

# FRAMEWORK IN ACTION:

# Learning Environments

The *Framework in Action* series expands on the *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches*<sup>(1)</sup> and provides brief research reviews, practical strategies, and guidance for creating meaningful and tangible change in communities. Each *Framework in Action* corresponds with one of the eight buckets of alignment effort identified as essential to high-quality and comprehensive P-3 approaches.

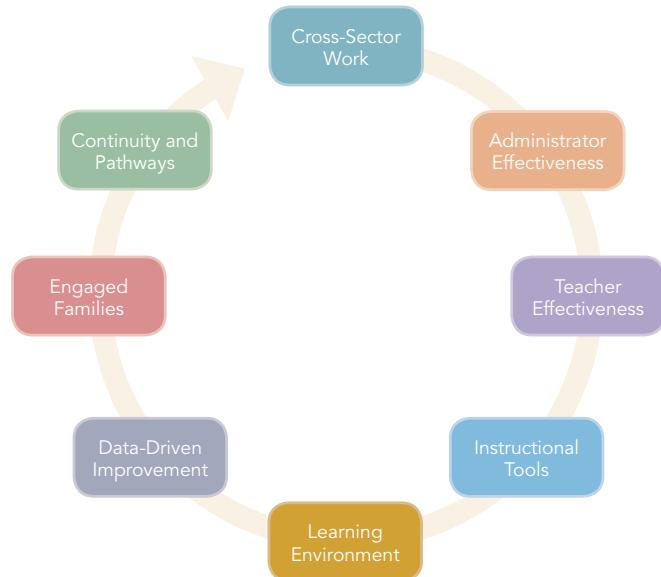
## The ISSUE



The physical spaces in which children learn, and the social and emotional climates in which those spaces are set, must create learning environments that are culturally responsive, nurture relationships, and intentionally support diverse learners.

Learning environments are powerful contributors to effective P-3 approaches and require keen awareness of how children use and perceive their space. The concept of the learning environment as a “teacher” was immortalized by Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, and has been embraced widely as developmental psychologists, neuroscientists, and educators recognize the close link between physical environments and children’s psychological and cognitive development. Intentionality about learning environments is no longer the exclusive domain of Reggio-inspired or Montessori approaches<sup>(2)</sup>, but is being integrated into public school districts, as well.<sup>(3)</sup>

Vibrant learning environments for children ages birth through age eight promote relationships between and among children and adults, are designed to facilitate exploration and independence, and are inclusive of diverse learners and children with special



needs. They should be well-organized and conducive to social and emotional development, positive behavior development, and skill acquisition. Through a variety and complexity of materials and structural designs, learning environments should reflect children’s homes and cultures, and facilitate their learning.

The Issue	The Goal	The Strategies	What Does the Research Say?	Where to Start in Your Community	Common Pitfalls that Impede Implementation	Indicators of Progress	Spotlight: Promising Efforts and Success Stories	References
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## The GOAL

The physical space and school/program culture promote collaborative relationships, actively engage all children in a variety of learning experiences and settings, and support the health and wellness of children and adults.



## The STRATEGIES

- **CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE:** Learning environments are welcoming and reflect the community of children and their families, home communities, cultures, and languages.
- **PROMOTE RELATIONSHIPS:** Learning environments provide a climate that promotes positive interactions and supportive relationships for children and adults.
- **STRUCTURED TO SUPPORT DIVERSE LEARNERS:** Learning environments are organized and provided with resources to support a wide range of development, abilities, and interests.

## What Does THE RESEARCH SAY?

This section provides an abbreviated literature review that substantiates the importance of Learning Environments in comprehensive approaches to P-3:

- Learning environments are more than physical space; they are the total combination of surroundings (including indoor and outdoor space) and conditions in which young children and adults engage in learning, and feel safe, challenged, and valued.<sup>(4, 5)</sup>
- School climate reflects students', school personnel's, and parents' experiences of school life socially, emotionally, civically, and ethically, as well as academically. Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive student development, learning, and academic achievement.<sup>(6)</sup>
- Learning environments with welcoming climates are particularly important for students of color and students from historically marginalized populations who have long been poorly and inadequately served by care and education institutions.<sup>(7, 8)</sup>
- Children with special needs do not necessarily interpret environmental cues in the same way as typically developing children. Sensitivity to the arrangement of the environment can invite children in, and provide information to help them feel confident and competent.<sup>(9)</sup>
- Inclusive schools and programs take into account the physical space (e.g., how it is arranged so that all children can authentically participate) and the philosophy that children's abilities are facets of who they are, not all that they are.<sup>(10, 11)</sup>
- While instruction and teaching practices often take precedent in deliberations about teaching and learning, there must also be increased effort to reorganize materials, artifacts, and learning environments to encourage deep learning.<sup>(12)</sup>
- The role of P-3 settings should not only be to take care of children but also to facilitate positive interaction among parents and professionals, families, and the community. Settings should have physical spaces to facilitate the development of such relationships (e.g., large spaces for groups and smaller spaces for private conversations).<sup>(13)</sup>

# WHERE TO START in Your Community

The following are initial approaches to extend and deepen effective learning environments along the P-3 continuum:

- **Engage all adults in promoting the engaging, healthy, and supportive learning environments children need.**

This includes stakeholders who are traditionally not included, such as custodial, administrative, library, and meal staff, who all have opportunities to use their particular spaces and roles to welcome and engage children.

- **Review books and other materials in classrooms and school libraries to assure representation of diverse people, cultures, and experiences.** Robust and inclusive libraries convey cultural and linguistic responsiveness within classrooms and schools. Children's literature should be physically accessible to young learners and include characters and content that reflect the children in the classroom and their home communities and cultures.

