly defined circulation patterns that support reliable, efficient service. Adjacency to composting, recycling, and waste-management areas will support environmental sustainability goals.

In addition to serving students, the cafeteria and kitchen function as valued community assets. Local organizations use the space for community breakfasts, civic programming, and intergenerational events. The kitchen must therefore be accessible, secure, and equipped to facilitate weekend and evening community use while maintaining appropriate separation from academic areas. Because the school also serves as a potential emergency sheltering location, the kitchen should be designed to support extended meal service, power resiliency, and safe food handling during emergency operations, with sufficient generator-backed electrical capacity and walk-in refrigeration space.

The cafeteria should be designed for efficient meal service and student flow, with seating and acoustics that create a positive dining experience. Adjacency to outdoor spaces can support smooth transitions between eating and recess, while flexible design will allow the space to function as a hub for community gatherings.

Sensory-Considerate Dining Environment

To support the diverse sensory needs of all students, a sensory-considerate dining option should be included within the cafeteria design. This space, contained within a portion of the allowable MSBA dining guidelines, will provide a quieter, lower-stimulation environment for students who may experience sensory overload in a traditional cafeteria setting.

The sensory-considerate dining area will:

- Feature muted lighting, reduced noise levels, and calming color palettes to create a soothing atmosphere.
- Incorporate sound-dampening materials and spatial separation from high-traffic areas to minimize auditory distractions.
- Provide flexible seating arrangements, allowing students to eat in small groups or independently based on their comfort and regulation needs.

- Align with the school's commitment to inclusive design and social-emotional learning, ensuring that every child has equitable access to a positive and comfortable mealtime experience.

This space is not a separate program, but rather an extension of the school's universal design for learning and whole-child wellness philosophy. By proactively addressing sensory needs, the school can foster belonging, independence, and improved readiness for learning throughout the school day.
Together, these improvements will strengthen nutrition access, promote social connection, support community resilience, and advance MERSD's commitment to caring for the whole child.

Technology Instruction Policies & Program Requirements & Library

Technology instruction at Essex Elementary School is grounded in the belief that digital literacy, information fluency, and responsible technology use are essential competencies for all students. Digital tools and computer science concepts are intentionally integrated into library/media programming and core academic content, allowing students to apply technology skills in authentic, interdisciplinary contexts. Instruction emphasizes research and inquiry, ethical use of information, data privacy, media evaluation, and digital citizenship, preparing students to navigate increasingly complex digital environments.

Classrooms are equipped with interactive display boards, audio amplification systems, document cameras, and 1:1 student devices, enabling teachers to differentiate instruction, provide real-time feedback, and extend learning beyond the physical classroom. Students engage with age-appropriate applications that foster creativity, collaboration, and problem solving while developing proficiency in navigating digital resources and communicating effectively online. Multi-tiered supports and assistive technologies further promote equitable access to curriculum and align with inclusive instructional practices.

The goal of the Technology and Digital Literacy program is to develop critical thinkers, responsible digital citizens, effective problem solvers, and creative collaborators who can adapt to evolving tools and platforms. Students learn to evaluate information sources, create digital products, engage in collaborative digital environments, and practice safe, ethical online behavior. Instruction builds foundational computer science skills through introductory coding, engineering design, robotics, and iterative problem solving, supporting early exposure to computational thinking and design principles.

Because technology is integrated across the instructional day, the building must provide strong wireless connectivity, electrical capacity for device charging, and the bandwidth necessary to support hundreds of devices simultaneously. Charging stations, access to outlets, and reliable network infrastructure must be distributed throughout classroom neighborhoods and shared learning areas to ensure uninterrupted access to digital tools.

Learning Commons / STEAM Integration

The Library, Technology, and Engineering programs collectively cultivate a love of reading alongside hands-on exploration of digital and engineering concepts. The curriculum blends traditional library experiences—such as literature appreciation, research instruction, and access to print media—with opportunities for design thinking, computational thinking, and collaborative project work. Lessons encourage students to apply transferable skills to real-world challenges and reinforce the district's instructional focus on inquiry, creativity, and collaboration.

Looking ahead, the Learning Commons will function as the academic and social hub of the school—a flexible, interdisciplinary space that combines library services, digital media resources, engineering and maker tools, and collaborative project zones to support research, creativity, inquiry, and hands-on learning. Intentional adjacency to visual arts classrooms and STEM project spaces will support natural crossover between technology, engineering, design, and the creative process. These connections reinforce MERSD's commitment to learning that is active, iterative, and expressive, preparing students to design, build, test, and reflect through multiple modalities.

The Learning Commons will include flexible zones for:

- whole-group instruction,
- small-group collaboration,
- independent exploration,
- digital fabrication and prototyping,
- robotics and coding,
- multimedia production,
- project-based learning,
- and exhibition of student work.

Durable work surfaces, embedded storage, and open shelving will support materials management and long-term project builds. Access to digital fabrication tools—such as 3D printers, microcontrollers, and laser cutters—as well as engineering materials and art-making resources will allow students to move fluidly between design, construction, and reflection.

Furnishings and Presentation Features

To support diverse instructional and student-driven learning experiences, the Learning Commons will incorporate:

- moveable tables on casters,
- soft seating and modular furniture,
- quiet reading nooks,
- portable whiteboard partitions and writable surfaces,
- digital display boards for showcasing student work,

- and a small-scale amphitheater or stepped seating area for presentations, performances, and read-alouds.

These features will allow teachers and students to rapidly reconfigure the space for collaborative projects, independent reading, small-group instruction, and interdisciplinary work. Quiet reading areas will remain accessible throughout the day for unscheduled visits and independent inquiry.

Visibility, Supervision, and Infrastructure
Glass walls, open sightlines, and transparency between adjoining spaces will support visual supervision and communicate that making, tinkering, coding, reading, and creating are core elements of school culture. Seamless technology infrastructure—including robust wireless networks, ceiling-mounted access points, ample outlets, and collaborative displays—will ensure reliable access to digital resources throughout the school.

Because technology and engineering experiences often involve small groups, rapid iteration, and hands-on tools, proximity to adjacent breakout rooms is essential. These localized spaces will support guided instruction, assessment, conferencing, and small-group intervention without requiring travel across the building.

