

PATHWAY FIVE: ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Engaging environments go beyond what the school building looks like and include: the classroom learning environment, school climate, interactions, and developmentally appropriate practices. Schools that engage children and families:

- ▶ Project an open, child-focused, and welcoming atmosphere characterized by friendliness, respect, and high staff morale;
- ▶ Use appropriate practices that support the whole child—physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively;
- ▶ Are safe, inviting, and developmentally appropriate; and
- ▶ Actively engage children in learning.



Key Understandings

In the seminal work, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Lella Gandini (1998) gives the reader a guided tour of a preschool in Reggio Emilia, Italy, pointing out the important relationship between the children's facility and the larger community; the ways that space reflects culture; and how that environment responds and evolves over time. She explains that the Italian designers created space to:

- ▶ Promote active exploration and relationships among children and adults;
- ▶ Meet the developmental needs of each age group;
- ▶ Document the life that occurs within that space; and
- ▶ Provoke discovery and learning.

In Italy, Gandini (1998) believes that their value for schools everywhere lies in the way *"each school's particular configuration of the garden, walls, tall windows, and handsome furniture declares: this is a place where adults have thought about the quality of the environment."*

The environment...conveys the message that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and instructive power of space. The layout of the physical space is welcoming and fosters encounters, communication, and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages choices, problem solving, and discoveries in the process of learning.

– Gandini, 2001



Thoughtful consideration of the school environment should attend to the following ideas:

- ▶ All children and their families should feel welcome and respected. Children should know upon arrival that they belong in the school environment — all indoor and outdoor spaces are accessible to children: the classroom, hallways, auditorium, and cafeteria, as well as the grounds, including the entrance, the parking lot, the bus area, the gardens, the surrounding trees and plants, and a defined playground.
- ▶ Indoor and outdoor environments should be designed to engage and support children in active, meaningful play that promotes development across all domains - physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. This is true for all children, not just four and five year olds.
- ▶ Learning occurs most effectively in the context of supportive, positive relationships. School environments foster those relationships by providing opportunities for children to interact with peers and adults in a variety of rich and stimulating indoor and outdoor environments.
- ▶ Adults and children deserve environments that promote comprehensive school health and wellness.



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Schools and communities may wish to reflect on the following questions and assessment tools as they engage in the Ready Schools Assessment Process (FirstSchool Design Collaborative, 2009):

- ▶ What barriers to relationship building are apparent in our design?
- ▶ Do we use our outside spaces to promote academic learning, physical development, and contact with nature?
- ▶ What values and beliefs do we convey, and how is that reflected in our environment?
- ▶ Do we promote family and community involvement?
- ▶ Do we welcome and honor ALL staff, children, and families?



Environment Assessment Tools

The following tools may be helpful in assessing your school's indoor and outdoor environments:

Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC): This rating scale is designed to measure the use of developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten through third grade classrooms, in terms of physical environment, social context, and instructional context. It is suitable for program improvement as well as for research and evaluation.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS): is an observational tool for assessing teacher-child interactions in PreK through third grade classrooms. Three important domains of interaction are examined: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The system can be used for professional development, planning, evaluation, and research.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (revised) (ECERS-R) and School-age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS): These rating scales are designed to assess the quality of learning environments for children, including the interactions between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, and among the children; the many materials and activities in the environment; and features such as space and schedule. They are suitable for program improvement efforts as well as research and evaluation. Training materials are available. The ECERS-R is designed to be used in classrooms for children ages 2 ½ through kindergarten. The SACERS is designed for before- and after-school care programs.

Physical Environment: A Guide to the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard and Related Accreditation Criteria: This resource is a self-study guide for programs seeking accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, focusing on NAEYC's "Physical Environment" program standard. It can be useful to anyone trying to assess the physical elements of their program. It is one of nine booklets addressing the Standards and Criteria specific to NAEYC Accreditation of early childhood education programs.

Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS): This measure was designed to help teachers/caregivers and administrators learn more about creating higher quality environments for children's outdoor play and learning. It is a tool to assess the quality of outdoor environments for children three to five years old and a self-study resource for planning new construction or for improving existing space. It can be used as a research instrument to study the implications of outdoor environmental quality on children's development and learning. POEMS contains 56 items grouped in 5 domains: physical environment, interactions, play and learning settings, program, and teacher/caregiver role. In addition to a user guide, scale, and scoring protocol, a technical assistance manual for program improvement and planning is also available.

Smart Start Effective Practice in Activity Design: Outdoor Learning Environments: This publication offers guidelines for Outdoor Learning Environments Design Plans, including considerations for selecting materials, meeting ADA requirements, protecting health and safety, and evaluating the initiative.



Taking Action

The following topics and activities can help schools and districts begin or further their work in Engaging Environments.

