

FREEZE FRAME

Encore Worthy

Booker High School's performing arts center is a beacon for creativity.

BOOKER HIGH SCHOOL'S recently renovated performing arts center is a state-of-the-art facility designed to serve not only the nearly 350 students in Booker's Visual and Performing Arts magnet program, but also the broader Sarasota community. The centerpiece is the main 406-seat theater, which now has updated audio-visual integration, balcony seating and tiered orchestra levels. The facility also includes a new black box theater that seats 125 and offers an intimate setting for smaller-scale performances. There's also an expanded public lobby that doubles as an art gallery and event space, as well as audio-assistive technology, wheelchair lifts and cutting-edge lighting and rigging equipment. "It's not just an auditorium," says Booker principal Rachel Shelley, a driving force behind the project. "There's not a facility that can compare. This is a classroom, and the kids now have what they deserve." —KIM DOLEATTO

Architect Ekta Desai is a partner and design lead at Schenkel Shultz, which worked on the \$28 million renovation. She credits Shelley's ambitious vision for allowing the firm to think big. "We wanted this to go beyond education and become a true community space," says Desai. The design team worked with faculty, students and alumni to ensure the space meets the school's needs and aspirations.



The upgraded facility includes a dedicated costume shop with industrial washers and dryers, a fitting stage and expanded storage. The addition of new dressing rooms ensures students have the space they need without having to use classrooms, which presented logistical conflicts in the past.

Beyond performances, the new center provides opportunities for engagement and education. "We hosted a black-and-white photo exhibit where students learned to hang their work, create placards and curate a professional space," says assistant principal Greg Rumph. "It mirrors what working artists do."

The center honors the legacy of Emma E. Booker, a pioneering Black educator who became the school's namesake. A new mural pays tribute to her.

For Courtney Smith, Booker's Visual and Performing Arts coordinator and an alumna of the program, the new facility has personal significance. "This school is a hidden gem," she says. "I hope this space becomes a beacon that shows off our accomplishments and reminds the community of the importance of the arts and humanity."



"We hope it inspires the next generation," says Desai. "Access to the arts is so important, and this space opens doors for so many." Smith says, "In the long term, I envision this as a hub, whether it's students presenting their craft, hosting artist events or welcoming recruiters. This space will amplify the incredible talent here." 📸