By integrating literacy, engineering, technology, and the visual and performing arts within a central, flexible hub, the Learning Commons will create a vibrant, future-ready learning environment that reflects MERSD's vision for interdisciplinary, student-centered education and lifelong curiosity. The flexibility of these zones supports student-to-student and student-to-teacher collaboration, creates opportunities for exhibitions and community gatherings, and extends learning beyond the school day—all key goals of the district's vision for this facility.

Learning Commons Staffing and Scheduling
The Learning Commons at Essex Elementary School will be staffed by a certified Library Media Specialist supported by a Library Teaching Assistant. Instruction will be delivered through a hybrid scheduling model that balances fixed lessons with flexible access for independent research, small-group inquiry, and interdisciplinary project work. Students may visit the Learning Commons individually, with peers, or as part of scheduled classroom integration.

The Learning Commons will maintain consistent hours during the school day and may be available beyond school hours to support extracurricular enrichment, family engagement events, and community programming. A flexible booking system will allow teachers to reserve instructional zones, project areas, and maker resources. This balanced model ensures that the Media Center serves simultaneously as an instructional classroom, collaborative laboratory, and independent reading hub.

Visual Arts

The visual arts program nurtures creativity, imagination, and self-expression through exploration of a wide range of media including paint, clay, ceramics, ink, recycled materials, and emerging digital tools. Guided by state standards, the curriculum is vertically coherent and intentionally structured to develop student competency in Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting—the four artistic domains defined by the Massachusetts Arts Frameworks. Students study influential artists, artistic movements, and contemporary makers, connecting visual art to social context, cultural perspectives, and other areas of the curriculum. Critique routines and reflection practices emphasize process, growth, and creative problem-solving, helping students see themselves as confident creators.

Instruction in the visual arts is highly hands-on and exploratory, requiring spaces designed to safely support diverse media and techniques. Art studios should include:

- Durable, easy-to-clean work surfaces suitable for wet and dry media
- Multiple large, multi-height sinks for washing brushes, palettes, and tools
- Adequate storage for supplies, student portfolios, and works-in-progress
- Ventilation and a dedicated kiln room for ceramics coursework
- Flexible layout to support whole-group demonstration, small-group creation, and independent studio work

Technology integration enhances instruction through access to instructional videos, projection and camera-fed demonstrations, digital design software, and documentation of student process. Proximity to the innovation/learning commons hub will support STEAM integration and interdisciplinary projects.

Visibility into art spaces—through interior windows or display glazing—showcases active making and reinforces MERSD's commitment to vibrant, visible learning. Ample display areas throughout corridors and shared spaces celebrate artistic achievement and provide authentic audiences for student work, contributing to a positive school climate and sense of belonging.

Collectively, these programmatic and spatial elements allow the visual arts to flourish as a core contributor to creativity, critical thinking, and whole-child development within the Essex Elementary experience.

Performing Arts

Music and performing arts are integral to the Essex Elementary experience, fostering creativity, confidence, collaboration, and community connection. Students participate in general music classes weekly, where instruction emphasizes active engagement—singing, listening, improvising, moving, playing instruments, and responding to music. Through these experiences, students develop

foundational skills in creating, performing, responding, and connecting, consistent with the Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Frameworks.

In addition to general music, students may pursue instrumental lessons through a pull-out instruction model and can participate in before- or after-school ensembles—including band, chorus, and musical theatre opportunities. These programs nurture self-expression, discipline, and teamwork while building cultural appreciation and artistic literacy. A highlight of the performing arts experience is the annual cross-district Fifth Grade play, which brings together music, drama, staging, and public performance, serving as a capstone celebration of students' growth.

Instruction is grounded in principles of multiple intelligences, recognizing that music supports learning across cognitive, social, emotional, and motor domains. Performing arts experiences strengthen confidence, public speaking, and the ability to collaborate—skills that extend well beyond the stage.

To support high-quality music and performing arts instruction, the school requires:

- A dedicated general music classroom with flexible seating, movable furniture to allow for dance space, appropriate acoustic treatment, and storage for instruments and instructional materials.
- A large performance and rehearsal space suitable for chorus, ensemble work, and dramatic presentations, equipped with adjustable lighting and sound amplification.
- A small lesson or practice room for instrumental pull-outs, individual coaching, and sectional rehearsals.
- Music and performance spaces located near each other to support smooth transition between practice and performance locations.
- Sound isolation to minimize disruption to adjacent academic areas.
- Digital technology for recording, playback, and multimedia integration.

Display and exhibition areas throughout the building will allow students to share their artistic accomplishments with authentic audiences, reinforcing pride and community engagement. Collectively, these programmatic and spatial features ensure that music and performing arts remain central components of a whole-child approach—developing students who are tuneful, artful, expressive, and confident contributors to their school and community.

Physical Education and Wellness

Physical education at Essex Elementary is delivered within a comprehensive wellness model that integrates physical activity, foundational health concepts, and social-emotional skill development to address the needs of the whole child. Students participate in wellness classes twice weekly, with the curriculum emphasizing lifelong healthy habits, fitness, nutrition, motor development, and self-care. Instruction targets refinement of fundamental movement patterns, coordination, and personal fitness through small-sided games, dance and rhythm, gymnastics, and individual skill progressions. These

experiences promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and self-regulation, reinforcing learning that occurs in the classroom.

Beginning in the 2025–26 school year, the district will undergo a comprehensive curriculum review to align its health and physical education programming with the Massachusetts Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Frameworks. This work will strengthen vertical alignment, update instructional practices, and support a continuum of developmentally appropriate health and wellness instruction across PreK–12.

A signature component of the District's wellness model is Project Adventure, a K-12 experiential learning strand that builds cooperation, trust, communication, conflict resolution, leadership, goal setting, and creative problem-solving. These activities promote resilience and support students' social-emotional learning competencies. To fully implement this curriculum, the school requires space for low, medium, and high challenge elements, both indoors and outdoors, along with appropriate safety zones, storage, and structurally supported anchor points.

