

Let Be Kids

A progress report on schools and safety



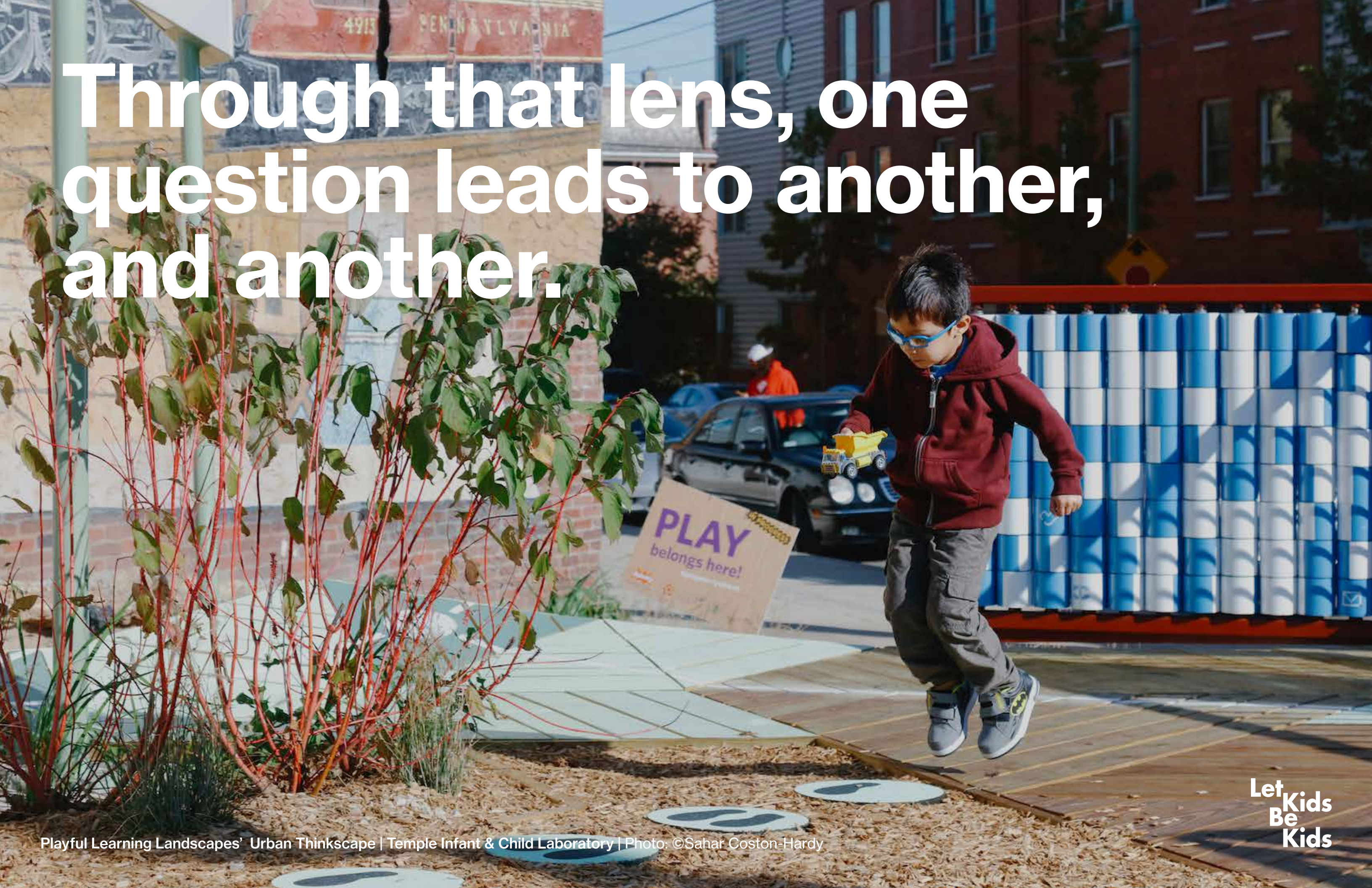
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What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and really welcoming?

Let Kids Be Kids investigates that question through a lens focused on kids.

Through that lens, one question leads to another, and another.



What if we put the values of kids first?

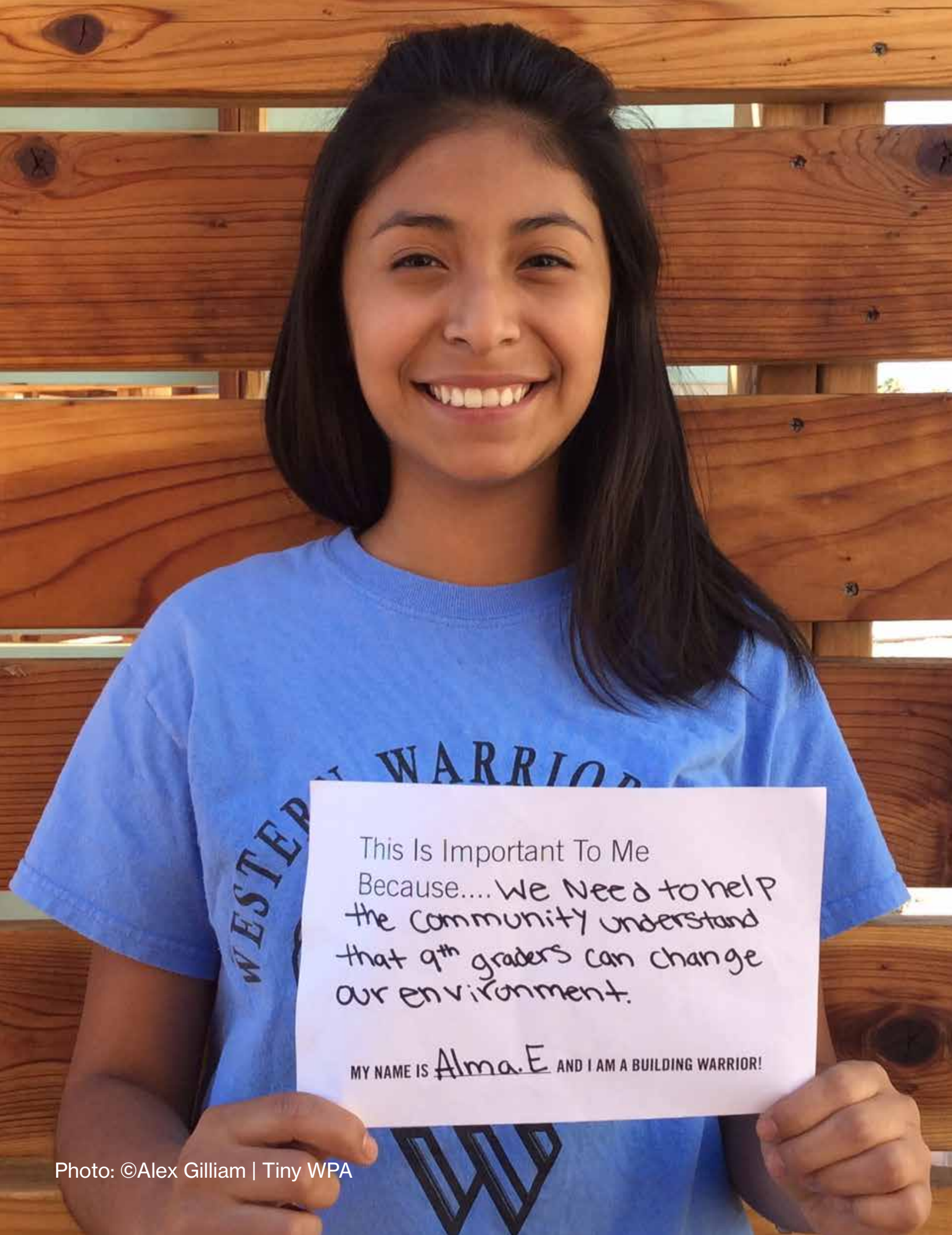


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Would we design safer schools?



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**Let Kids Be Kids recognizes
that everything is designed, so
everything can be redesigned.**



What if we redesigned schools to meet many needs?



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A photograph showing several children's hands holding small, round balls of brown mud. The children are outdoors, and the ground is covered in dirt. A white bucket is visible in the background. The text "Would we create more welcoming learning experiences?" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Would we
create more
welcoming
learning
experiences?**

Let Kids Be Kids invites
us to **reimagine schools**
and **rethink the communities**
beyond school walls.



**What if we
reimagined
schools
to nurture
wellbeing?**



Would we create healthier communities?



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Let Kids Be Kids asks what
it takes to make schools and
communities **safe spaces**
where **belonging blooms** and
kids thrive.

**What if we
explore these
questions
from many
perspectives?**



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**What
myriad of
possibilities
would we
discover?**

Letting Kids Be Kids

An Epiphany for Change

Dina Miris Sorensen and Caroline Lobo

Let's start with a question, one that's real rather than rhetorical.

It crystallized from years of workshops, conversations, and data, all capturing hundreds of voices, into this:

“What does the future need from us?”

If you design schools, if you build them, fund them, teach in them, lead them, live around them, or simply send a child into one every morning, this question is for you. Because the future isn't waiting for us to figure it out.

This question wouldn't let go because with all the expertise available and all the amazing ways people are responding to the challenges at hand, we noticed a bigger pattern across the data. The future is already sitting in classrooms. And the students have things to tell us, if we're willing to listen. Students have been integral to the work on this report. When asked what matters most to them, the answer wasn't test scores. It wasn't GPAs or AP credits. It was belonging.

Students want schools to be safe and welcoming places where they feel they belong, are believed, and can connect in community.

They want to be included in imagining the future, not consulted after the decisions are made or just told what their school or community will look like. They want to be included in envisioning, designing, and building the future.

One student we'll never forget described in a workshop what her school actually felt like from the inside:

"Beginning in middle school, kids start to be sorted and sifted – into AP classes, into tracks," the student said. "Our schedules are so tight and choreographed, so socially limiting, that we get stuck in silos, and we don't have time to get to know each other outside of those bubbles."

She wasn't criticizing her teachers; she was describing a system that was designed, and that points back to the need to redesign.

What captured our attention most, as we made sense of all this data, was how students talked about safety not as a single intervention, such as locks on doors or cameras in hallways. Safety, as they described it, embraces a matrix of needs.

