

PATHWAY FIVE: ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Effective curricula, instruction, and child assessment are essential for enhancing development and learning in young children, especially those at risk for academic failure due to poverty, disability, or other factors. Learning is most meaningful when integrated across domains. Using high quality, appropriate, and effective curriculum and instruction can stimulate children's motivation and enthusiasm as well as support development in all domains and foster academic growth.



Key Understandings

- ▶ An environment is more than "physical" aspects and includes climate, interactions, and developmentally appropriate practices.
- ▶ Engaging environments are essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of young children as they learn through playing, discovering, and creating.
- ▶ Engaging environments should promote active exploration and relationships.
- ▶ Environments should be appropriate for children's ages and level/stage of development.
- ▶ Community resources such as parks, libraries, and local establishments (e.g., monuments, cemeteries, places of business, etc.) are environments where learning can flourish and add depth to the daily curriculum.



The Work

The Community-District Team can be instrumental in the following ways:

- ▶ Advocating for a common definition of engaging environments that will direct attention, particularly when resources are limited;
- ▶ Providing a needed common public meeting space for families (e.g., community centers, churches, etc.);
- ▶ Assuring common resources are distributed across the district and community;
- ▶ Creating and/or supporting indoor and outdoor places of learning where children learn by using their environment to explore, create, manipulate, change, question, imagine, respond, and reflect;
- ▶ Informing educators, administrators, and community members about places of learning in the community and how they can support curriculum; and
- ▶ Recruiting local business leaders and experts (e.g., outdoor designers or landscapers, college faculty, seller of playground materials or other early childhood materials, etc.) to make presentations or provide professional development on developmentally appropriate, engaging environments.

Learning is not so much an additive process, with new learning simply piling up on top of existing knowledge, as it is an active, dynamic process in which the connections are constantly changing and the structure reformatted.

– K. Patricia Cross, Education Scholar



Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

The key players in creating and maintaining engaging environments are:

Families: Families should communicate with early childhood professionals and public school personnel about their expectations for engaging environments. They need to be willing to advocate for appropriate environments for their children. With the support of the Community-District Team, they should examine the spaces, identify needs, and seek community involvement to contribute needed resources for all early childhood settings and classrooms. For example, if you want to improve the classroom library, talk to local book stores, libraries, and swap shops about donating unwanted books. Families must also communicate their expectations for outdoor learning environments that promote welcoming, respectful interactions. Families can participate in the process using their time, talents, and resources to assist their children in extending their learning at home and in the community.

Educators: Early childhood professionals, teachers, and teacher assistants are essential to advocating for, creating, and maintaining engaging indoor and outdoor environments. In order for the community to be effectively involved, the early childhood professionals must be willing to discuss the curriculum connections they see and initiate conversations with community members to seek their involvement. The Community-District Team can facilitate these interactions and establish open communications among early childhood professionals, teachers, families, and the community at large leading to the implementation of new modes of engaging environments.

Early Childhood Directors and Elementary School and District Administrators: The role of directors and administrators is to support both educators and families in their work toward the construction of engaging environments for children by creating and implementing district-wide policies for engaging environments. Directors and administrators must also advocate for and implement district-wide professional development for creating and sustaining engaging environments. Additionally, they can provide school-based support in this area. This may mean finding spaces to create outdoor learning centers and gardens, recruiting staff members to solicit donations and financial support from local businesses (e.g., home improvement stores), and committing financially and philosophically to obtaining needed resources for rich environments. Educational leaders are fundamental in connecting educators and community members and can lead Teams to action in the assessment and improvement of engaging environments.



Children: Children play a key role in the creation and maintenance of engaging environments. They must be willing to care for their environment, share materials and ideas effectively, and assist in the establishment and reinforcement of a positive community. Environments across settings should change and adapt based on children's needs and interests.

Community Members: It is essential for members of the community to be actively involved as they are charged with providing assistance in linking the school-based learning settings to those of the community. By opening the walls of the school to include the whole community, everyone benefits: students, teachers, schools, families, and communities. Having a variety of community representatives on Community-District Teams will provide needed additional perspectives. Suggested community members include (but are not limited to): faith-based leaders, museum employees, parks and recreation directors, local history buffs, retired educators, business owners, and athletic and sports enthusiasts.

University/College Liaisons: University personnel can be helpful in assisting Community-District Teams begin conversations about how to assess and improve opportunities for engaging environments. They may have access to instruments and evaluation plans that can assist communities and districts in this process. University/college faculty may also be able to provide professional development on engaging environments. Keeping abreast of current early childhood literature is another avenue for gaining effective strategies.