To meet program needs, the gymnasium should include:

- Adequate ceiling height for climbing elements and rope activities
- A divider (sound-attenuating) wall to create two simultaneous teaching stations
- Padded perimeter walls and resilient athletic flooring to support safe movement
- Storage for a wide array of athletic and expeditionary equipment
- An adjacent PE office for supervision, planning, and student support

A regulation-sized basketball court is recommended to support district athletic programming, youth recreation leagues, and community events. This will allow Essex Elementary to continue serving as a practice and competition site for junior varsity, recreation league, and middle school basketball while strengthening community use and reducing scheduling pressure across the district.

Outdoor learning spaces should include:

- Fields for athletic skills practice, PE classes and small games
- A turf surface to extend playability during inclement weather
- Low/medium/high challenge elements for Project Adventure
- Safe circulation pathways for running and movement-based activities

Together, these features ensure that the physical education and wellness program supports the physical, emotional, and social development of all students, fosters healthy lifestyle habits, and aligns with district priorities around whole-child learning, teamwork, and resilience.

Special Education Programs

The special education program at Essex Elementary School serves students with a wide range of learning needs, the majority of whom qualify as moderate special needs students and access a combination of

inclusion and pull-out services. The moderate special needs program provides both classroom-based supports and separate instruction delivered individually or in small groups of up to eight students for reading, written language, and mathematics. Currently, moderate special education teachers and the speech-language pathologist share a classroom divided into instructional zones, with one small room available for quieter, separate instruction.

As of FY2025, the moderate needs team consists of three special education teachers, one full-time, and one part-time teaching assistant. To effectively meet student needs, separate instructional spaces are required for teachers to deliver targeted instruction in quiet, acoustically controlled environments. At least two of these spaces should accommodate up to eight students, a teacher workstation, and technology access, while two additional rooms should support small groups of up to four students. All spaces should be located in close proximity to grade-level classroom neighborhoods to support inclusion and efficient transitions.

Because special education enrollment fluctuates with student need and demographic shifts, flexible instructional spaces are required to ensure continuity of programming even as cohorts expand or contract across developmental stages. Locating service delivery spaces adjacent to general education classrooms reduces travel time, protects instructional continuity, and supports discreet movement for students receiving higher-tier interventions.

MERSD is deeply committed to ensuring that every student has access to an inclusive, high-quality education within the least restrictive environment. Essex Elementary School offers a continuum of services that combine in-class supports, targeted interventions, and specialized separate programming designed to meet a range of academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and communication needs. Each program provides individualized instruction while fostering integration within the general education setting, consistent with the district's values of inclusion, collaboration, and equity.

Maintaining robust, high-quality in-district programming is central to both student outcomes and long-term fiscal responsibility. By providing specialized services within the district, MERSD reduces reliance on out-of-district placements and minimizes the need for specialized transportation—one of the most unpredictable and costly components of special education finance. Beyond operational efficiency, locating specialized programming in-district strengthens students' relationships with peers, fosters continuity of school culture, and supports meaningful inclusion in extracurricular and community-based learning. These benefits reinforce the district's commitment to serving students in the least restrictive environment while ensuring equitable access to comprehensive supports close to home. *(Appendix: Special Education Program Review.)*

Academic and Communication Enhancement (ACE)

The Academic and Communication Enhancement (ACE) program serves students in grades K–5 with complex language-based learning disabilities who require a structured, language-rich environment and

intensive instructional support. The program is designed to be organized into two cohorts—lower elementary and upper elementary—each serving six to eight students with two teachers. Instruction combines small-group and one-to-one tutorials emphasizing reading, writing, mathematics, oral communication, and language comprehension. Lessons follow a sequential, multisensory structure and incorporate assistive technologies to promote independent access to grade-level content.
This interdisciplinary staffing model requires proximity to shared therapy spaces to support collaboration among special educators, speech-language pathologists, reading specialists, and occupational therapists. Co-location enhances supervision, fosters consistent communication supports, and increases the efficiency of scheduling related services.

Space Considerations: ACE requires one dedicated classroom for each cohort with adaptable layouts for small-group instruction and conferencing. Each classroom should include writable surfaces, acoustic control to support focused language instruction, and an adjacent breakout or therapy room for speech-language and reading interventions. Ample storage for instructional materials, manipulatives, and assistive technology is required. Locating ACE in proximity to the RISE cohort supports collaboration among specialized staff and facilitates shared use of sensory and therapy resources.

Reaching Independence in Supported Environments (RISE)
The RISE program serves students in grades K–5 with developmental disabilities or genetic disorders who require highly individualized academic, behavioral, and communication support. The program is designed to be organized into two cohorts—lower elementary and upper elementary—each serving six to eight students with two teachers. Instruction is delivered through small-group and one-to-one tutorials, emphasizing functional academics, communication, life skills, and social-emotional development. Students receive consistent support across the school day, including transitions, lunch, and recess, to reinforce skill generalization.

The program is staffed by an interdisciplinary team that includes a certified special education teacher/board-certified behavior analyst, registered behavior technicians, an occupational therapist, a speech-language pathologist, and a physical therapist. Students participate in social skills groups, daily living instruction, and specialized case management, and receive ongoing collaboration between home and school.

Increasing numbers of students with autism and complex learning profiles—especially at the preschool and primary levels—highlight the continued necessity of specialized instructional environments and intentionally designed sensory-supportive spaces as students progress through the continuum of services.

Specialized Program Components include:

- Self-contained and inclusion opportunities aligned to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) principles embedded across instructional domains

- Specialized reading and math methodologies (Reading Mastery, Reading Milestones, Visualizing and Verbalizing, Number Worlds, Do the Math)
- Social Thinking and Circles curricula to promote social understanding
- Assistive technology that supports communication and independence
- Consistent data-driven decision-making and progress monitoring

Space Considerations: RISE requires two dedicated classrooms—one for each cohort—with defined areas for academic instruction, sensory regulation, and life-skills practice. Each classroom should include:

- An adjacent breakout or therapy room
- Adaptive restroom facilities
- Low-stimulus lighting and acoustic control
- A kitchenette or food-prep area for daily living skills

Direct access to outdoor learning areas and safe circulation paths supports experiential learning and safe movement during sensory breaks. Co-location with ACE will enable shared therapy resources, coordinated staffing, and efficient scheduling.