Behavioral scientist Bob Bowen writes that "understanding each person's unique matrix is more than an academic exercise, it provides the framework for understanding how our psycho-social selves are formed, and informs the process of healing when needs are unmet."

And welcoming? Welcoming isn't what happens at the front door. Welcoming is what you do every single day to create the conditions for those needs to be met and lasts long after students cross a school's threshold.

Placemaker Dominic Richards, co-founder of Our Place, reminds us that either we design for belonging or we end up more isolated.

Students must be not just the subject of the design but co-designers. Ask students what is wrong with schools and they will tell you exactly what they are experiencing. Then ask them what the future looks like.

It turns out that to better understand the issues, we have to better understand young people. We have to learn more about their journeys, their joys, their struggles. We have to center their voices that have been pushed to the margins, as a design act, because their voices carry knowledge the center needs to know.

Here's what the data made crystal clear: The next frontier in design is relational. Not just biological. Not just technological. Relational.

We are wired to connect, to bond. And we are so deep inside this moment, this movement, that we cannot stand outside of it and judge where it's going. We are the actors. We are the navigators of these waters in real time.

That means something important: There isn't one narrative; there are multiple narratives. There isn't

one answer or one future; there is a multitude of futures. And our job as architects and designers is not to pick the future we think is right and march toward it; our job is to hold space for others to imagine their own futures.

Lesley Ann Noel, in her book *Design Social Change: Take Action, Work Toward Equity, and Challenge the Status Quo*, puts it plainly: You have to know yourself first as an ingredient in design practice and then build outward. Then you can build change in your world. You can build change in your practices. You can understand your role in change.

That's the epiphany this work brought forth. The industry doesn't need another guideline or diagram or tool. It starts with reflection, not action – talking, sharing, and thinking at a deeper level, for a longer time, before we pick up our tools.

Conversation is the first act of design.

So what do we actually do?

We have been translating the strong currents of change from this data into an invitation for each of us to do things differently. To reflect on our design practice and our design process. Not a manifesto. Not a mandate. An invitation.

It advocates for something seemingly simple. Analog, even. Talking. Sharing. Thinking. But at a deeper level, for a longer time, with more skill and intention, not random chance.

This project reflects design thinking as a framework for intersectionality and a values-based approach. It points to a future practice where we ask: What would flourishing actually look like for kids who don't see themselves reflected in what is already designed?

How we frame the problem depends on how we contextualize the problem space. That's not jargon; that's everything. The frame is the design.

That student describing her school divided into tracks. Kids too busy to know each other. Schedules too tight to leave room for just being a kid.

That's not a scheduling problem. That's a values problem. And it's ours to solve.

Letting kids be kids isn't nostalgia. It's a design brief. It means building schools and systems where belonging blooms. Where safety is understood as a matrix of human needs, not a checklist. Where welcoming is a verb, not a signage strategy. Where we ask students not just what's wrong, but where do you want to go?

The future needs us to listen. It needs us to slow down before we build. It needs us to center the people who will live inside what we create. Conversation is the first act of design.

So let's start one.

WHY THIS WORK STARTED

Pivotal events in the world beyond architecture sparked this project. Its conversations changed our values and vocabulary. And that transformed how we can think and talk about the possibilities within architecture for education.

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Dialogues Publication

Let Kids Be Kids

WHEN IT ALL HAPPENED

Pivotal events

- 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting
- 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High Shooting
- 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

Research

- 2015 AIA-CAE Research Task Force Launched
- 2015–2016 AIA-CAE Research International Advisory Group Platform developed
- 2015–2019 AIA-CAE Research Industry POE Practice Study Conducted
- 2017 AIA-CAE Research Learning Environment Evaluation Criteria Protocol developed

Summits

- 2015–2017 AIA-CAE Research Subcommittee Global ThinkTank Programmed and sessions hosted
- 2016 AIA National Convention Philadelphia, PA Session hosted
- 2018 AIA-CAE The Design of Safe, Secure & Welcoming Learning Environments Summit Washington, D.C. Programmed and summit hosted
- 2018 AIA Conference on Architecture New York, NY Session presented
- 2018 Innovative Learning Environments and Teacher Change Conference (ILETC) Phoenix, AZ Session presented
- 2019 AIA-CAE Spring Conference Los Angeles, CA Session presented
- 2020 AIA-CAE Schoolhouse Rocked Webinar Series Programmed and series hosted
- 2022 Cultivating Community and Safety in Schools AIA-CAE National Convening Portland, OR Programmed and convening hosted
- 2023 Cultivating Community for Safe and Welcoming Schools, EDspaces Charlotte, NC Session presented
- 2023 Cultivating Community for Safe and Welcoming Schools, AIA-CAE Town Hall Webinar Presented
- 2023 AIA-CAE Safe and Welcoming Schools Working Group Minneapolis, MN Session convened
- 2024 AIA Conference on Architecture & Design/CAE Day of Tours & Talks Washington, D.C. Programmed and session hosted

Workshops

- 2016 LearningSCAPES Annual Conference Philadelphia, PA Workshop hosted
- 2019 Dialogues Live Symposium Workshop #1 AIA-CAE and LBD Milwaukee, WI Programmed and co-hosted
- 2020 Dialogues Virtual Symposium Workshop #2 AIA-CAE and LBD Programmed and co-hosted
- 2021 Dialogues Live Symposium Workshop #3 AIA-CAE and LBD Fallingwater, Mill Run, PA Programmed and hosted
- 2021 Bridging the Gaps: The Language of Research and Design for Future-Focused Learning Environments POE Workshop EDspaces Pittsburgh, PA Presented
- 2023 Dialogues Live Symposium Workshop #4 AIA-CAE and LBD Taliesin West, Phoenix, AZ Programmed and co-hosted
- 2023 Cultivating Community for Safe and Welcoming Schools Workshop LearningSCAPES Chicago, IL Hosted and presented

Publications

- 2017–2021 Sorensen and Lobo Dialogues: The Intersection of Emerging Research + Design for Learning
- 2017 Brittin, Sorensen, Lobo, Rich, and Cook AIA-CAE Research Industry POE Practice Study Findings
- 2019 Lamoreaux “Using Crime Prevention through Environmental Design to Foster Sense of Safety and Psychological Wellbeing in Schools”
- 2020 Scott-Webber, Sorensen, and Lobo “Bridging the Gaps: The Language of Research and Design for Future-Focused Learning Environments”
- 2020 Sorensen and Lobo, Illustrations by Rohde Schoolhouse Rocked
- 2023 Sorensen and Lobo Dialogues: The Intersection of Emerging Research + Design for Learning Issues I–V
- 2023 Goodman “Location, Location, Location”
- 2024 Sorensen, Lobo, Hoskens, and Baibak “A Vision for Safe, Welcoming Schools”



WHAT'S IN OUR VOCABULARY

21st century skills	Barriers	Co-creators	Connect	Disabled joy	Environmental racism	Half-made spaces
Academic content	Be seen	Co-design	Connected communities	Discipline	Equality	Harmonious
Acceptance	Beautiful and comfortable	Co-evolution	Connection to nature	Discovery	Equity	Health
Access	Behavior versus conduct	Co-learning	Connection with the teacher	Disparities	Evaluation	Health education
Access to "choice"	Behaviors	Cognition	Connections	Dissemination	Evaluation and improvement	Healthy learning communities
Accessibility	Behavioral science	Cognitive benefits	Connectiveness	Distress	Everyone can do something	High risk
Accessible spaces	Being known	Cognitive development	Constructivist	Diverse population	Evidence-based design	High visibility
Accountability	Belonging	Cognitive engagement	Control wave theory	Diverse worldviews	Exploration	Holistic
Acoustics	Belonging as an equity lever	Collaboration	Conviviality	Diversity	Facility conditions	Holistic approach
Activation	BIPOC community	Collaborative spaces	Counseling	Do it for me	Family kitchen	Holistic safety
Active classrooms	Biological reactivity	Comfortable	Creativity	Do it for ourselves	Feedback loops	Home life
Active design	Biophilia	Common language	Critical utopian action research	Drivers of change	Finding synergies	Household
Adaptive environments	Bioswale	Communal spaces	Cultivate culture	Economic injustice	Flex spaces	Human centered design
Adaptive reuse	Body and mind	Communality	Cultivate food	Ecosystemic approach	Flexibility	Human dignity
Adult learning centers	Breakout spaces	Community	Cultural celebration	Ecosystems	Flipped classroom	Humane
Adverse childhood experiences	Building a community	Community access	Cultural reparation	Educational adequacy	Focus	Humanistic
Affinity space	Built environment	Community asset	Cultural responsiveness	Educational architecture	Focused learning spaces	Hyper-connected
Affordances	Bullying	Community health	Cultural shift	Educational needs	Food justice	Hyperlocal
Agency	Burden of safety	Community narratives	Culture	Educational specifications	Food security	Ideation
Agent provocateur	Calming environment	Community of connections	Culture of care	Education inequality	Food systems	Identity
Air quality	Campfires and watering holes	Community ownership	Culture of learning	Educator	Forestry	Imagineer
Alcoves	Campus as beacon	Community space	Data-driven decision making	Emancipatory worldview	Fortress-like	Inclusion
Alone together	Campus identity	Community as experts	Deaf Gain	Emotion	Fractured relationships	Inclusivity
Ambient space	Can be seen	Community at large	DeafSpace Design	Emotional care	Framework	Increased connections
Ancestral knowledge	Carbon emissions	Community building	Decision making structures	Emotional growth	Freedom	Individualization
Anxiety disorders	Celebrate	Community centered design	Deeper learning	Emotional health	Fulfillment	Individualization design
Areas of autonomy	Celebrating ancestral knowledge	Community engagement	Democratic	Emotional literacy	Furniture specifications	parameters
Areas of refuge	Celebrate often	Community expertise	Design as power	Emotionally protected	Furniture types	Inequality
Art	Checklist	Community-focused	Design justice	Emotional safety	Furniture, fixtures, & equipment	Informal
Artificial light	Child-centered design	Community-focused spaces	Design process	Emotional wellbeing	Future school	Informal gathering areas
Assessment tool	Choice and collaboration	Community infrastructure	Design skills	Empathetic environment	Gathering spaces	Informal learning spaces
Assessments	Choice and comfort	Community pride	Designing from difference	Empathy	Generational links	Infrastructure
Asset-based	Choice of environment	Compartmentalized layout	De-stimulation spaces	Empower	Global community	Innovative learning
Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder	Choices for students	Compassion	Detection systems	Enable	Global health	Inspire
Authentic care	Civics	Competence	Developmental science	Engage	Good relationships	Institutional bias
Authenticity	Climate	Competing demands	Dialogic	Entry point	Group learners	Integrate
Autism spectrum	Climate change	Comprehensive safety	Digital play	Entryways	Grow	Integrated systems of care
Autonomy	Coercive systems	Concept of traditions	Disabilities	Environmental choices	Growing together	Interconnectedness
	Co-creation	Confidential spaces	Disability discrimination	Environmental conditions	Growth mindset	Intellectual safety

