SOUTH CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL’S
21ST CENTURY LEGACY

Moving buildings after over six decades presented a variety of challenges and opportunities for South Christian High School. First, and foremost, the school’s leadership wanted to create a space that would help it meet its mission for the next 100 years. Practically speaking, that meant developing an educational setting where students and teachers could leverage technology and learn, but also gather, worship and build community.

To achieve that successfully, building South Christian High School took people with open minds who listened well and worked together. This project was based on planning, value engineering and field design.

Located at 7979 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Byron Center, MI 49315, the new South Christian High School accommodates 700 students and 56 classrooms, a 1,100-seat auditorium with balcony, STEM facilities, a full kitchen, home economics, wood and metal shops and a 1,100-seat auditorium with balcony. A wide variety of community spaces help bring students together with flexible furniture and common areas for viewing projects, and classrooms with glass doors and walls.

The construction of South Christian High School involved over 66 different trade contractors, including 12 concrete contractors, 3 concrete suppliers, 3 electrical contractors, 5 site work contractors, 2 LPDA contractors, multiple painters, 4 HVAC and controls contractors, and multiple subcontractors who had ties. In total, more than 40 tradespeople who worked on this project are graduates of South Christian School and at least 10% of the workforce for this project was involved in the school in some capacity or have kids in the school. Even high school students worked at the school as their summer job or participated in design focus groups.

Our team worked with the architect and the client to research and implement value engineering, providing cost savings for the school. For example, having re-evaluated the plans, everyone agreed that a larger shop space would offer more to students. Having had shop experience themselves, our team saw a great opportunity in creating a metal shop for the up-and-coming generation skilled tradesmen. The enrollment in all shop classes continued to grow during construction. Subsequently, by working with teachers and instructors a metal and machining shop was added adjacent to the woodshop.

Adding the machine shop was challenging, as its construction was happening within a few months of the school being opened. Although, this change did not cost extra due to in-kind gifts and utilizing existing space. Our team as well as the school knew that this was the best way to create space that flowed well and provided additional capability for young people to gain exposure to tool and die practices.

The South Christian High School project is unique because it was a community effort that was in the making since 2001. Extensive collaboration between AMDG Architects and the school’s constituents helped define and incorporate the key design objectives early and throughout the process. Thanks to the community effort, this school offers more than college prep, but central skills for life and knowledge of skilled trades. We worked to check all the boxes that make up a good school and then we looked even further to create a place of learning that can be flexible and unique for the next generations.

The school and trade contractors looked at this as not just an opportunity to build a building but also to build a place for the community, where many of the people building it were community members themselves. Most in the community will attend a basketball game, their kids and neighbors will visit the school, the outdoor amphitheater, or the auditorium that can hold a small chapel or a full-scale musical with flying Mary Poppins.

The involvement of multiple subcontractors in various categories required intensive planning, thought and discussions. Everyone was invested and wanted to be part of this project. Through communication, collaboration methods, and the implementation of value-add opportunities came in under budget by over 10% on the project. Our team worked to maximize these connections and figure out what sections of the school everyone’s talents would be best suited for. Through communication and collaboration, the value-add opportunities were successfully implemented and the project came in within budget.

The South Christian High School project embodies what we do as a company – “Building for Life.” This building is special because it was built on a 60+ year old legacy. It was built to preserve the culture of the school, yet it was not built on a basic formula. This project was a way to create a place for the future through the hands of the current generation.