Accessibility and Specialized Supports

Essex Elementary has historically served students with hearing impairments and other physical challenges. The new facility must continue to incorporate:

- Sound-field amplification systems in instructional spaces
- Sound-attenuating panels in targeted rooms
- Assistive listening devices
- T-coil or compatible hearing loop systems (where applicable)
- All instructional and public spaces must be fully accessible, with:
- Barrier-free circulation
- Elevator/lift systems
- Accessible restrooms
- Adaptive playground equipment

The current building's split levels and stair configurations create mobility barriers. A renovated or rebuilt Essex Elementary must eliminate these limitations and embody universal design principles, ensuring that every student can participate fully in all aspects of school life.

Design Priorities Across Programs

To ensure successful delivery of specialized instruction, the new facility should include:

- Small-group rooms adjacent to classroom neighborhoods
- Sensory and calming spaces accessible without long transitions
- Therapy rooms for OT, PT, and speech-language services
- Secure storage for adaptive and communication devices

- Quiet testing environments for standardized assessments
- Flexible circulation patterns that support discreet movement

As part of the Essex Elementary building project, specialized programming—including Preschool, ACE, and RISE—will be intentionally located at Essex to align program cohorts, strengthen interdisciplinary staffing, and minimize unnecessary transitions between buildings as students progress through the continuum of services.

These investments reflect MERSD's commitment to inclusive practice, equity of access, and the delivery of high-quality specialized instruction within the least restrictive environment.

Technology / Vocational Programs

Aligned with Technology Instruction Policies & Program Requirements)

Technology instruction at Essex Elementary builds upon the district's broader Technology Instruction Policies and Program Requirements by ensuring that digital tools, resources, and learning experiences are embedded throughout the instructional day. The program is intentionally designed to provide both dedicated instruction, where foundational digital skills, coding concepts, and responsible online behavior are explicitly taught, and integrated instruction, where students apply these skills within core subjects such as literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies. This balanced approach ensures that students receive focused skill development while also experiencing authentic, real-world application across the curriculum.

Students engage in dedicated Digital Literacy and Computer Science (DLCS) instruction as well as integrated technology use within core curriculum areas. The program is designed to build strong foundations in digital literacy, research, critical thinking, and problem solving, ensuring that students develop the skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex digital landscape. Students have hands-on opportunities with a variety of technology tools and platforms, including introductory coding, robotics, multimedia creation, and collaborative virtual environments. This integrated approach emphasizes creativity, communication, teamwork, and responsible engagement as digital citizens.

A dedicated technology learning space will support both quiet, independent exploration and active, project-based collaboration. This environment will allow students to engage deeply in computational thinking, engineering concepts, and design practices, while also providing opportunities for small-group instruction, guided inquiry, and iterative prototyping. Instruction includes explicit guidance in safe and ethical online behavior, helping students understand appropriate communication, information evaluation, data privacy, and cyber-safety expectations.

Technology access within classrooms includes interactive display boards, audio amplification systems, and sufficient space and electrical capacity for 1:1 device charging carts. Flexible access to shared devices allows students to create, research, communicate, and problem solve as part of everyday learning. As technologies continue to evolve, the school's infrastructure must support adaptable use of new tools, platforms, and applications.

To sustain continuous, high-quality access, the building must be equipped with a robust network infrastructure and building-wide wireless coverage capable of supporting hundreds of devices simultaneously. Reliable bandwidth, device management systems, and network security will be essential to ensure seamless instructional use and equitable access. Together, these elements create a technology-rich learning environment that empowers students to explore new ideas, innovate collaboratively, and develop the digital literacy and problem-solving skills necessary for future academic and workplace success.

Transportation Policies

Transportation to Essex Elementary School will include a combination of bus, car, bicycle, and walking routes, reflecting the diverse needs of students and families within the district. Arrival and dismissal procedures will be designed to ensure safe, efficient, and predictable traffic flow. Designated bus loops will allow for streamlined boarding and unloading, while clearly marked carline procedures will reduce congestion and maintain separation between vehicle traffic and pedestrian pathways. Safe and accessible walking and biking routes will be integrated into the site plan, encouraging healthy habits and supporting students who live within proximity to the school.
Adequate parent pick-up and drop-off areas will be located near the gymnasium and cafeteria wing to minimize congestion in academic corridors and maximize student safety. Outdoor circulation areas will be designed to provide clear sightlines, age-appropriate supervision, and minimal conflict between cars, buses, and pedestrian traffic. Bicycle racks, crosswalks, and appropriate signage will help promote safe active transportation options.

In addition, the site should include a dedicated Pre-K drop-off zone that minimizes exposure to high-volume traffic areas and allows families to escort students directly to the early childhood entrance. This area will provide short-term parking for strollers and car seats, allow space for adult-to-adult handoff, and ensure that early learners are not navigating busy corridors or long exterior walks during peak arrival times.

This dedicated circulation pattern aligns with early childhood best practice, which emphasizes predictable, developmentally appropriate transitions, minimized exposure to high-volume traffic areas, and opportunities for direct adult-to-adult handoff. By reducing travel distance and complexity at arrival and dismissal, the design supports young learners' regulation, safety, and readiness to engage in instruction as soon as they enter the building. The separation of Pre-K circulation from older student

traffic also decreases sensory overwhelm and supports individualized pacing for students who may require additional time or assistance during transitions.

The transportation plan emphasizes accessibility and equity by ensuring that all students—regardless of mobility needs or geographic location—have consistent, reliable, and safe transportation to and from school. Walkways, curb cuts, and boarding zones will be designed to meet ADA requirements, and transportation services will be coordinated to support students with specialized needs.
Together, these strategies create a school site that is safe, efficient, welcoming, and responsive to the full range of transportation needs within the Essex Elementary community.