Intersectionality	Measures as value making	Novel spaces	evaluation	Resource allocation	Shared narratives	Structural racism	Values-based change
Intimate	Measurable intentions	Novelty	Preventive care	Responsible	Sharing	Student agency	Values-based design
Intimate localities	Measurable outcomes	Nurture	Preventive measure	decision-making	Signage and wayfinding	Student success	Vegetable gardens
Intimidating	Media	Open sightlines	Prevention and detection	Restorative practices	Situated learning	Student-centered design	Vestibule
Intrusive	Mental health	Open space	strategies	Safe	Skill-building	Student-teacher ratio	Vibration
Inviting	Mental health services	Open versus closed	Prevention training	Safe rooms	Social awareness	Student voice	Virtual designed
Isolation	Mental health training	Operation conversation	Privacy	Safe versus welcoming	Social determinants of	Support of students	environments
Iterative	Mentoring hours	Outdoor learning	Privatization	Safety	health	Supportive environment	Visibility
Joy	Mentorship	Outdoors	Processes that repair	Safety as a matrix of needs	Social ecological metrics	Supportive systems	Visible security measures
Justice	Mind-body wellness	Ownership	Professional development	Safety tax	Social-emotional learning	Surveillance	Visual complexity
Just environments	Minimal design	Parenting	Programming	Salutogenic design	Social-emotional skills	Sustainability	Visual connection
Just systems	Moat	Participatory design	Project-based learning	Sanctuary for sick kids	Social-emotional wellbeing	Synergies	Visual ease
Knowing the unknowns	Mobile technologies	Pathway	Prospect and refuge	Schedule flexibility	Social engagement	Systems	Visual intrigue
Knowledge creation	Movement	Pedagogy	Protect	School as hinge	Social health	Systems thinking	Voice
Knowledge sharing	Multi-generational	Perception of safety	Protective factors	School building as	Social inequalities	Table	Voice alarms
Layering	Multicultural	Perceptual improvisation	Prototype	teaching tool	Social infrastructure	Targeted interventions	Vulnerability
Learner centric design	Multilingual learners	Performance based	Providers of care	School culture	Social periphery	Teach and reinforce	Walking
parameters	Multimedia spaces	Permeability	Psychologist	School setting	Social resilience	Teacher training	Wayfinding
Learning	Multiple narratives	Personal behaviors	Public health	School siting	Socialization	Teaching-learning	Welcoming
Learning landscapes	Nature	Person-to-person	Public investment	Schoolyards	Socially interactive	interactions	Welcoming façades
Learning modalities	Nature based	relationships	Public policies	Seating arrangements	Societal engagement	Therapeutic environment	Wellbeing
Learning process	Natural elements	Perspectives	Public space	Secure	Socioeconomic status	Think beyond the curriculum	Wellbeing science
Learning space	Natural environment	Physical approach	Purposeful	Secure spaces	Soft furnishings	Threshold experience	Wellness center
Learning styles	Natural light	Physical barriers	Queue	Security elements	Space activation	Thrive	Wellness practice
Learning, growing,	Natural stimuli	Physical dimensions of	Quiet	Security measures	Spatial agency	Total health	Wonder
nurturing, tasting	Natural surveillance	safety	Racial justice	See and be seen	Spatial awareness	Trailblazer	World building
Lens	Natural systems	Physical ease	Rain garden	Segregation	Spatial design lifecycle	Transformative outcomes	Worldviews
Let kids be kids	Naturalness	Physical learning	Reciprocity	Self-awareness	Spatial equity	Transitional space	Wraparound services
Liberate learning	Naturalness design	environment	Recognition	Self-contained	Spatial justice	Transparency	Youth
Liminal space	parameters	Physical safety	Redlining	Self-management	Spatial organization	Transparent suite	Youth led
Listen to hear	Nature-relatedness	Places of respite and	Reflection	Sense-centric architecture	Spatial qualities	Trauma	Youth voices
Lived experience	Neighborhood	meditation	Refuge areas	Sense of belonging	Speak up	Trauma-informed design	Zoned enclosures
Living systems	Neocolonialism	Placemaking	Regenerative design	Sense of determination	Specialized spaces	Trauma-informed lens	Zoning
Lobbyist	Neurodiversity	Place maker	Relational safety	Sense of hope	Stable	Trauma recovery	
Loneliness	Neuronal information	Play	Relationship building	Sense of purpose	Staff-centered design	Treehouses	
Longevity	processing	Playfulness	Relationship exploration	Sense of welcome	Stakeholder inclusion	Triggering spaces	
Long-term relationship	Neuroscience	Pleasantness	Relationships	Sensitivity	Stay curious	Trust building	
design	Noninstitutional	Pluriversal design	Relationship skills	Sensory activation	Stewardship	Trustworthiness	
Loved	environments	Points of access	Reparative design	Sensory challenges	Stigma	Typologies	
Maker space	Nontraditional learning	Points of view	Replicate	Sensory design	Stimulation design	Underrepresented	
Marginalization	Nonvisual engagement	Policies	Representation	Sensory focus	parameters	Unique relationships	
Materials	Nooks	Poverty	Respect	Sensory rooms	Stressors	Universal design	
Meaningful encounters	Normative practice	Pre-/post-occupancy	Respite	Shared accountability	Structural injustice	Values	

HOW FAR OUR PROJECT REACHES

49.6M

Kids in U.S. K-12 schools

990

Hours per year a U.S. kid spends
in the classroom

3.2M

Educators teaching in U.S. schools

12.5K+

Members of the AIA-CAE Knowledge Community

268

Contributors participating to date

596

Vocabulary terms described

6

**Safety
Welcoming
Community
Mental Health
Design Justice
Evaluation**

Table of Contents

16	Letting Kids Be Kids: An Epiphany for Change By Dina Miris Sorensen and Caroline Lobo
18	Let Kids Be Kids: The who, what, when, where, why, and how of the project
30	A Call to Action
31	Modules 01 See Me, Know Me 02 We Belong Here 03 Give Us Links, Not Locks 04 Believe in Us 05 My Life, My Insight 06 It All Matters to Me Module Initiatives 01 Transforming Streets into Child-Friendly Public Spaces 02 A Flexible Force Driving the Journey 03 All Our Relations 04 Rounding the Edges 05 Every Schoolyard an Oasis 06 Prying Open the POE Black Box
107	What Does It Mean to Build a School? By Ira Socol
111	Vocabulary
122	Resources
123	Acknowledgements

A Call To Action

Schools are dynamic environments where **spatial, social, emotional, and cultural conditions** converge to influence how students feel, behave, connect, and learn.

Designing them demands a **fundamental paradigm shift**. We need to move from thinking of schools as neutral containers to considering them complex socio-spatial systems that actively shape human development.

This publication calls on all of us to move toward an ethic of **designing meaningful educational experiences** through architecture and landscape.

Six values – **safety, welcoming, community, mental health, design justice, and evaluation** – form an interdependent framework that places social and emotional connection alongside academic programming.

The time is now to **think differently about the systems we design**, and to build a new humanism into the spaces where children grow.

module

01

SAFETY

In a study that asked students to define a “safe school,” 90% mentioned a place where any individual can feel accepted.

See Me Know Me



In recent decades, we've talked about safety in schools as if we're tangled in a dichotomy.

We can have a place that's safe, or one that's welcoming. We can design a space that's closed, or open. We can use hard measures like walls without windows, or soft ones like views to the outdoors. We've framed the problem as a series of impossible choices.

What we need is a better framework. A dichotomy simplifies complexity, forcing a subject into two opposing ideas. A matrix, on the other hand, draws ideas together, representing in mathematical terms how they're interwoven. When we reframe safety as a matrix, we can respond differently to loud demands for heightened

security in schools. We can answer with deep concern for the complete socio-emotional well-being of kids, because safety is a matrix made up of needs. To feel truly safe, we need to feel protected emotionally and mentally, as well as physically.

That matrix of protections is the prerequisite for real learning. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a neuroscientist who studies youth development in educational settings, has observed that learning doesn't happen in the absence of emotion. In effect, school only functions well when kids feel well.

Embracing the holistic concept of not only educating but supporting the whole child is more than a philosophical stance. It's also a preventive measure, addressing safety before it becomes a problem. This is especially true when we consider the whole child as a social being, and school as a social entity. Understood that way, safe schools require many contributions from many people. How safe we feel is how supported we feel.

There is another definition of a matrix. In biological terms, it's a structure that supports, connects, and nurtures growth.

A safety matrix, then, is more than a functional framework. It's a symbol, an embodiment, of how everything and everyone is interconnected.

A month into each school year, a school in Washington, D.C., holds a staff development day when pictures of each student are posted on the walls of the school. Teachers write their names under the pictures of the students they know. At the end of the day, three teachers are assigned to each of the students that no one knows.

Current 1

Relationship Building Is Radical Inclusivity

Current 2

Learner-Centered Safety Is Social

Current 3

Holistic Safety Goes Beyond the Checklist

Current 4

Learning Deserves to Be Joyful

Insight

Safety is a matrix of needs.

Relationship

The quality of any human experience comes down to the quality of its relationships.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

Every student deserves to cross the threshold of their school and feel, "I'm seen. I'm known. Someone here cares about me."

Building Is

Radical

When schools are organized to bring students and adults into frequent contact, students notice, and feel safer.