- **Inventory materials and appraise physical spaces to assess how well classrooms support diverse learners.**

A survey of classrooms can help teachers and administrators determine starting points for improvements. Seek opportunities to assure that classrooms are well-organized, physically accessible, inclusive of a rich variety of materials, supportive of skill building, and conducive to relationships between and among teachers and children.

- **Assure that staff have dedicated space and time to work together and share resources.** All adults need welcoming, uncluttered, comfortable spaces, and opportunities for planning and collaboration.

- **Ask the children.** Children should be key informants for improving the experience and use of their space. Seeking their input will build ownership and inform child-centered learning environments.

# COMMON PITFALLS that Impede Implementation

P-3 approaches are simple in theory and complex in practice. The following are pitfalls to avoid when seeking to strengthen learning environments:

- **Setting up learning environments in isolation.** Learning environments that are created in a vacuum run the risk of being lower quality and misaligned along the P-3 continuum. Educators should receive consistent support, guidance, and professional learning on how to create learning environments, and the process should be collaborative.
- **Allowing learning environments to become stagnant.** As children's needs and interests develop and change, learning environments must change as well. A classroom that remains unaltered over the course of the school year, is unlikely to meet evolving needs of children or adults. Consider implementing regular observations and assessments of how learning environments are working and take time to make necessary refinements.

- **Taking a 'tourist approach' to cultural inclusion.** A concentrated collection of images or books meant to reflect an entire culture or community simplifies multi-faceted cultures and risks painting a narrow image of peoples' lived experiences. Ensure that there are multiple representations of diverse people and settings that embrace the complexity and interrelations among cultures.

- **Limiting children's access to the learning environment.** High-quality learning environments will have fewer benefits if schedules or rules create barriers to children's engagement with the space and materials. It is important for children to have time to fully access their learning environments and be allowed to engage freely and creatively with materials.

- **Ignoring outdoor learning environments.** Oftentimes, while attention is paid to creating indoor learning environments, outdoor spaces and playgrounds remain unchanged. Outdoor spaces offer a multitude of opportunities to extend learning and should be designed intentionally.

# INDICATORS of PROGRESS

The following are sample indicators that signal that learning environments reflect the values and promise of P-3 approaches:

- **Learning environments are well-managed within classrooms and across schools.** Teachers, administrators, and staff prioritize and maintain well-ordered environments that facilitate learning, encourage active engagement, and demonstrate culturally responsive and inclusive practices to help children self-regulate emotions and behaviors.
- **Objects, materials, and furniture that match children's developmental stages and are culturally relevant are integrated into classrooms.** This reflects teachers' knowledge of their students' cultures, experiences, and diverse learning needs.
- **Stakeholders co-create.** When designing or refining learning environments, the perspectives of administrators, teachers, families, and the children themselves are included in the process to assure that spaces are suitable for the needs of those inhabiting them.

- **Assessments and rubrics help determine efficacy and quality of learning environments.** Administrators and teachers evaluate how classroom and building spaces are used, assess classroom climates, and use that information to sustain the focus on the environment in facilitating children's learning.
- **Space, time and resources for staff help further relationships and promote collaborative work among teachers, administrators and cross-sector partners.** This requires dedicating time for these conversations and having physical spaces (i.e., break rooms, conference spaces) where they may happen.
- **Families are welcomed.** They experience environments that are culturally inclusive, and have spaces available to gather.

## Spotlight: PROMISING EFFORTS and SUCCESS STORIES

The following examples reveal ways in which practitioners are taking up P-3 approaches in their home communities, and implementing elements of P-3.

### Mountlake Terrace Elementary, Edmonds School District, WA

"Windows and mirrors" are an aspect of culturally responsive teaching, and within Mountlake Terrace Elementary (MTE) School, students and families experience both. "Windows" are glimpses into cultures, perspectives, and stories that are different than that of the child. "Mirrors" are reflections of the child's own beliefs, race, life experience, or abilities. At MTE, where families speak more than 28 different languages, it's critical that students see themselves reflected in the school and build understanding of people who are different from themselves. This is being intentionally addressed in three areas: public art displays, staff representation, and literature.

When people enter MTE, they immediately see public art that offers windows and mirrors. A large wall includes the word "welcome" in 43 different languages, huge murals in the gym depict children of many races, cultures, and abilities, and flags of more than 30 nations line a prominent hallway. The school has increased the diversity of its educators as well, so that students are more likely to see someone who looks like them or shares their perspective. MTE has also dramatically increased the selection of books that serve as windows and mirrors, which are accessible in classrooms, the library, and throughout the school. MTE's goal is that students see themselves as they enter the school, but also see their friends and others in their community.

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### Bellingham Public Schools, WA

In Bellingham Public Schools, the learning environment is viewed as a teacher and a tool for students that is co-created as the school year progresses. Learning environments in Bellingham schools transition over time and support children through ages and stages of development. They have intentional room arrangement and flow to facilitate successful transitions, and unique places for children to learn and grow. They take into consideration common spaces where high quality play can occur, as well as whole group, small group and individual instructional areas. Materials are open ended, easily accessible, and developmentally appropriate, ultimately cultivating students' cognitive development and creativity.

The spaces in which children learn are approached with as much intentionality as lesson designs and day-to-day interactions.

The role of the environment has been at the forefront of professional learning with community partners. Across infant and toddler spaces, community preschool spaces, and Kindergarten classrooms, common areas reflect a continuum of materials. In the block area, for example, there are soft cloth blocks in infant spaces, Duplos and cardboard blocks in toddler and preschool classrooms, wooden blocks in Kindergarten and first grade, and then mature play with planks in second and third grade classrooms.

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**For additional resources related to Learning Environments, and other buckets in the Framework, please visit [www.nationalp-3center.org](http://www.nationalp-3center.org).**

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NATIONAL P-3 CENTER

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