Sustainability

A successful Community-District Team will likely contain a diverse group of people who represent all aspects of the community. One way to encourage community member buy-in is to use resources already available by soliciting help from families and taking advantage of the community connections that they have. Once connections are established with places within the community, relationships can be continually nurtured, eventually resulting in a wealth of resources. Districts and communities who are just beginning to explore these possibilities should start slowly and think about layering on new resources each year so that the process will not become burdensome, but instead will be enjoyable and sustainable. Engaging environments are typically fluid and malleable.

Working with local volunteers is another way to increase the role of the community in establishing active learning environments. For example, one university education student worked with a local botanical garden to design a scavenger hunt for children to provide meaningful, age-appropriate ways for them to interact with and learn about the environment. The scavenger hunt was then published in a pamphlet and became a permanent offering for children visiting the botanical garden.

Stakeholders can be recruited and encouraged by simply recognizing those who have constructed successful strategies and made significant contributions. Recognition may take the form of a school or community sign that expresses thanks, a certificate of appreciation that is prominently displayed, or even media coverage in the newspaper or on the local television channel.



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

1. What do environments look like across early childhood classrooms (e.g., public, parochial, family, church) in the community? Are they engaging and age-appropriate? Are environments welcoming and safe for all children and families? Do they promote learning, interaction, and relationships?
 - » A common first step in examining environments is surveying current conditions. Observations can lead to questions, revelations, and considerations that would not otherwise be possible.
2. On what criteria for engaging environments can the Community-District Team focus and agree?
 - » An essential next step to the improvement of current environments is to bring the Community-District Team together to decide what environmental elements should be emphasized. By sharing ideas and reaching consensus, the Team members can then address the necessary elements for establishing, maintaining, or extending these environments.
3. Are there ideal environments that the school district has identified and supports for grades Kindergarten–3rd?
 - » It can be helpful to identify environments the district has upheld as models of engaging environments. Visiting, exploring, and understanding the why and how behind the creation of these model environments can provide useful information.
4. Does the school district's philosophy and support for teachers include helping teachers learn about and create engaging environments through professional development, curriculum liaisons, etc.?
 - » Examine the professional development that has been offered to teachers. Identify those offerings which focus on or include engaging environments. This can help identify holes or redundancies in professional development.
5. Do PreK–3 classroom environments reflect best practices for young children and include spaces for individual, small, and large group learning?
 - » A close examination of the physical surroundings can reveal much about a philosophy of learning. Whether this information is collected by teachers on their own classroom or by their peers or an outside evaluator, it can be a useful to determine what the classroom says about the type of learning and interaction that is valued in that space.

6. What local community resources could the Community-District Team tap into to support the development and maintenance of engaging environments?
 - » Providing a list of resources in the community can be an effective way to campaign for increased community involvement. Ask families to review and contribute to the list, thereby inviting their participation in the establishment of community relationships.

7. What outdoor learning spaces are available or needed for children?
 - » Often outdoor learning spaces are overlooked as resources for engaging environments. Assess current access for your students to the natural environment. If such spaces are currently unavailable, how can Community-District Teams assist in providing outdoor gardens, learning communities, or courtyards? What about accessibility? Can all children access and benefit from the outdoor environment regardless of ability?



Taking Action

Key Strategies

Observations

Encourage districts and schools to invite PreK teachers to visit the classrooms of Kindergarten teachers, and likewise to allow Kindergarten teachers to visit classrooms of PreK teachers. Seeing the two environments can promote better communication and understanding as well as ideas for creating engaging environments. Encouraging positive, constructive feedback between both parties can result in even stronger environments. Educators can ask questions and observe how other teachers work with children to develop skills.

Catawba County has used this observation strategy and noted many benefits. For example, the reciprocal observations helped both parties (i.e., PreK teachers and Kindergarten teachers) understand what students experienced prior to or after the school year. For PreK teachers, the observations helped them understand what knowledge the children would need, what experiences the teachers could provide to help prepare them, and the relationship between PreK and Kindergarten experiences. For Kindergarten teachers, the observations helped them understand the prior experiences of their students, the importance of play in learning, and the relationship between PreK and Kindergarten environments and experiences. Overall, both parties were reminded of the developmental continuum as contrasted to a fixed point during the year in which the teachers worked with students. The observations facilitated communication between the parties and fostered a common language for the sharing of information. The observations lessen the divide that can sometimes exist between PreK and elementary grades.

Professional Development

Teacher assistants spend significant time with children. Often, these educators are not provided the same opportunities for professional development as the teachers in their districts. Many Community-District Teams believe that by increasing the amount of training provided to teacher assistants, the quality of the environments may improve. Teachers, administrators, and early care providers and directors can benefit, too, especially if they have not had this type of training before.