How do I ensure that the relationships and connections I design for are centered on those who feel least seen, known, or cared for?

"We must know each other. We must build buildings and communities that foster our connection to one another."

— Sherry Earle, Former Executive Director, National Center for School Safety

Inclusivity

Learner-

Students are complex, unique individuals, not identical products of an educational system.

A school that sees its students designs for them: flex areas to retreat to, informal places to gather, alternatives to the cafeteria, spaces for destimulation.

Centered

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure students are active voices in shaping their own spaces?

Safety

When students see themselves in their school, they feel safe in it.

Kids don't always step forward, so invite them to speak up.

Is Social

Holistic

Security isn't a one-time effort, or a checklist of discrete measures.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

A safe school attends to six interconnected dimensions of wellbeing: physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual, and community.

Safety

How do I ensure students move from being consulted about safety to being the authors of what safety requires?

Goes Beyond

That kind of safety requires a commitment to the long view.

“Social-emotional learning is not something new on an educator's plate. It is the plate.”

the Checklist

— Ed Dunkelblau, PhD, Founder, Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning

Learning

Joy isn't a luxury in a school. It's a condition for everything else.

When children are engaged, they feel safe enough to show uncertainty and ask questions.

Deserves

to Be

Spaces that convey brightness, openness, and meaning tell students: This place is for you.

“One of the most important factors is joy of learning and having fun and creating playful, safe environments. ... Play supports learning ... because children ... feel safe.”

— Elizabeth Bonawitz PhD, Professor of Education, Harvard University

Joyful

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure joy is accessible to every student by making play a principle of my design process?

Transforming Streets into Child-Friendly Public Spaces

Kids are social beings, so school is a social entity, embedded in a realm of streets and blocks, neighborhoods and towns, and all that those civic elements encompass. A safety matrix, then, contains all that, too, and asking questions about what a truly safe, truly child-centric public realm might be like is sparking inspiring answers around the world.

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing safety on many levels.

United Kingdom
PlayStreets
Playing Out
playingout.net

Aurora, IL | Chicago, IL | Philadelphia, PA | Santa Ana, CA, and Beyond
Playful Learning Landscapes
playfullearninglandscapes.com

Barcelona, Spain
Public Space Play Plan
The Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents
cities4children.org

New York, NY | Paris, France | United Kingdom
School Streets Initiative
openplans.org, arep.fr, schoolstreets.org.uk

Barcelona, Spain
Superblocks
Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal)
isglobal.org, barcelona.cat

**Where
did I feel
safe at
school?**

**What made
me feel seen
and known
at school?**

**When did I
find joy during
the school day?**

Where was a place that you felt completely safe?

What did you do (consciously or not) to find or create that feeling?

Who was that place designed for and how did you know?

What's the distinction between feeling secure and feeling safe?

When have students felt safe in school? What made that possible?

If safety was a precondition for learning, how might that reframe the environment we design?

What invites everyone who crosses the threshold of a school to say, "I'm seen, I'm known, someone here cares about me"?

What does a learning environment look like when socialization is centered as learning itself?

How do we focus more on social and emotional skills as central to a sense of safety?

How might teachers and students take ownership and adapt the environment to their needs?

Where do the kids you know choose to socialize? Inside school? Outside school?

What do you know about why kids chose those places?

What do those places look like and feel like?

What's something that challenged or confirmed your thinking about safety through the lens of students being seen, being known?

What's one thing you'll do differently to ensure students feel seen and known in your school?

How do you feel about engaging in these conversations with students?

What do we want to commit to together?

What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and really welcoming? In a true spirit of observation and inquiry, it's a question that opens onto many more.

module

02

WELCOMING

**We love school
spaces dedicated to
our passions outside
the classroom and
where there's a seat
for everyone.**



We Belong Here

02 WELCOMING

Let Kids
Be Kids

Most schools are organized around standardization and metrics.

While those may currently be necessary, when we allow them to drive the approach to designing school buildings we get standardized spaces, aimed at a generic student or a homogenous student body.

How is any individual student, each with their own background, traditions, needs, and passions, to feel welcome, feel like they belong?

That question reflects a process that begins with welcoming and develops into belonging. A student arriving at a school for the first time may, like a traveler, feel welcomed. But they'll remain like someone passing through until they feel they belong. Arriving at belonging is critical, because we don't feel safe in spaces where we don't feel we belong.

Safety, then, is more than the absence of harm or threat; it's also the presence of the three Rs – representation, recognition, and relationship. We need places where kids can see themselves reflected in the space itself, in the art in the halls and the names on the walls. We need places where kids can be seen by others for who they are, in spaces that make room for relationships to grow and prosper, between peers and between generations.

That's why we must move away from rigidity, whether of a physical structure or a pedagogical one. Design a flexible place, one where every kid can find their group, their passion, their seat, and you've designed a place that says, "You belong here – and so do the people you care about, and who care about you."

That sense of belonging is both measurable and predictive, in that evidence has shown it can improve academic outcomes, can increase enrollment, and is protective of mental health. When you design a place for belonging, you design space for a new kind of metric, one that's a more honest measure of what school is really for.

The attendance area for Lincoln High School is less racially diverse than other parts of Portland, Oregon, so the student group Brothers of Color helps build a sense of community for BIPOC students. With no dedicated space to meet in the old school building, the group gathered in the choir room. In the new building, an intentionally designed multicultural center provides an "affinity space" for Brothers of Color and groups like it.

Current 1

Reflection Results in Representation

Current 2

Wayfinding Is Meaningful on Many Levels

Current 3

Proclaim Welcoming a Value

Current 4

Design for the Full Range of Experience

Current 5

Belonging Belongs to Everyone

Insight

The next frontier for design is relational. We are wired to bond, to matter, to belong.

Reflection

Reflection can be literal, like mirrors and windows, and figurative, like murals by and for the community.

Specialized spaces – like culinary classrooms, black box theaters, and mock trial and Model UN rooms – provide places to stand proud in a passion.

Results

in

When students drive design they're reflected and represented in the results.

“As a person of color, the multicultural center makes me feel like I belong.”

– Student at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Representation

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure the people most affected by a design are the ones shaping it?

Wayfinding

First impressions count when what you see as you enter is what you'll get throughout.

Consistent room numbering is universal design that welcomes all people.

Is Meaningful

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

Where might my own positionality create blind spots in how I design for wayfinding and first impressions?

on Many

"I've seen nice buildings before, but what's nice here is so much intention."

— Student at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Open layouts enable easy encounters and transparency between spaces encourages connection.

Levels

Proclaim

Comfortable seating in entryways welcomes the community.

Windows that let light in and allow views make a space feel warm and enveloping.

Welcoming

a

Eating spaces designed like a “family kitchen” break free of institutional models.

Design that makes a visible commitment says “it’s not just a school, it’s like art.”

– Student at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Value

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What practices can I use to move beyond empathy, and invite people who have had the lived experience to join the design team?

Design

Hangout spaces distributed around school, even in hallways, let kids find somewhere unique to suit them.

Libraries designed for eating lunch offer a cafeteria alternative with less social pressure.

Range of

Spacious corridors and gathering spaces reduce sensory overwhelm.

Biophilic design offers respite and encourages recovery.

Experience

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I design for experiences I haven't personally had, especially those involving sensory, social, or neurological differences?

Belonging Belongs to Everyone

Belonging is a right and an “equity lever” – marginalized students benefit the most.

Environment matters as much as instruction, and shared spaces that convey joy and meaning welcome one and all.

“Students who feel they belong at school are overall more motivated and engaged, have higher attendance, are less disruptive and distressed, achieve higher test scores, and complete school at higher rates.”

– Paul J. Kuttner, Author, “The Right to Belong in School: A Critical, Transdisciplinary Conceptualization of School Belonging”

A range of spaces that are specialized say that you don’t have to fit in to belong.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How can my design approach break through to ask deeper human questions?

A Flexible Force Driving the Journey

Our physical environment is more than a backdrop to our experience. It's an active force that engages our senses and emotions, shaping how we perceive the world and our place in it. The initiatives that are testing and measuring this force use transdisciplinary approaches to do so. One project is researching the neuroscience of how built environments make people feel seen, engaged, and present, while another is enriching educational settings by combining biophilic design, wellbeing science, and systems thinking. Evidence-based science and practice are producing a new set of metrics and a new sense of belonging.

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing the concept of welcoming on many levels.

Australia
Project Thrive
projectthrive.com.au

San Diego, CA
The Salk Institute for Biological Studies
salk.edu

Portland, OR
Institute for Health in the Built Environment
buildhealth.uoregon.edu

Seattle, WA
The Living Building Challenge
International Living Future Institute
living-future.org

Baltimore, MD
Intentional Spaces Initiative
International Arts & Mind Lab
artsandmindlab.org

**What is
inviting
about
school?**

**Where in school
did I feel most
like myself?**

**What school
space could
I claim as
my own?**

How can you tell when a school has been designed with intention?

How are first impressions made meaningful, memorable, and lasting?

What does a space reflecting identity look and feel like?

How does a school make room (literally) for who a student really is?

Which sensory overwhelm triggers are most obvious?
Harder to spot? Easiest to fix?

How do we learn to notice the influence physical spaces have on our ability to socialize?

How might we reimagine student hangout spaces and scatter them throughout a school?

What happens when students shape their space? What appears? What disappears?

What's something that challenged or confirmed your thinking about welcoming students through the lens of belonging?

What's one thing you'll do differently to ensure students feel they belong in your school?

How do you feel about engaging in these conversations with students?

What do we want to commit to together?

What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and welcoming? In a true spirit of observation and inquiry, it's a question that opens onto many more.

module

03

COMMUNITY

Schools designed for kids are also used for adult learning and all-ages gatherings. When communities connect, they're safer for all.

Give Us Links Not Locks

03 COMMUNITY



Let Kids
Be Kids

“Huge windows and glass doors make the space feel more like community,”

observed a student at the AIA-CAE’s 2022 Portland convening. The remark recognized what made their new school “permeable” in architectural terms, and how that design move signalled permeability in functional ways, too.