- ▶ Well-constructed environments promote the learning and well-being of the children and adults who spend their days there (Gandini, 1998). *"Both child-guided and teacher-guided experiences are vital to children's development and learning."* Successful learning environments support play and relationships, and promote health and wellness.
- ▶ Developmentally appropriate programs provide substantial periods of time when children may select activities from a variety of enriching and stimulating choices that teachers have prepared in various centers in the room.
- ▶ Planned, teacher-guided, interactive small-group, and large-group experiences are an important part of each school day (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).
- ▶ Learning environments convey respect for different cultures and abilities.
- ▶ Nature is important to children's development — intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically. Play in nature is especially important for developing capacities for creativity, problem-solving, and intellectual development. Therefore changes in our modern-built environments should be made to optimize children's positive contact with nature (Kellert, 2005).
- ▶ Play is a controversial subject and as schools determine their philosophy and practice about play, it is important to consider the evidence and data. The NC Position Statement on Kindergartens of the 21st Century (2007) shares these thoughts on play:
 - » *"The NC Department of Public Instruction believes that play is at the core of a kindergartner's learning and development and that it is an essential element of a child's education in the 21st Century...Through an interactive, play-based curriculum, children develop cognitive skills as they explore, imagine, imitate, construct, discuss, plan, manipulate, problem-solve, dramatize, create, and experiment."*



Environments that Support Relationships

Research has consistently demonstrated an association between positive teacher-child relationships and children's social, emotional, and intellectual competence. Well-planned environments make it easy for children to be constructively engaged with each other and with materials so that teachers can observe and interact with individuals or small groups to promote deeper explorations and learning. When children are constructively engaged, there are fewer discipline problems and thus a calmer, more pleasant emotional environment for everyone. Well-planned environments provide spaces for children to be active as well as to pause and reflect, and for family members to observe as well as participate in school life.

For example: as children get older, they continue to benefit from the creativity and self-regulation that is promoted through play. The social studies and science curricula provide an excellent foundation for the integration of play into daily classroom life. Rather than the kitchen area that is prevalent in PreK classrooms, dramatic play areas can become community facilities such as the post office, hospital, or parks and recreation office; science labs for the investigation of sea life, anatomy, or magnetism; or community action areas for work on the environment, elections, or the need for a new stop sign.

Environments that Support Health and Wellness

Children, teachers, and families are impacted daily by obesity, diabetes, lack of exercise and fresh air, poor nutrition, and exposure to environmental chemicals. Additionally, members of the school community are directly or indirectly affected by difficulties that include depression, substance abuse, and hyperactivity.

In order to give priority to the health and wellness of all members of the school community, environments should not only be designed and managed to prevent illness and injury, but also to *"promote and build healthy children, staff, and families"* (FirstSchool Design Collaborative, 2009).

School communities have an opportunity to dramatically improve children's connection to the natural world. *Last Child in the Woods* (2008) brings together a new and growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of children and adults. In this influential work about the divide between children and the outdoors, Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of children to rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

The development of positive relationships among and between education professionals, families, and children is foundational to all work with young children.

– FirstSchool Design Collaborative, 2009



Links between Curriculum, Instruction, and Environment

Thinking about curriculum and instruction is synonymous with thinking about engaging environments. Some of the ideas presented in this section can also be found in the Curriculum and Instruction Pathway.

- ▶ Every child is different. Learning is not a lockstep, linear progression; the environment must be responsive to the unique needs and learning styles of diverse children.
 - » Do lessons include a variety of modalities — visual, audio, kinesthetic?
 - » Does curriculum planning insure that children understand content before moving on?
- ▶ Children are persistent, curious, and creative; they want and need to make sense of their world. The environment must promote multiple ways for children to gain knowledge.
 - » Are children supported as they learn to be good observers — given equipment such as microscopes, magnifying glasses, binoculars, clip boards? Are they given access to animals, plants, rocks, water, and trees? Are they given instruction on how to document their findings through notes and sketches?
 - » Are children given the opportunity to hypothesize, ask questions, and talk about what they have learned?
- ▶ Language, traditions, and family expectations are the primary influences on children's development.
 - » Is cultural and linguistic diversity apparent throughout the school in books, art and materials, and music?
 - » Are there multiple opportunities for families to share their knowledge and experiences that go beyond cooking a traditional dish or attending a single event devoted to their heritage?
 - » Are some staff able to communicate with children and family members who speak a language other than English?

- ▶ Learning is most meaningful when integrated across all domains of development and learning – physical, emotional-social, and cognitive. Each is important and closely interrelated. Children's development and learning influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains. Part of integrating development and learning includes the development of environments that incorporate rather than compartmentalize learning.
 - » Are math vocabulary words such as horizontal, vertical, and parallel in the blocks area so that children can develop descriptive language for their buildings?
 - » Are books on touch and smell in the science area accompanied by opportunities for children to develop and identify their senses?
 - » When there is interpersonal conflict, do teachers take the time to help children talk about the feelings involved and strategies for resolution?
- ▶ Children learn through active engagement.
 - » Are classrooms arranged for optimum movement and interaction?
 - » Are there a variety of learning areas/centers for active exploration that address content areas (literacy, math, writing, science/discovery, social studies, and creative arts) that attend to children's developmental needs including fine and gross motor development, language development, and higher order thinking?
 - » Are children able to be independent and self-reliant? Are materials readily accessible and organized? Are routines clear and well established? Are children given consistent opportunities to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings?



Snapshot of a Ready School Environment

If you were to look into a school that honors all of its members, you would encounter:

- Staff who are diverse by race, culture, ethnicity, language, and ability;
- Books, pictures, posters, and materials that reflect the language, race, culture, and background of the school staff and families;
- Hallways and classroom pathways wide enough for wheelchair access;
- Railings on stairways and in restrooms;
- Written communication in the languages of the school families;
- Teachers and staff who can speak the languages of the school families;
- Foods that are familiar to all children, and;
- School and classroom activities and events that are representative of the population of the school.