Functional & Spatial Relationships and Key Programmatic Adjacencies

The design of the new Essex Elementary School will embody MERSD's commitment to student-centered, inclusive, and collaborative learning. Functional and spatial relationships will be organized to support the district's instructional philosophy—fostering flexibility, connection, and equitable access to high-quality learning environments for all students.

The building will be structured around grade-level classroom neighborhoods, each designed to promote a sense of belonging while encouraging movement, collaboration, and cross-grade interaction. Adjacencies between core classrooms, small-group rooms, and shared learning spaces will strengthen instructional alignment, collaboration, and community cohesion across grade levels.

Classroom Neighborhoods and Small-Group Learning
Each neighborhood will include a cluster of classrooms with direct access to small-group rooms and shared collaboration spaces, supporting inclusive instruction, the district's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), and flexible grouping structures. These localized breakout areas will allow for differentiated learning and strengthen opportunities for students to lead, collaborate, and engage in hands-on work with increasing independence. By providing multiple pathways for interaction—student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher—the design reinforces our commitment to dynamic, active learning environments.

Early Learning Adjacencies
The Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten classrooms will anchor the lower-elementary neighborhood, featuring direct outdoor access, age-appropriate restrooms, flexible play areas, and sensory spaces that foster exploration and independence. These classrooms will include child-height fixtures, built-in storage, and adjacent therapy or small-group rooms to support integrated services for students with special needs. Early learning spaces will set the tone for the school's design—nurturing curiosity, creativity, and belonging.

Specialist and Experiential Learning Spaces

Specialist classrooms will provide environments purpose-built for creativity, experimentation, and interdisciplinary learning:

- Science spaces will include sinks, counter space, waterproof/non-slip flooring, and multiple outlets, designed to support inquiry, safe circulation, and technology integration.
- Visual Arts rooms will feature a kiln room with proper ventilation, multi-height sinks, drying racks, and storage cabinets, with ample natural and adjustable lighting for studio work and student exhibitions.
- Music instruction will occur in a large movement-oriented classroom with risers, instrument storage, a small lesson room, and acoustic treatments to ensure sound quality and reduce noise transfer. The music area will be located near the stage or multipurpose gathering space to support performance-based learning.

The Library/Media Center will serve as a literacy and innovation hub, connecting students to both print and digital resources. Centrally located for easy access, it will include flexible furniture, research zones, and media-creation technology. The library will also serve as a collaboration space for interdisciplinary projects and whole-school programming, aligning with MERSD's emphasis on inquiry, communication, and technology integration.

Physical Education, Wellness, and Community Gathering Spaces

The Gymnasium and Wellness Suite will include a regulation gym floor with padded walls, seating for wellness instruction, Project Adventure installations, and accessible storage. An adjacent office for physical education staff will provide proximity for supervision and instructional planning. The gym will support both daily instruction and community use, reflecting MERSD's belief that schools serve as centers of community engagement.

A flexible cafetorium or multipurpose space will serve as the heart of school gatherings, accommodating assemblies, performances, and family events while maintaining appropriate separation from instructional areas for security and acoustics. This space supports the district's goal of providing a shared, large-scale school community environment where students and families can gather in small, large, or whole-school groupings, reinforcing the school's role as a hub of community connection.

All shared spaces will be designed with universal design principles, ensuring accessibility for individuals with mobility, sensory, and physical challenges. The building's design will reflect MERSD's core value of inclusion—ensuring every student and community member can engage fully in the life of the school.

Teacher Collaboration and Professional Spaces

As outlined in the Teacher Planning section, collaboration is central to MERSD's instructional model. To support this, each classroom neighborhood will include teacher collaboration rooms and professional work areas that are easily accessible from instructional spaces. These areas will provide technology

access for data analysis and lesson design, flexible seating for team meetings, and storage for shared instructional resources.

A centralized professional workroom or staff commons will support all-staff collaboration, professional development, and interdisciplinary planning. These adult-centered environments will be designed for comfort, productivity, and reflection, emphasizing that supporting educator collaboration enhances student learning and aligns with MERSD's culture of continuous improvement.

Functional Organization Summary

The organization of Essex Elementary School reflects the district's guiding priorities:

- **Student-Centered Design:** Learning neighborhoods that foster inclusion, flexibility, and belonging.
- **Collaborative Culture:** Adjacencies that promote teamwork, co-teaching, and shared resource use.
- **Community Connection:** Central gathering and performance spaces that unite students, families, and the broader community.
- **Future Readiness:** Specialized, technology-rich environments that support interdisciplinary, hands-on learning.
- **Universal Access:** Spaces designed for safety, comfort, and full participation by all members of the school community.

Together, these functional and spatial relationships create a cohesive, flexible, and connected learning environment that harnesses the energy of children, fosters student leadership, extends learning beyond the traditional school day, and supports the school's role as a vibrant hub for the community.

Supervision and Shared Space Utilization

Shared breakout rooms, collaboration zones, and project spaces will be scheduled through a digital reservation system to ensure equitable access across grade levels. Interior glazing and transparent sightlines allow staff to supervise students working independently or in small groups without leaving core instructional areas. Learning neighborhoods are intentionally compact, minimizing travel and promoting safety. This design normalizes flexible grouping and student agency while preserving continuous instructional oversight.

Security & Visual Access Requirements

Student safety is a top priority for the Manchester-Essex Regional School District, and the design of the new Essex Elementary School will reflect contemporary best practices in school safety, supervision, and emergency response. The district maintains a comprehensive emergency operations framework that is

reviewed annually in collaboration with local law enforcement, fire officials, town emergency management personnel, and district leadership. Annual audits and developmentally appropriate drills ensure that protocols remain current and aligned to state requirements. The district's Medical Emergency Response Plan (MERV) was most recently submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in September 2025 and will continue to be updated annually.

During the school day, the building will maintain a single, controlled point of entry, improving upon the current model through the addition of a secure, double-door vestibule. Visitors will be required to verify identity and purpose through a staffed reception desk and electronic access-control system before gaining entry to instructional areas. Credentialing, screening, and check-in procedures will reinforce a layered approach to access control while maintaining a welcoming environment for families and community members.