Schools primarily designed for students have traditionally served adult members of the community as well, as places to learn and gather and make cross-cultural, multi-generational meaning together. But in recent decades, the relationship between schools and their communities has broken down, alienating schools from the very social networks that ensure safety.

A truth that surfaced at the 2022 convening was this: School safety is not locked doors.

It’s the relationships among students, and, expanding outward, the relationship between students and community, between school and community. That’s why communities that use schools as gathering places and as resource centers are not only closely connected, but also safe.

The encouraging news is that “We are re-learning as a society how to be in community (beyond direct family),” says Carlos Beato, co-director of Next Generation Learning Challenges, who grew up undocumented in the South Bronx learning English as a second language and turned to teaching after studying architecture.

What that social evolution means for us, as designers, is that we must in parallel be relearning how to do our work in community. That’s no easy process, because it means relinquishing our role as primary author and embracing co-creation as a design imperative.

This is especially apt when it comes to designing safer schools, because it provides a way to act on the truism that security is everyone’s concern, but it’s also everyone’s job.

An after-school program leader notices a broken light needs a fast fix, suspects a district repair ticket would take too long, and knows a parent who’s an electrician. The electrician arrives that day and repairs the light. It’s a simple story with multiple parts: The school leader who’s familiar with a parent’s expertise, has a relationship with them, has their contact information, and is comfortable asking; the parent who knows the school, can get there quickly, and is happy to be asked for help. This fast fix was possible because of a web of community connections built over time.

Current 1

School Is a Hinge, a Point of Connection

Current 2

We Design with, Not for, Community

Current 3

Collaboration Prioritizes Community Leadership

Current 4

The Campus Is a Civic Presence

Insight

The sense of coming together grows where community is deeply rooted, in relationships, in shared identity, and in the act of designing the future together.

School Is

What if the school is not the center of the community, but returns to being the center of learning and the hinge for a thriving community?

Schools as sites of convening, as generational links, help create shared narratives between the students and the community.

a Hinge,

a Point

School becomes a place where different generations and parts of the community meet and make meaning together.

“Food shifts matter. ... Our community is thriving – hyperlocal, hyper-connected. We grow, cook, sell our own food.”

– Stephen Ritz, Founder, Green Bronx Machine, AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

of Connection

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How can my design process serve the conditions communities need to reimagine the world and build new beginnings together across generations and cultures?

We Design

Safety will always mean different things for different communities.

“The conditions of the places where we are born, grow, live, learn, play, and age affect our health and quality-of-life risks.”

— Huda Ahmed, Founder, Transformational Solutions, 2022 AIA-CAE Portland Convening

with,

Not for,

Schools can develop culturally specific pedagogy to tell their own stories that aren't reflected in the dominant culture's narratives.

“Involve us.”

— Student at 2018 AIA-CAE Washington, D.C., Convening

Community

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure my design process centers world building through the voices of those whose safety, stories, and futures are most at stake?

Collaboration

Community members are not end users of school design; they are co-creators of it.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

A community's sense of safety and security depends on power having been transferred back to the community who benefits.

Prioritizes

How does my design process shift power to the community, and what am I willing to relinquish to make that real?

Community

A “neutral convener,” someone able to see every side and reach across the community, is essential to any authentic community process.

Two critical ingredients are essential for effective partnerships: follow-through and trust.

Leadership

The Campus

A school's physical presence
can generate community pride.

Design expands beyond the buildings, so the campus
should present a welcoming presence that is harmonious
with the surrounding community.

Is a

Civic

“This new building brings people
with different backgrounds together.”

– Student at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

“Allow the community to participate in the beautification of
school grounds, helping with cleanup, planting, and possibly
even creating vegetable gardens.”

– Participant at AIA-CAE 2018 Washington, D.C., Convening

Presence

Each current
sparks a question
that inhabits the
margins of practice:
the edge where
what we've always
done meets what
we can no longer
ignore. Use it to
expand your field
of vision and
broaden your
scope for action.

How can my design
approach serve
to root the school
so deeply in its
community that it
becomes an
undeniable civic
force?

**What
made me
proud at
school?**

**Where in school
did I see my
neighborhood
reflected?**

**What brought
grown-ups
to school?**

Where and when do meaningful encounters between students and adults happen? What makes them possible? What gets in the way?

Which elements of a building bring people from different backgrounds together?

What enables multigenerational participation in the design process? What ensures multigenerational reflection in the design outcomes?

Where in school does the surrounding community show up in the building itself?

What signals that community members are becoming true co-designers and co-creators?

How do we ask kids what they really need, and how do we really hear the answers?

What does safety look like when there are healthy relationships between students? Between students and staff? Between students, staff, and community members?

What shifts as good relations ripple outward from school?

What's something that challenged or confirmed your thinking about community through the lens of student connection?

What's one thing you'll do differently to ensure students feel a sense of connection in your school?

How do you feel about engaging in these conversations with students?

What do we want to commit to together?

What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and really welcoming? In a true spirit of observation and inquiry, it's a question that opens onto many more.

All Our Relations

Kids thrive when they're cocooned in a web of relationships with each other, with supportive adults, and with plants and animals, earth and water. While we most often think of community as the civic sphere, nature-based and land-based learning initiatives redefine community to include the natural world. Many of the projects mentioned here honor Indigenous knowledge, which fosters connections to the natural world as central to children's flourishing. Now, research into access to nature and developmental outcomes is revealing what traditional practices have long held: The natural world is catalyst, connector, and community for all living beings.

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing community on many levels.

Jundiaí, Brazil
Desemparedamento da Infância
(Unwalled Childhoods Project)
[Initiativechildrenandnature.org](http://initiativechildrenandnature.org)

Frontiers in Psychology
"The Natural World as a Resource for Learning and Development: From Schoolyards to Wilderness"
frontiersin.org

Gland, Switzerland
IUCN Task Force on Nature-based Education
The International Union for Conservation of Nature
iucn.org

Raleigh, NC
The Natural Learning Initiative
NC State
naturalearning.org

New Zealand
Te Whāriki ("Woven Mat") Early Childhood Curriculum
education.govt.nz

module

04

MENTAL HEALTH

**1 in 7 youth worldwide
struggles. Architects
can't fix the crisis.
Architecture can – as a
values-based practice.**



Believe in Us

Current mental health statistics are more than an uptick in symptoms.

They're a signal telling us it's time to move beyond tallying the numbers to undertaking the work the numbers represent.

That work is a new understanding of mental health and of the role our environments play in supporting or undermining resilience to stress and trauma. Trauma has a new urgency in school safety conversations, and acknowledging and allowing it to inform school design ensures we balance academic achievement and mental health.

In their definitions of mental health, both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention include wellbeing – emotional, psychological, and social – as the key measure, recognize that it's influenced by many factors, and assert that it enables us not only to cope but to thrive.

Mental health, according to these organizations, is necessary for us to learn well and realize our abilities.

Understood that way, it's clear that kids struggling with mental health conditions will likely experience a school that isn't intentionally designed for wellbeing as a place that's unsafe and unsuited to both thriving and learning. By contrast, says the WHO, environments reshaped with mental health in mind both prevent illness and protect wellbeing.

Much as wellbeing is a web of interconnected elements, designing for wellbeing relies on connecting disciplines and people. We begin our work as designers by expanding the design team, by making "our" as broad as possible. There's great power in inviting people, including kids, to step out of their silos and into collaborative action. It's how we demonstrate that we believe in them and their experiences, in ourselves and our expertise, and in our collective ability to build places that will help us cope with the stresses of life inside school and beyond school walls.

A teacher who checks in regularly with kids is more likely to notice when they need help. Some call the approach "operation conversation;" the Kids Mental Health Foundation calls their program On Our Sleeves. In partnership with children's hospitals and behavioral health providers, it offers free coaching and resources for starting conversations and breaking stigmas. The program's tagline says it all: Because we know kids don't wear their thoughts on their sleeves, we give them a voice.

Current 1

Support Is a Web Stronger than a Safety Net

Current 2

Intentional Space Is Where Kids Thrive

Current 3

Putting Emotions into Words Is a Skill

Current 4

School Design Can Shield Kids from the Outside World

Current 5

Social Resilience Is Central to Wellbeing

Current 6

Trauma as a Lens Sees the Whole Child

Insight

Mental health is the presence of conditions that allow every child to cope, learn, and thrive – and those conditions are designed.

Support

Schools' existing internal supports for kids – social workers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, administrators, classroom teachers, special educators – are often underutilized in design conversations.

Schools – and designers for schools – need to accommodate and connect to external resources such as housing services, policy makers, researchers, community groups.

Stronger Than

Student-centered design is critical, and so are staff-centered and community-centered design, since those are the people who support kids.

Is a Web a Safety Net

More voices speaking about physical space equals more perspectives on designing for calm and support.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What does the evidence tell us about the full web of relationships, social ties, and bonds that holds kids together, and what would a design ethos built on that evidence look like?

Intentional Space Is Where Kids Thrive

We can rethink triggering spaces by considering room organization, views to an exit, and what's at someone's back.

Positioning the mental health/wellness center in the flow of student activity gives it importance and accessibility.

Culturally reflective spaces can provide a source of strength, unique coping strategies, and tailored resources.

More mindful bathroom design reduces the chance bathrooms will become places of isolation or bullying.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What does the evidence tell us about culture, nature, and environment as active sources of protection and healing, and what would a design ethos built on that evidence demand of us?

Putting

Making space, physical as well as metaphorical, for conversation is critical, because talking with kids is one of the best ways to check in on their mental health.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

Design places that nurture trust, because adults who invest time in understanding kids are showing support and creating healthy relationships, and space can support or undercut that.

Emotions

What does the evidence tell us about the physical conditions that make emotional literacy possible, and what design ethos ensures trust is built, feelings can be named, and no child goes unseen?

into Words

Emotional literacy is as important as any other kind of literacy.

“Feelings are not fixed.”

– Student at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Is a Skill

Schools Can

Corridors, cafeterias, gymnasiums, and classrooms are due for a redesign.

Incorporating biophilic design elements from nature is supported by research showing that kids with nature nearby feel less stress.

Shield Kids

from the

“Identifying mechanisms that buffer children from life’s stress and adversity is an important empirical and practical concern.”

– Nancy Wells, PhD, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University

Quiet places and open, daylit spaces build room for meditation and other wellness practices.

