

**ULI Chicago 9th Annual Vision Awards
July 11, 2024**



Project Finalist: Johnson College Prep | Noble Schools

Project Team:

Developer/Owner: Noble Schools

Architecture Firm: OKW Architects

General Contractor: UJAMAA Construction

Project Description: In a city of distinct, vibrant neighborhoods, Noble Schools operates 17 charter public high schools. With the vast majority (90+%) of its student body made up of minority and low-income students, Noble has made it their mission to create equitable and positive futures for those they are entrusted to educate. Located in the East Englewood neighborhood, Johnson College Prep serves 750-800 students. With several competing schools investing in their own campuses, Noble saw an opportunity to elevate their school as a viable option for local families and create an opportunity for greater connection to the community. Principal Jonas Cleaves recalls his first day at the school in 2019, calling the entry “depressing.” The beige entryway was non-descript, bland, and the interior was dark and uninspiring. Noble’s leadership outlined a vision of a bright, open entry that welcomed its students, activated the interior, and engaged with the surrounding neighborhood. With a modest budget of \$2.9M, it was crucial to work strategically to maximize every dollar’s impact on the daily experience of Johnson College Prep’s student body, faculty, and staff. OKW set out to reimagine the entrance so it could function as an aspirational beacon to the community. We replaced the beige walls and dark, cramped entry with a soaring, glassy, three-story volume. Capping this entry was a monumental steel trellis that added to the dramatic sense of arrival. Between the entry and the street, the project team reinvented the banal hardscape as a welcoming plaza and Front Porch for the school. This came together as a plan of interconnected elements – benches, ramps, planters, and statement signage – that seamlessly created a sense of place, purpose, and personality. Thanks to the thoughtful lighting design, the school is not only well-lit, but visible and transparent. OKW, in collaboration with Pivotal Lighting Design, incorporated dramatic light fixtures and hidden LEDs to transform the entry and plaza into a literal beacon. For neighbors, nearby businesses, and casual passersby, this means a greater connection between the school and the neighborhood. We brought personality and life to the entry’s walls with fiber cement panels specified to the school’s colors, instilling recognizable pride of place. Inside, we peeled away the exterior wall and installed enlarged ribbon windows to bring more light into the school. On the upper floors of the new entry, we removed underused administrative spaces to create colorful student lounges looking out onto Stewart Avenue. Filled with natural light and multiple seating areas, these lounges are now active, engaging spaces for studying and social engagement. Johnson College Prep’s renovation is more than a bright entry and a series of student lounges. It is a transformational project that brings a sense of place, school pride, and safety. Thanks to its presence, this stretch of East Englewood has new life and vitality. The school has left its depressing entry and impression behind, becoming a true beacon that draws the community together and reflects Noble’s promise to create positive and equitable futures for all its students.