Data Collection to Assess and Improve Environments

Many Community-District Teams conduct regular assessments of school and community environments to see what areas need to be specifically addressed. Using the data to inform changes is an effective way to improve environments. There are many instruments available. The ECERS-R (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised) is one that is commonly used in early childhood settings (see <http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/early-childhood-environment-rating-scale-ecers-r>) and the SACERS (School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale) is designed for use in programs for children from age 5 to 12 (see <http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/school-age-care-environment-rating-scale-sacers>). Data collection is just the first step. An equally, if not more important, step in the process is to use the data collected to inform action plans and improve environments. Teams can also promote the development of Adult Learning Communities (ALCs); these professional development groups can review the data, discuss next steps, and make recommendations for action. While some ALCs are considered "vertical," or having members from a range of grade levels, other ALCs are considered "horizontal," or having members of a specific grade level.

Family Education Night

In order to educate families about the child's environment, some Community-District Teams hold an evening session in which they talk about common resources in the classroom and how each contribute to the child's learning. The importance of play is discussed and academic connections are made so that

families understand how play contributes to learning. In this way, families know more about how their children learn and are encouraged to continue that learning in the home environment as well.

In Bogue Sound Elementary in Carteret County, one PreK teacher posts learning standards next to displays of students' work. In this manner, she communicates to colleagues, families, and community members what her students are learning through various activities and play.





Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Many challenges exist to sustaining engaging environments. By sharing success stories in multiple venues, other individuals, schools, or communities are likely to become interested and replicate these efforts.

As with many other issues surrounding quality education, school and community leaders face issues, challenges, and barriers to providing engaging environments including providing adequate indoor and outdoor physical space and safe environments. Gaining stakeholder and buy-in constitutes another challenge. Historically there has been a division among educational professionals regarding the crucial role of play and interaction in young children's learning.

One overarching challenge to providing engaging environments is adequate funding for appropriate resources and opportunities to view model programs with strong engaging environments. Educators and communities are encouraged to seek resources from a wide array of sources. The resources below may assist in efforts to increase funding for materials and transportation for teachers and school administrators to visit programs with outstanding environments that support young children and their families.



Strategies for Overcoming Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Awareness of where and how to obtain additional funding is an essential first step in obtaining resources. The websites below provide information in this process.

Tips for Legislative Program Visits

This article provides tips for inviting legislators to see, first-hand, the need for increased funding.
<http://www.dvaeyc.org/images/cms/file/LegislativeProgramVisits.pdf>

Grants for Teachers

The websites below are resources for K-12 teachers who are interested in writing grants to obtain funding:

- ▶ Fund for Teachers Grants: K-12 teachers with a minimum of three years experience.
www.teacherscount.org/teacher/grants.shtml
- ▶ NEA Foundation: Teachers apply with students for grants of up to \$10,000.
www.neafoundation.org
- ▶ Grant Wrangler: Free grant listing service offered by Nimble Press. Helps teachers find classroom grants for school funding.
www.grantwrangler.com
- ▶ Grants for Teachers. Online resource for information related to K- 12 grants.
www.grants4teachers.com

For more resources see Appendix F, Resources for Pathway Five: Engaging Environments at the end of the Toolkit.



Ready Schools in Action: An Ideal Setting

In the school setting, engaging environments are fairly easy to imagine: children focused on meaningful, active learning experiences and teachers facilitating learning opportunities to actively engage the learners. The role of the Community-District Team is to promote this learning in the classroom environment by providing resources and support and extend it beyond the scope of the school walls by enabling children to use their wider surroundings for learning as well.

Imagine this:

1. Children's classrooms, activities, and events are welcoming, inclusive, and reflective of a range of diversity. Environments are adapted for children with special needs and various learning styles and are filled with resources that bring the world to children through multiple modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic).
2. Families serve important roles in this endeavor by offering their own expertise to the school or classroom in whatever way they are able to contribute (e.g., lead small groups, read a story, get kids moving with brain gym activities). Capitalizing on the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of families is a great way to engage students in learning about the world around them and connects easily to the goals of early childhood education.
3. Each school, community center, preschool, and family center (whether urban, suburban, or rural) is equipped with an outdoor learning space where children are encouraged to interact with nature and ask questions of their world. Teachers use these surroundings as tools for teaching and learning.
4. Community members take ownership in providing other learning resources. Museums, historical landmarks, gardens, zoos, attractions, and natural areas that typically charge for admittance might offer one free day per month for children and their families. They also work with educators to arrange for field trips and classroom visits.