Outside World

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What does the evidence tell us about the built environment as a buffer, and what design ethos applies it through intentional attention to acoustics, daylight, social density, movement, access to nature, and healthy food?

Social

Structures, pedagogical and physical, can make kids feel left out, like Advanced Placement classes and classrooms that tend to divide by socio-economic status and race.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

Protective factors occur and help build resilience throughout our lives, so design approaches that work for kids also work for the adults who care for them.

Resilience

What does the evidence tell us about place attachment, and what design ethos creates places that kids and adults claim as their own, return to, and draw strength from across a lifetime?

Is Central

Designing for positive social interactions and strong community ties helps build social resilience as a protective factor.

Spaces and amenities that can be personalized, like places to eat, are part of a social resilience system.

to Wellbeing

Trauma

A trauma-informed lens reads behavior as communication, builds on strengths, keeps every student in view, and integrates all that into student-centered environmental design.

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

Culture influences perceptions of trauma, with some populations and cultures being more likely to experience a traumatic event or specific type of trauma.

as a Lens

What does the evidence tell us about trauma-informed design, and what design ethos ensures every decision attends to connection, protection, agency, and the cultural dimensions of how trauma is experienced and expressed?

Sees the

Culture determines acceptable responses to trauma and shapes the expression of distress, with not all families being accepting of symptoms and help.

Creating a trauma-informed space means bearing in mind four key concepts: connect, protect, respect, and redirect.

Whole Child

Rounding the edges

“Salutogenic” design supports the new understanding of mental health as wellbeing by designing for flourishing. One example of salutogenic form-making is architecture that embraces circles and curves. It’s especially well-suited to schools and campuses because, as designer and joy researcher Ingrid Fetell Lee writes, research has shown that our emotional brain associates sharp edges with danger and negativity and curved forms with safety and positivity. As Fetell Lee puts it, “circle by circle, curve by curve, we can round the edges.”

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing mental health on many levels.

Cupertino, CA
Apple Park
fosterandpartners.com

Tachikawa, Tokyo, Japan
Fuji Kindergarten
tezuka-arch.com

Copenhagen, Denmark
Ørestad Gymnasium
3xn.com

Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India
Rajkumari Ratnavati Girl’s School
dkarchitects.com

**What
gave me
hope at
school?**

**Where did
I find calm
in school?**

**Who at
school
believed
in me?**

What's the visible difference between a school that does no harm and one that actively supports holistic wellbeing?

What makes the kids you know feel that someone at their school cares about them?

How does the physical space support that caring?
How do the practices of the people support that?

How does the space support the practices?

Who in school is responsible for a student's mental health?

How does the physical space support or hinder that responsibility?

Where in the school day does a student encounter a trusted adult? Is it by design or by accident?

What's entailed in designing for staff mental health as well as for student wellbeing?

How does a school building compound stress? How does it relieve stress? Where are the first places to look?

What does a space designed for self-regulation look and feel like?

What elements and considerations go into a calming space? Layout, acoustics, lighting, furnishings? What else?

Which school spaces give students a choice about when and how to be there? What makes those choices possible?

What would it take to make joy visible in school architecture, as design intention?

What's something that challenged or confirmed your thinking about mental health through the lens of students being believed and valued?

What's one thing you'll do differently to ensure students feel believed and valued in your school?

How do you feel about engaging in these conversations with students?

What do we want to commit to together?

What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and really welcoming? In a true spirit of observation and inquiry, it's a question that opens onto many more.

DESIGN JUSTICE

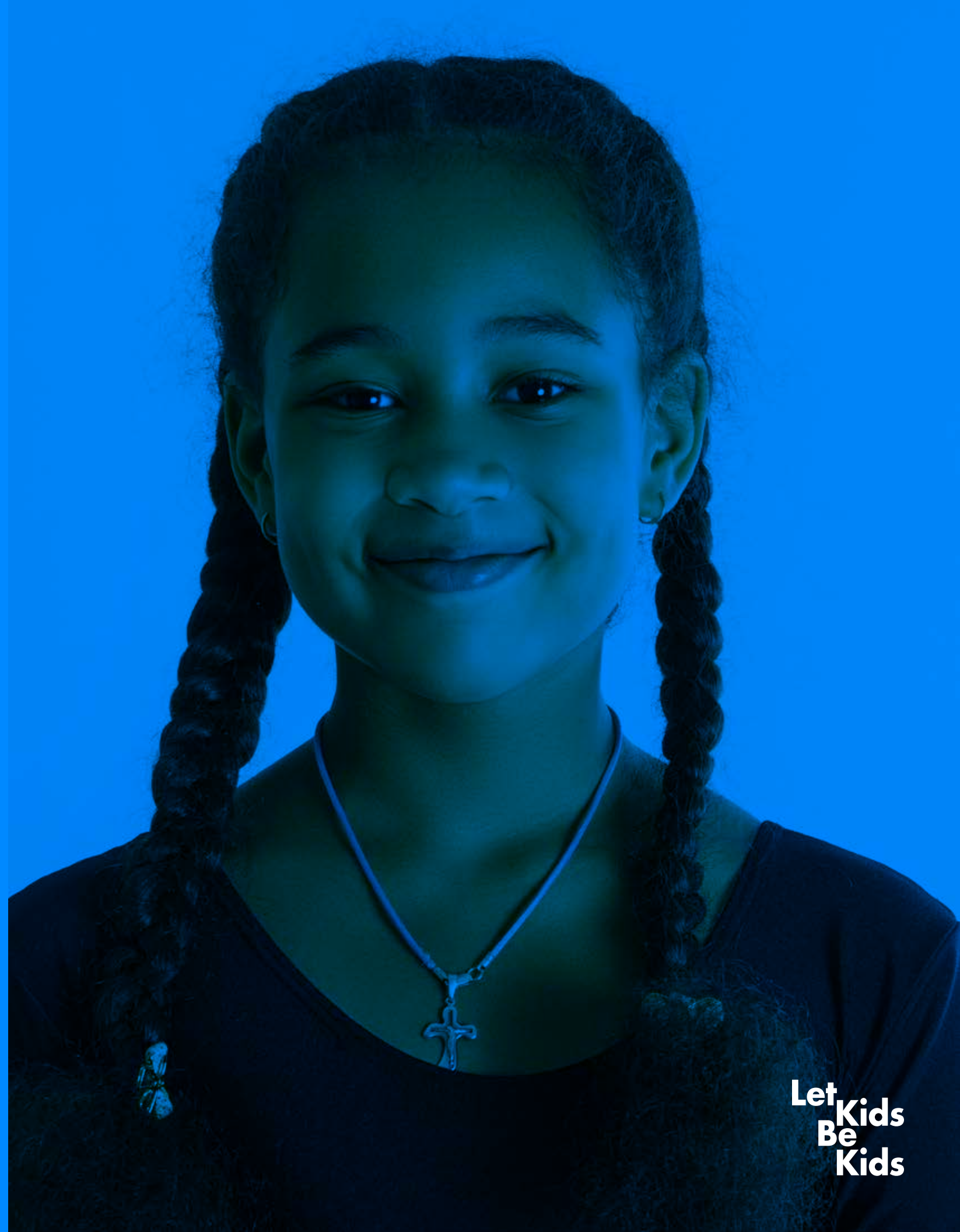
**Don't guess.
Ask, innovate, and
co-create.**

module

05

My Life My Insight

05 DESIGN JUSTICE



Let Kids
Be Kids

“The design of a space is just the tip of the iceberg,”

Karim Hassanein, principal of Colloqate, a design justice practice, reminds us. “What we are able to see on the surface is held up and created by a significant set of unseen structures.”

To use the iceberg metaphor in the context of design for learning, if a school building is the tip, it sits upon an educational and social system that, all too often, is a vast iceberg of historical injustice. For example, says Hassanein, at the root of food insecurity is a system that prioritizes profits over people; at the root of housing and transportation injustices are remnants of redlining.

While it may not be immediately obvious, these underlying injustices have everything to do with safety. “More often than not,” says Hassanein, “when we ask people what they need in order

to feel safe and a sense of belonging, it’s access to things like mental health care, housing security, food security, and spaces of cultural celebration and joy.”

Note that the phrase is “when we ask,” not “if we ask.” The asking is imperative. It’s what ensures that we, as design professionals, are not taking the social signals we receive at face value, nor accepting without question the inherited biases of our profession.

During the same 2022 AIA-CAE convening at which Hassanein spoke, his imperative was echoed by other experts: Start by listening to the voices of students and community, designers were urged. Embed yourself in the community. Earn trust, don’t expect it.

In considering whether to adopt the advice, we must recognize that the stakes are high. As Hassanein puts it, “The lasting permanence of our profession’s decisions requires us to pay particular attention to the injustices that result from our work and to seek design justice wherever possible.”

“To illustrate how our dominant culture prioritizes the theater of security over holistic wellness, consider this. The Portland Police Bureau’s annual budget is over \$200 million. And the budget for modernizing Portland’s predominantly Black and brown high school is \$311 million. One time. A building that will impact students, teachers, staff, their families, and their communities for the next hundred years.”

– Karim Hassanein, Colloqate

Current 1

The System We're in Is One We Can Question

Current 2

Discourse and Experience Drive Design

Current 3

The Future Is a Multicultural Claim

Current 4

Co-creation Is a Restorative Practice

Current 5

Design Justice Orients Us Toward Liberation

Insight

Design is not neutral ground:
Every decision either
perpetuates the systems
beneath the surface or
begins to dismantle them.

The System

The true impact of the built environment is broad, and the impact of what we build extends beyond learning.

“We exist in an oppressive system. ... If we don’t question the processes and policies that uphold it, we cannot design for more just and equitable outcomes.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

We’re in

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

If the designer is an ingredient in every outcome, what does it demand of me to question the systems I am part of perpetuating?

Is One We

“We are often conduits of power and not the sources of power. ... Consider what role we play in defining and codifying normative praxis.”

– Lesley-Ann Noel, Author, *Design Social Change*

Design has more than physical implications.

Can Question

Discourse and Experience Drive Design

Looking outward
with empathy allows us
to hear all voices.