The building will include zoned access, allowing Essex Elementary to safely support community use during evenings and weekends. Access will be granted only to designated program areas—such as the gymnasium, cafeteria/kitchen, multipurpose/performance spaces, select restrooms, and the Learning Commons—while academic wings remain locked and isolated through controlled door hardware. Adjoining access-control points will allow school leadership to initiate partial or full lock-out configurations based on operational needs.

A comprehensive digital surveillance system will monitor critical public areas, entrances, major circulation corridors, parking lots, playgrounds, pedestrian walkways, and perimeter access points. Camera feeds will be accessible to school leadership and district safety teams and, when appropriate, interoperable with local law enforcement during emergency events. Exterior perimeter access roads will enable emergency vehicles to reach multiple sides of the building, improving response times for medical, fire, or security incidents. To support emergency response, the facility will include Knox Boxes (secure key storage systems) for Essex police and fire personnel, ensuring rapid access during urgent situations. Clear signage and multiple egress points will assist responders and enhance evacuation safety.

Classroom neighborhoods will be designed with clear sightlines to reduce isolated or concealed areas. Lockable classroom doors with age-appropriate hardware and remote lockdown capability will support swift protective action if needed. Emergency notification technology, two-way communication systems, and integrated access control will align with district safety protocols.

Site circulation will reinforce safe movement patterns by locating parking, bus loops, and parent pick-up/drop-off areas near the main entry, allowing staff to maintain continuous visual oversight during arrival and dismissal. Clearly delineated pedestrian pathways and accessible routes will support walkers, bicyclists, students with mobility needs, and families using strollers or adaptive devices.

These architectural and operational strategies will create a welcoming, developmentally appropriate environment that balances physical safety with the district's commitment to positive school culture, student belonging, and community partnership. The school will remain both secure and accessible—supporting learning, family engagement, and civic activity—while embedding multiple layers of safety that protect students, staff, and community members every day.

Typical Day & Week in the Life of a Student

A typical day at Essex Elementary School reflects the district's commitment to student-centered, developmentally responsive learning that nurtures the academic, social, and emotional growth of every child. The day begins at 8:25 a.m. with Morning Meeting, a daily community-building routine that strengthens relationships, sets a positive tone for learning, and reinforces social-emotional skills aligned with MERSD's Vision of the Graduate.

Following Morning Meeting, students engage in a Literacy Block that blends whole-group instruction, small-group guided reading and writing workshops, and opportunities for independent practice. Instruction emphasizes authentic reading, writing, and speaking experiences that develop critical thinking and communication skills.

After a brief movement and snack break, students transition to Mathematics, where lessons build conceptual understanding through hands-on exploration, inquiry, and problem-solving. Students work collaboratively and independently using manipulatives, visual models, and technology to strengthen reasoning and perseverance.

Midday includes lunch and recess, essential times for play, social connection, and physical well-being. In the afternoon, students participate in Science or History/Social Science experiences that promote curiosity and exploration through project-based investigations and inquiry learning. These lessons connect to real-world phenomena and help students understand their roles as informed, engaged citizens.

Sample Student Schedule

	Activity
8:25 AM	Arrival & Morning Meeting (community-building, SEL focus)
8:45 AM	Literacy Block (whole group mini-lesson; small-group guided reading/writing; independent practice)
10:15 AM	Movement/Snack
10:30 AM	Math (concept lesson; manipulatives; small-group practice/centers)
11:45 AM	Lunch & Recess
12:30 PM	Science or History/Social Sciences (hands-on investigations or inquiry projects)
1:15 PM	Specialist (e.g., PE, Art, Music, Library/Research, Technology)

2:00 PM	SEL/Closing Circle; Intervention/Enrichment as scheduled
2:55 PM	Dismissal

Each day also includes a specialist class—such as Art, Music, Physical Education, Library/Research, or Technology/Engineering—that supports creative expression, movement, and interdisciplinary learning. These experiences expand student engagement and reinforce the district's belief in educating the whole child through multiple pathways of learning and success.

The day concludes with a Closing Circle, during which students reflect on their learning, celebrate accomplishments, and set goals for the next day. Teachers also provide targeted intervention and enrichment as part of MERSD's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, ensuring that every learner is appropriately challenged and supported. Dismissal at 2:45 p.m. concludes a day intentionally designed to balance rigor, engagement, and belonging.

Week in the Life of a Student

Across the week, the Essex Elementary schedule provides a balanced, integrated learning experience aligned with MERSD's strategic priorities: Authentic Learning for Every Student, Social-Emotional Learning, and Inclusive Culture. Instructional time is intentionally distributed among literacy, mathematics, science, history/social science, and SEL, ensuring coherence across disciplines. Students participate in six 45-minute specialist blocks each week, providing consistent opportunities to explore the arts, movement, research, and technology. Within this structure, intervention and enrichment blocks are embedded to provide targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports based on progress-monitoring data and student need.

This approach reflects MERSD's commitment to differentiation, collaboration, and continuous growth, ensuring that every student engages in meaningful, connected learning experiences that promote curiosity, confidence, and compassion. The weekly rhythm fosters both academic achievement and a strong sense of community, embodying the district's mission to empower students as capable, creative, and caring learners prepared to thrive in an ever-changing world

Week In the Life Overview

Activity	Locations	Benefit
ELA (Literacy)	Classroom; Breakout rooms; Learning commons	Reading/writing foundations; differentiation.
Mathematics	Classroom; Small-group rooms; Project labs	Fluency, modeling, problem-solving.
Science	Project areas; Maker space; Outdoor zones	Inquiry, engineering, authentic investigation.
Social Studies	Classroom; Collaboration zones; Presentation areas	Civic learning, culture, research skills.
PE (2×)	Gym; Fields; Movement zones	Fitness, coordination, readiness for learning.
Visual Arts	Art studio; Project zones; Display corridors	Creative expression, reflection, belonging.
Music	Music room; Practice room; Performance space	Rhythm, ensemble, confidence.
Library / Media	Learning commons; Breakout rooms	Digital citizenship, inquiry, reading.
Tech / Engineering	Maker space; Robotics rooms	Computational thinking, prototyping.
Outdoor Learning	Outdoor classroom; Gardens; Trails	Environmental literacy, sensory regulation.
Intervention (MTSS)	Small-group rooms; Support spaces	Targeted instruction and enrichment.
SEL & Community	Classroom meeting areas; Commons	Belonging, empathy, conflict resolution.

