

Tongue River Elementary has Bighorns theme: New school features landscapes, scenes from the mountains under which it sits

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Kristin Magnusson | The Sheridan Press The scenery in the new Tongue River Elementary School mirrors that of the Bighorn Mountains.

RANCHESTER — Every inch of space of Tongue River Elementary was thoughtfully designed with useful purpose. It reflects the beauty of its surroundings and the beauty and joy of the people who work there. The faculty, staff and students were involved throughout the design and building process.

“The faculty picked out everything from which wing do they want to be in to what kind of furniture they needed,” Principal Deb Hofmeier said. “I think their love and joy comes through. It’s a friendly place to be.”

There are three wings — one for kindergarten and first grade, one for second and third grade and one for fourth and fifth grade. Each has a mural with a mountain scene; one of a high mountain lake, one of Antelope Butte and one of Blacktooth Peak. They are made from photographs taken by middle school teacher and local photographer Tim Doolin. The door signage also includes photographs taken locally.

“When we first started doing the planning for our building, we said that we really wanted it to reflect the Bighorn Mountains and the beauty of the area where we live,” Hofmeier said. “They let us set up our wings with a riparian wing, a mountain meadow wing and a mountain alpine wing. The color schemes match the photographs in each wing.”

The kindergarten and first-grade classrooms each have a bathroom and water fountain. There are three learning enrichment areas in the hallway right outside the classrooms. There is a huge sandbox with the sunshade from the old school outside. The building contractors provided trucks and tractors for the children to play with in the sandbox.

“We actually added extra square footage in our hallway with built-ins for three areas for learning enrichment, what we call intervention and enrichment,” second-grade teacher and IT director Jesse Hinkhouse said. “Kids can be pulled out really quick within a matter of a few feet of their door, so they don’t lose any transition time, and they can get more bang for your buck with what they’re learning.”

Each classroom is set up with a touch-screen Mondo Pad computer, white boards, surround sound, audio jacks and iPad charging stations in the cupboards with 24 plug-ins.

A mountain-theme playground is accessible from the common area. It is complete with 12 swings, a zip line and rubber footing.

Common classrooms are in the middle of the building including the library and computer labs, music, reading and science.

There is an art nook in the cafeteria so the space can also be used for art classes.

Two computer labs are on either side of the library. Each has 26 computers, one with Apple computers and the other with PCs. The special education classrooms have two labs of six computers in each.

The music room has storage for instruments and is big enough for the entire fifth grade, 45 students, to practice band together.

“There are built-in risers that wheel out to make it easy to practice for concerts,” Hinkhouse said. “We can have concerts in our own building, which we never had the space to be able to do before.”

The level library has its own room, which is organized in sections for levels A to Z with books for guided reading.

“We run a title one reading program,” Hofmeier said. “Over the years we have collected books to use for guided reading. There are six copies of each book for each reading level.”

At the end of the hallway is a room for science. A garden, complete with a fruit orchard, will be planted outside of this room, next to a greenhouse.

“Every class has a 30-minute block that they get to come in here for hands-on science rather than just reading about the science,” Hinkhouse said. “They will learn about electricity and be able to do dissections.”

Next to the gym is a ski room, complete with skis, poles and boots.

“There are two schools in the state of Wyoming that offer cross-country skiing,” Hofmeier said. “We are one of them. We will be able to ski over to the middle school and ski around the loop of the football field.”

The gymnasium is more than two times the size of the one at the old building. A hand-painted mural of a bald eagle family was painted on a wall by Brett Schwieder, the art teacher for the middle and high schools.

“Brett painted a mural at the high school of a big and tough grown-up eagle with talons,” Hofmeier said. “The middle school has a scraggly teenage eagle whose head isn’t completely white. He decided that a mom, dad and baby eagles would be the best theme for this school. He designed it, blew it up with an opaque projector, drew it on the wall with black magic marker and stood there and painted the whole thing.”

The students visited during the ground breaking, when the steel beams had been erected and then again at the end of the school year last year so they could see their classrooms for this school year.

“The kids brought notes and cookies for the workers every time we came up,” Hofmeier said. “They got to sign their names on the steel beams. The contractors were really good about allowing all of us access throughout the project.”

Four soccer fields will be put on the lawn in front of the building. The YMCA will be able to have soccer games on these fields.

At the entrance of the building will be a statue of an eagle. The school has purchased one of the statues from the Sheridan Public Arts Committee — “The Great Eagle’s Power” by Chris Navarro. It will be placed out on the pinnacle, perhaps on one of the boulders that decorate the landscaping around the building.

On Aug. 26, TRE will have an open house complete with a ribbon cutting ceremony, dinner and tours.

The high school band will provide music at the event and Sen. Mike Enzi is sending a flag that was flown over the White House for the flag raising ceremony.

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