“Don’t go in assuming that we know what
will create safe or welcoming environments
for a given community.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

“Learn about all the barriers and inequities that
impact stakeholders, not just what people think
about the way the building looks.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

“Thanks for hearing things
I didn’t even know I said.”

– Participant, AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Each current
sparks a question
that inhabits the
margins of practice:
the edge where
what we’ve always
done meets what
we can no longer
ignore. Use it to
expand your field
of vision and
broaden your
scope for action.

How do I become
a more discerning
listener and
genuine
accomplice —
working in the
shadows of com-
munity leadership,
not in front of it?

The Future

“To think of a form of oppression that no longer exists, imagine the future in 2050.”

– Lesley-Ann Noel, Author, *Design Social Change*

“We need diverse worldviews and perspectives [because] schools are not [usually] designed to meet multicultural needs.”

– Ross Parker, Presenter, AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Is a

Multicultural

Letting kids lead, with self-expression and creativity, puts children’s culture in the picture.

“Design Justice forwards the radical anti-racist vision of racial, social, and cultural reparation through the process and outcomes of design.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

Claim

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What new design consciousness becomes possible when I suspend my own worldview and create space for others to build the future?

Co-creation

“Pay attention to
who is designing.”

– Ross Parker, Presenter at
AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

Each current
sparks a question
that inhabits the
margins of practice:
the edge where
what we’ve always
done meets what
we can no longer
ignore. Use it to
expand your field
of vision and
broaden your
scope for action.

“We focus on the person first, we aim for a trauma-informed
approach, we take as much time as we can with folks, and
we advocate for more time during project phases.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

Is a

Restorative

When we teach spatial awareness
to the entire school community, kids
and teachers have agency.

How do I ensure my
design process
honors the
relationships built
through dialogue
rather than
extracting value
from the
communities
I serve?

Design solutions that
engage people teach kids
how to own their future.

Practice

Design Justice

“Liberation is a societal orientation towards the holistic wellbeing of all.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

What must I be willing to become and to give up to be a designer actively working against the systems my profession has historically served and perpetuated?

“The orientation requires a radical reframing of our position as people within an industry, and a recognition of where we are now.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

Orients Us

Toward

“Design justice seeks to challenge the privilege and power structures that use architecture and design as a tool of oppression.”

– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

“Talk about what keeps people down, so then we can know ‘Where do people have to be lifted up?’”

– Lesley-Ann Noel, Author, *Design Social Change*

Liberation

**When
did I first
notice
design?**

**What made me
wonder who
school was
built for?**

**What would
I change
about school?**

How do our dominant practice models impact the safety and wellbeing of our most marginalized stakeholders?

Why should architects care about process or policy? Isn't our role design?

If I operate in a system that wants me to operate in a racist way, how do I shed that and align myself with an anti-racist position?

As architects, we follow building and zoning codes, but whose wellbeing and safety do those codes define? Is anyone left out?

How do we learn about all the barriers and inequities that impact stakeholders, not just about what people think of how the building looks?

How do we avoid assuming from the start that we know what will create safe or welcoming environments for a given community?

What community engagement strategies can we propose that compensate people for sharing their lived experiences?

How do we include cultural narratives and ancestral knowledge in the process and in the places we build?

What does letting kids lead mean in practice?

How do we design our processes to facilitate healing?

How do we slow our processes down so there is time to build trust?

What's something that challenged or confirmed your thinking about design justice through the lens of student agency?

What's one thing you'll do differently to ensure students feel a sense of agency in your school?

How do you feel about engaging in these conversations with students?

What do we want to commit to together?

What does it mean for a school to be truly safe and really welcoming? In a true spirit of observation and inquiry, it's a question that opens onto many more.

Every Schoolyard an Oasis

The underlying injustices that make children feel unsafe, from food and housing insecurity to cultural exclusion and marginalization, are well documented. An emerging threat on the list is climate disruption, which hits hardest in communities – and bodies – that are least prepared. Children are among the most vulnerable to extreme weather events, and the school closures those events cause disrupt learning, exacerbate existing inequalities, and undermine supportive environments. In that context, it's more important than ever for schoolyards to become green incubators, growing solutions to climate challenges while nurturing wellbeing.

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing design justice on many levels.

Liverpool, UK

PopUP Forest Bathing Pod

landezine-award.com/popup-forest-bathing-pod

Barcelona | Brussels | Paris | Rotterdam

COOLSCHOOLS Project

jpi-urbaneurope.eu/project/cool-schools

Global Network

Global Rewilding Alliance

globalrewilding.org

Berkeley, CA

Green Schoolyards America

greenschoolyards.org

Paris, France | Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia

OASIS Schoolyards Resilient Cities Network

resilientcitiesnetwork.org/oasis-schoolyards

Global Network

SUGi Pocket Forests

sugiproject.com

EVALUATION

What we measure is a message to kids about what we think of them.

module

06



**It
all
matters
to
me**

“If we want to bring it on the radar screen, we need to measure it,”

said Andreas Schleicher, director of education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in 2017. Now that safety, welcoming, community, mental health, and design justice are on our radar as values shaping the design of learning places, we need a values-based approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating the impact of that design.

To reference architect Giancarlo De Carlo, who believed that buildings were “an outline of potential,” we can’t know how or what to build until we know why we are building it. It follows that we can’t evaluate whether what we’ve built has fulfilled its potential without the why as a measure of success.

Taking that cause-and-effect approach will mean shifting post-occupancy evaluation out of its inadequate present state. We must move from what, all too often, is an improvised, in-house, wrap-up task to a rigorous, industry-wide, values-based design phase that evaluates what’s already been built as a step toward what has yet to be designed.

As De Carlo suggested more than a half century ago, to avoid perpetuating definitions and standards that no longer serve us, when we build schools, we have to first articulate the reasons contemporary society needs school buildings. Those reasons – to provide places of welcome and community where wellbeing and social justice can flourish and kids can feel safe – form the framework for values-based evaluation.

We must redress our measurement inadequacies by embedding that values-based evaluation within the matrix of needs, during the design phases. How then might safety appear on the radar of kids and all who care about their flourishing?

Building a framework sturdy enough to support the co-creation and evaluation of schools that meet a matrix of needs is no faster or easier than constructing anything new. In 2017, the AIA-CAE Research Subcommittee launched a U.S.-based initiative to examine the future of post-occupancy evaluation. Seven years later, after surveying school architects and convening professionals from architecture, education, health care, sustainability, and public health to focus on bridging the language of research and design, the structure emerged: a holistic evaluation framework, values-driven, community-centered, and equity-focused.

Current 1

We Can and Should Measure What We Value

Current 2

Building Is a Lifelong Relationship

Current 3

Language Is What Links Values and Criteria

Current 4

Learners' Experiences Belong in the Data

Current 5

Values-Based Evaluation Drives Systems-Based Change

Current 6

Cues, Tools, and Metrics Are a Work in Progress

Insight

Evaluation is a design problem. Evaluation is not a wrap-up task: It is a design beginning, and the values that guide what we create must be the same values by which we measure what we've built.

We Can

Behavioral and student learning outcomes are often cited as important but rarely evaluated.

Existing metrics weren't designed to measure whether kids are thriving, so they don't provide a means of acting on what's important to us.

and Should

Measure What

"Measures are a domain of practical action."

– A.M. Brighenti, Author, "The Social Life of Measures"

"Measurement is value-making and value-promoting, not merely value-using."

– Adam Wood, Author, "The Politics of Post Occupancy Evaluation"

We Value

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I advocate for evaluation frameworks that measure what we actually value and refuse to accept metrics that were never designed to tell us whether kids are thriving?

Architecture

Whether a building is new or renovated, its design team has an intense but brief relationship within its long lifespan.

Social determinants of health, wellbeing, safety, and equity extend beyond the metrics of building systems performance and user satisfaction.

Is a

Lifelong

Post-occupancy evaluations (POEs) are nearly four times more likely than pre-evaluations to be funded internally.

Interest in POE now is idiosyncratic, depending on champions rather than professional culture.

Relationship

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we've always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I steward a long-term relationship with what I've helped build, advocating for evaluation that extends beyond building performance to the social determinants of health, wellbeing, safety, and equity?

Language

Five qualities of successful school design are not just aspirations, but criteria: reflective, robust, integrated, inclusive, and coherent.

“Connection to nature linked to writing.
Individualization linked to math.
The building was not neutral.”

Peter Barrett, Presenter, 2021 Dialogues Workshop

Links

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure the language I use to define success becomes the bridge – linking the values that guided the design to the criteria by which its human and transformative outcomes are measured?

Values

What has been missing from evaluation is the connective tissue – the relationships among learners, design, place, and transformative outcomes.

“Align value systems [between] the built world and its users.”

– Adam Wood, Author, “The Politics of Post Occupancy Evaluation”

and Criteria

Learners’ “Power asymmetries determine who is at the table defining goals.”
– 2019 AIA-CAE Workshop Finding

“The client paying for the building is not the child learning in it.”
– 2019 AIA-CAE Workshop Finding

Experiences

Belong in “Student opinions were seldom considered in published evaluation studies.”
– Cleveland and Fisher, Learning Environments Research, 2014

“We want students to authentically lead design processes.”
– 2019 AIA-CAE Workshop Finding

the Data

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I ensure that the people most affected by a design, the learners themselves, are not just subjects of evaluation but co-authors of it?

Values-Based Evaluation Drives Systems-Based Change

“We’re operating on antiquated systems.”
– Participant, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

“I hear wrong questions drowning out the right ones.”
– Participant, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I use evaluation not just to measure what has been built, but to build the case for the systemic change our schools (and the children in them) are still waiting for?

“What if we could develop an ongoing collaborative community of stewardship around our schools?”
– Julie Pfeffer, Presenter, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

The highest-ranked barriers to POEs of educational facilities are lack of time, lack of funds, and lack of perceived value among clients.

Cues, Tools, and Metrics Are a Work in Progress

“Why is building a typical data pipeline so difficult?”

– Dane Stokes, Presenter, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

How will we measure all of this place-based and systems-based change?

“The future of building is quantified and customized. ... What is the unit of analysis?”

– Melissa Marsh, Presenter, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

“Let’s grow out of the terrible tools.”