Space Implications

The daily and weekly rhythm of instruction at Essex Elementary underscores the need for flexible, adaptive spaces that support a full range of learning experiences—from active collaboration to quiet reflection. Classrooms should accommodate whole-group instruction, small-group collaboration, and individualized learning, with movable furniture and integrated technology to enable seamless transitions throughout the day.

The schedule's emphasis on project-based and inquiry learning in literacy, mathematics, science, and history/social science highlights the need for breakout areas, extended learning commons, and shared project spaces within grade-level neighborhoods. These areas will allow students to engage in investigations, hands-on projects, and interdisciplinary collaboration beyond the classroom setting.

Frequent integration of social-emotional learning and movement calls for access to outdoor learning areas, calming spaces, and flexible furniture configurations that can shift between active engagement and restorative practices. Specialist spaces—such as art, music, physical education, library/research, and technology/engineering—should be centrally located and easily accessible from classroom neighborhoods to support the flow of the daily schedule and interdisciplinary learning.

Finally, spaces designed for intervention and enrichment must be embedded within or adjacent to classroom neighborhoods, providing visibility, accessibility, and proximity for small-group instruction and

individualized support. These design features will ensure that the Essex Elementary School facility fully supports the district's vision of authentic, inclusive, and student-centered learning for every child.

Play, Movement, and Multi-Use Indoor Community Space

MERSD is committed to play as part of a comprehensive educational program. Multiple daily recess opportunities provide practice in communication, negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving, and self-regulation, reinforcing classroom learning and supporting overall well-being (per AAP guidance). Play supports creativity, peer connection, physical development, and the acquisition of critical social-emotional skills.

Recess promotes social and emotional learning and development for children by offering them a time to engage in peer interactions in which they practice and role play essential social skills. This type of activity, under adult supervision, extends teaching in the classroom to augment the school's social climate. Through play at recess, children learn valuable communication skills, including negotiation, cooperation, sharing, and problem solving as well as coping skills, such as perseverance and self-control. These skills become fundamental, lifelong personal tools. Recess offers a child a necessary, socially structured means for managing stress. By adapting and adjusting to the complex school environment, children augment and extend their cognitive development in the classroom.
(American Academy of Pediatrics)

At Essex Elementary, students enjoy multiple recess periods that promote social interaction, creativity, and physical activity. The school currently provides age-appropriate playgrounds, a grass playing field, and a large blacktop area that can be cleared for winter recess, ensuring consistent outdoor play opportunities throughout the year. However, coastal climate conditions, seasonal precipitation, cold extremes, and saturated fields limit outdoor access during significant portions of the school year.

Future design considerations include differentiated play structures for younger and older students, accessible play that is ADA compliant and allows all peers to participate in play together, a plowed and accessible area for winter months, and a covered outdoor space for use during inclement weather. The outdoor play space should support skill development and application across gross motor, fine motor, creativity, collaborative teamwork, and exploration/curiosity, while fostering a connection to sense of place. In addition, a flexible indoor movement room is necessary to maintain equitable access to recess and active play when outdoor conditions are unsafe or unavailable.

Play and movement are essential components of healthy child development and are deeply embedded within the instructional and social-emotional framework of Essex Elementary School. Research and experience both reinforce that students learn best when they have frequent opportunities to move, collaborate, regulate, and explore through active, developmentally responsive engagement. At the

elementary level, play supports executive functioning, builds problem-solving skills, strengthens peer relationships, and provides critical outlets for sensory regulation.

In order to maintain consistent access to movement, particularly during indoor recess periods, the school must be supported by spaces designed to host safe and structured play during times when outdoor environments are unavailable. The primary gymnasium is regularly scheduled for instructional delivery of the physical education curriculum and wellness programming, leaving limited availability for concurrent indoor recess blocks, student movement breaks, and grade-level common activities. Without an additional dedicated space, these needs place competing demands on the master schedule, risking reduced access to mandated instructional minutes and increased dysregulation in common areas.

For students receiving specialized services, access to indoor movement spaces is not a convenience — it is a therapeutic requirement. Occupational therapy, physical therapy, adaptive movement, gross-motor development, and sensory regulation activities are integral to many students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). These services benefit from access to equipment that must be safely stored and deployed in environments that allow climbing, stretching, balance, full-body movement, and fine-motor practice. The primary gym is often acoustically and socially overstimulating for these students and is rarely available during high-volume instructional blocks. A smaller multi-use movement room provides a quieter, developmentally appropriate space that can support individualized instruction, reduce stigma, and meet the requirements of 603 CMR 28.03 regarding appropriate instructional environments aligned to the least restrictive setting.

Beyond recess and therapeutic programming, flexible interior space plays an important role in supporting the school's whole-child approach. Grade-level community meetings, author visits, robotics demonstrations, STEAM showcases, family engagement nights, student leadership assemblies, and project-based learning exhibitions require space that is sized appropriately for small- and medium-group gatherings. The primary gym, while suitable for large events, is often too large, too loud, or acoustically reflective for younger learners, students who experience sensory sensitivities, or programs that rely on spoken word and presentation. A smaller multi-use space offers improved acoustics, moderated lighting, and a more age-appropriate scale.

As a community hub, Essex Elementary also extends learning beyond the traditional school day. Before- and after-school programming, enrichment activities, youth recreation, town partnership initiatives, and intergenerational programs benefit from access to a community-facing space that can be separated from academic neighborhoods while maintaining safe, secure entry. During evenings and weekends, the flexible multi-use room provides the community with an adaptable venue that supports recreation, meeting space, and connection without compromising the security of the instructional core. This zoning strategy aligns with MSBA guidance that supports separation of community access from instructional spaces for safety and operational efficiency.

The design response to these needs is a smaller, flexible indoor gym/large-group movement room located adjacent to specialist neighborhoods and accessible to occupational and physical therapy staff. The room should include acoustically absorbent surfaces, durable and impact-resistant flooring, storage for therapeutic and gross-motor equipment, and sufficient ceiling height to support climbing structures, movement circuits, and fitness activities. By distributing access to movement opportunities across the day, this space also reduces behavioral challenges, increases readiness to learn, and supports transition routines that lower sensory load.

Without this secondary movement space, Essex Elementary would face frequent scheduling conflicts; limited access to recess during inclement weather; reduced availability of therapeutic environments; and fewer meaningful opportunities for grade-level collaboration, community partnerships, and student showcases. These constraints would disproportionately affect students with disabilities, younger learners, and those who rely on movement to self-regulate. Including a smaller indoor multi-use gym ensures that the school's learning environment remains developmentally attuned, instructionally flexible, operationally efficient, and community responsive.

Extended Day / Community Programs

Essex Elementary School plays a central role in the civic life of the community, extending well beyond the regular school day. The district operates a before-school program called the Breakfast Club, providing safe, reliable care and supervision that supports smooth morning transitions for families. After-school programming is offered through a combination of district-run enrichment activities, school-based student clubs, and on-site YMCA childcare services. Together, these offerings promote social development, creativity, physical activity, and academic support in a structured, nurturing environment.

Looking ahead, a new or renovated facility should anticipate the potential future development of an Essex Parks & Recreation program that could function as a partner to Essex Elementary, similar to the existing relationship between Memorial School and Manchester Parks & Recreation. The Memorial School building project intentionally included dedicated space for after-school and summer programming; planning for analogous capacity in Essex would ensure equitable access to recreational enrichment across both towns.

During non-school hours, key areas of the building — including the gymnasium, cafeteria, library, and outdoor fields— are regularly used for athletics, community recreation, cultural events, concerts, intergenerational programming, and civic gatherings. Essex Elementary also serves as the venue for annual and fall Town Meetings and hosts community breakfasts and other municipal events. This extended use reinforces MERSD's belief that schools are vital public resources and centers for lifelong learning.

The gymnasium is heavily utilized by local youth sports programs and is currently the home site for junior varsity, recreation league, and middle school basketball. To continue supporting these programs safely and effectively, the new or renovated facility should include a regulation-size court with appropriate clearances, resilient athletic flooring, adequate spectator space, accessible restrooms, and storage for athletic equipment. These features will allow for league play, practices, and weekend community athletics while reducing scheduling pressure across district facilities.

To balance community access with student safety, the design of the new or renovated building will ensure that community-use spaces are located near a secure, controlled entry and can be fully sectioned off from academic wings during after-hours use. Access controls, visibility features, and strategic circulation patterns will allow evening and weekend programming without opening classroom neighborhoods or student support spaces.

The school's enrichment program extends student learning through authentic, hands-on experiences that build curiosity and interdisciplinary connections. In partnership with the Essex PTO and the Spaulding Education Fund, students engage in visiting-artist workshops, STEM demonstrations, author talks, music residencies, and experiential programming. These activities occur at both grade-level and whole-school scales, typically hosted in flexible gathering areas sized for large groups.

To support these functions, the new or renovated facility should include a multi-use performance and assembly space equipped with audiovisual technology, stage lighting, acoustic treatments, and secure storage. Such a venue will accommodate assemblies, celebrations of learning, enrichment events, and community programming while enabling smooth transitions between instructional and extracurricular experiences.

The Manchester Essex Regional School District's Middle High School athletics program currently faces significant limitations due to the absence of a local track facility. As a result, despite having enough student participation to merit its own independent track and field team, the District must participate as part of the Gloucester High School track program in order to access a regulation track for practices and competitions. This cooperative arrangement creates transportation challenges, reduces program autonomy, and limits the District's ability to provide consistent, developmentally appropriate training schedules for student-athletes.

Developing a combined turf field and perimeter walking/running track at the new or renovated Essex Elementary School would directly address these needs while expanding athletic access across grade levels. The facility would also serve as a dedicated training venue for the Middle High School cross country team, providing a reliable surface for interval work, pacing practice, and conditioning. Currently, cross country training relies on a mix of sidewalks, roadways, and open spaces—settings that can present safety and supervision challenges. A purpose-built running loop would significantly enhance safety, consistency, and coaching effectiveness.

Across the district, athletic field capacity is limited and highly scheduled, resulting in teams practicing late into the evening—sometimes until 9:00 PM. These late schedules are not optimal for student health, sleep, academic readiness, or social-emotional wellbeing. Additional rectangular field space would relieve scheduling pressure, increase access, and allow for safer, more developmentally appropriate practice times.

Approximately 70% of Manchester Essex Middle High School students participate in athletics, underscoring the importance of facilities that promote engagement, teamwork, wellness, and belonging. Currently, all interscholastic competitions—except baseball—take place in Manchester. Establishing a competition-capable venue in Essex would increase geographic equity and better integrate Essex students into the district's after-school athletic life.

In addition to school athletics, a turf field and track would support youth sports, recreation leagues, and community programming. A perimeter track would provide safe, accessible activity space for older adults, families, and residents—supporting intergenerational fitness and reinforcing the school's role as a community hub. Synthetic turf provides reliable playability during inclement weather, reducing cancellations and minimizing field closures due to overuse. Paired with a regulation track, the facility would increase capacity for practice and competition, reduce reliance on off-site partners, and enable year-round conditioning.

A combined turf field and track at Essex Elementary would:

- Enable Manchester Essex to operate an independent track and field program
- Provide a dedicated training facility for cross country
- Reduce reliance on cooperative agreements and transportation
- Improve scheduling equity across teams, seasons, and age groups
- Reduce late practice times, supporting student health and academic readiness
- Expand youth sports and community recreation opportunities within Essex
- Strengthen Essex's connection to district athletics
- Provide an accessible walking track for older adults and families
- Enhance community resilience, serving as a potential emergency support asset

Strategically located, well-lit, and adjacent to parking, this facility would expand regional athletic capacity while exposing Essex Elementary students to healthy role models and active lifestyles each day. This investment aligns with MERSD's commitment to the whole child, promoting physical wellness, social connection, equitable access, and authentic community engagement.