– Jeri Brittin, Presenter, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

Each current sparks a question that inhabits the margins of practice: the edge where what we’ve always done meets what we can no longer ignore. Use it to expand your field of vision and broaden your scope for action.

How do I stay humble about what we don’t yet know how to measure while refusing to let the limits of current tools become an excuse to stop asking better questions?

**What did
I love?
Who
knew?**

**Who at school
knew what
mattered to me?
Where did
I feel like my
experience
counted?**

How might we...

shift power so a broader representative group is at the table defining goals?

lower the risk for leadership taking on a challenge?

create an evaluation tool that expects a variety of factors, but still leads to shared knowledge?

develop a value proposition and evaluation tool of hypothesis-driven design to continue to validate its value to firm and clients?

reconceive the metrics of success to include actual performance over time?

develop an opportunity for professional sharing between architects and between architects/clients that rises above any competitive pressures?

bring people together from different disciplines on a single team with a clear purpose to have positive long-term impact via a designed project, and span knowledge areas in architecture?

find the right group/team that should/can take it on and make it standard practice?

connect the design process with the curriculum to add value to build the capacity to do POEs?

pair architects with researchers (in order to provide appropriate rigor to POE and yield findings that could further our understanding of how design can more effectively make positive change)?

begin to generate opportunities for trans-disciplinary career paths to bridge language (design/research) and job opportunities?

identify data and research to evaluate a variety of environmental interventions (and behavioral)?

How might we bridge education, architecture, and research to spark dialogue?

Dialogues workshop participants generated these bold questions, transforming a small gathering into collaborative inquiry, reimagining design, learning, and discovery together.

Prying Open the POE Black Box

To measure whether school is supporting a child's matrix of needs, we must design school buildings with those measures in mind. Since POE of schools has been operating as a black box, with its evaluative criteria opaque, opening it up may seem a daunting task. But, in fact, there are several initiatives already measuring what matters in the matrix. These projects, programs, and partnerships are working in the realms of educational research, philosophy, and practice and are already producing results. The evidence demonstrates that a rigorous, systemic, and holistic evaluation framework supports learner wellbeing. If others are already measuring what matters, so can we.

Thinking about the possibilities in architecture for education means thinking beyond architecture for education, to initiatives that point us in the right direction by being successful in addressing evaluation on many levels.

University of Oxford
"Adolescent Wellbeing: The Role of Schools"
wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk

Aspen, CO | Washington, D.C.
The Aspen Institute National Commission Youth Call to Action
aspeninstitute.org

Chicago, IL
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
casel.org

Charlottesville, VA | Louisville, KY
Compassionate Schools Project
compassionschools.org

Perth, Western Australia
Friendly Schools
friendlyschoools.com.au

Global Network
International Positive Education Network
ipenglobal.com

Let Kids
Be Kids

School design agent provocateur Ira Socol calls on us to act.



“

We must create learning spaces that are physically safe, psychologically safe, and emotionally safe for every child.

”

“

We should never
have to be in a room
with kids and discuss
‘hardening’ a school.

”

“

We need to mean it
when we imagine into
existence something
completely new.

”

What does it mean to build a school?

Ira Socol

One Friday in 2018 I found myself sitting in a bright sunlit room in Washington, D.C. On my left was the superintendent of schools from Newtown, Conn., and next to him, the new principal of the then-new Sandy Hook Elementary School. On my right sat two high school students, survivors of

the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I had been uncomfortable at this event before I sat down in that spot, but once I found myself at this epicenter of pain and loss, I realized that I did have a purpose that day.

Children are why we build a society. Children are the reason we want to build a just society, an equitable society, an embracing culture. Children are why we want a clean and healthy environment, why we want communities that are both safe and open, and both unified and diverse.

As our group began to speak, I watched closely as Joe Erardi, the recently retired superintendent of Connecticut's Newtown Public Schools, described his mission as he led the building of the new Sandy Hook Elementary. "I wanted a beautiful place," he said. "I wanted a beautiful place that children would love."

I introduced myself this way: "I've spent the last 10 years tearing down walls within school buildings and adding doors to the outside," I began, somewhat countering earlier narratives of the morning, "and I am absolutely certain that this has not only made our schools safer but has created great learning spaces that create great experiences for kids." Then I paused, and assured them that, "I'm not naive, I've been a New York City police officer, I've seen a world of violence, and"

I continued, in a nod to the fire expert who sat across the table from me, "I went to a huge high school that burned to the ground. But I believe we've taken the right path."

I think that we usually miss the point when we say, "We're going to build a school." Yes, it is about the physical building, but that is just one part of the big equation.

In Washington that Friday we had gathered to talk about safe schools in a summit organized by the AIA Committee on Architecture for Education (AIA-CAE), a group I was thrilled to have been part of for the year leading up to the summit. The committee called together a wide-ranging group – educators and architects, school psychologists and law enforcement, code officials and school hardware specialists, and the kids from Parkland, Fla. – all looking to create a broad definition of what a "safe school" is, and to build a framework of principles that might start to add definition to that goal.

It was a good day, but at the wrap-up, I felt compelled to bring up this question: "I really ask all the architects here," I said in response to an architect who had asked educators to be better clients, with bigger dreams, "to help develop those better clients by asking, at the very start, 'What do you want your children to be?' Don't ask about

spaces or number of students or timelines or budget, not yet. Make that first question, “What do you want your children to be?””

That is the question that needs to define everything about what a school is. If you want your children to be creative, to be collaborators, to be great communicators, to know how to make choices, to know how to build their own work and/or learning environments, to be kind, to be curious, to learn throughout their lives from the great wide world, to engage with technology well, to build healthy relationships and lead healthy lives, then can you really do that within the closed boundaries of traditional schools?

Can you do that with age-separated learning? With closed classroom doors? With separated subject areas? Without seating choices? Without technology choices? Without culturally engaged learning groups?

Can you do that with bells ringing telling kids to stop what they are thinking about and move on to another subject? Can you do that when you artificially divide kids, whether via reading “levels,” or with honor rolls, or with one or two student activities honored above the rest?

What — from space, to rules, to time schedules, to how and where lunch is eaten, to what voice

a teacher uses, to where the teacher desk is if there is a teacher desk, to homework attitudes, to whether kids can personalize computers — creates the school that is most likely to yield the learning our kids need?

Don’t limit yourself in your responses. I know a principal who put her desk in the central corridor intersection of her middle school. Another ended her elementary school teachers’ use of windowsills as storage — instead, they became places for kids to sit, to read, to work. One encouraged her kids to transform their cafeteria by building massive rolling tree houses. A high school principal turned little-used hallway locker areas into student hangout/breakout spaces. Others embraced the notion of multiage — K–5 together — learning environments. In another high school, ninth and 10th graders learn in a cross-curricular group with four teachers and no bell schedule. Elementary schools, big and urban, tiny and mountain rural, have abandoned single-teacher classrooms completely.

Those are just examples; there are thousands of leaders taking big risks every day. But we need to make that risk-taking systemic. We need to take the reinvention of education seriously. We need to mean it when we say, “We’re going to build a new school,” or “We’re going to rebuild an old school,” so that we imagine into existence something

completely new — and thus give our architects free range to develop true child-centric learning spaces.

We need to do this because, if we truly value our children, we will offer them the very best that we can — even if that is very hard, even if we need to transcend many obstacles, even if a city or county or state government wants to fight us. We need to do this because our kids are looking at us, every day, and wondering, “Why don’t they care enough?”

We need to stand up for what is right for children. We need to fund schools well, fund early-childhood programs well, ensure that parents can afford to spend time with their kids, ensure that every family has access to health care, decent housing, enough food. We need to ensure that mental health care — in school and out — carries no stigma. And something else very obvious, a requirement that sat like an elephant in the rooms of the AIA building on that Friday in 2018: We need to get military-grade weapons out of the hands of civilians.

Our education system was built from the very beginning on adult needs and adult priorities. There was Thomas Jefferson’s goal: “By this means 20 of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed at the public expense.” And Woodrow Wilson’s goal: “We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of

persons, a very much larger class, of necessity ... to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks. ... They must make a selection, and you must make a selection.” There was Ellwood Cubberley’s goal: “[Schools need to be] factories in which the raw materials [children] are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.” There was even the Eisenhower administration’s goal: an education modeled after the post-Stalin Soviet Union.

All addressing adult needs and priorities.

But what might school look like if we were helping kids to build their future society, a better society, a better world? If that was our goal, would we do anything that we do now? Would we build boxes around kids, around curricula, around age groups, around time? Would we design a secondary school without observing and talking to current five-year-olds? Would we make it difficult to go outside? Would we make sitting still a virtue? Would we accept the idea that we would prefer to “harden” learning spaces for children rather than take away weapons designed for only one task — murder? That Friday in 2018 was a true summit, a powerful

meeting of the minds, with a focus on hope, not fear. As a nation, we need to be grateful for the hard work of the AIA-CAE group in crafting that convening and those that followed, and for their effort to fight against knee-jerk security reactions and for developing ideas that represent real goals for kids.

Yet I’ll quote one alumus of Marjory Stoneman Douglas school, who asked during the summit, “If we’re talking about schools, shouldn’t kids have outnumbered adults?” Yes, we need to remember who brings the most relevant voices. That’s why, in the end, one moment on that Friday made my day. Walking with two Parkland, Fla., girls, I told them of their influence and impact on Virginia kids, and I asked them to keep fighting, no matter how disappointing American adults seemed to be. “Listen,” I said, “the old folks are dying off, and then you’ll be able to make things right.” I’m sure that’s not the kind of thing most adults tell them, but it’s as true as it is, perhaps, inappropriate. And hearing my thought they burst into laughter — real teenage-kid laughter — as one said, “That’s my quote for the day.” And in that laughter, I heard what was important.

A high school principal I once knew always referred to his students as “children.” When asked why, he said, “My children don’t get to be children at home. They work to feed their families; they

care for younger kids; they need to be adults out there. So when they come here, I want them to be able to be children.”

When we build a school, or rebuild a school, we need to insist on doing the right thing, and doing it completely. We must create a learning space that is physically safe, psychologically safe, emotionally safe for every child. And that learning space needs to be surrounded by a community, a state, and a nation with that same abundance. Only then can our kids truly be kids, and truly be kids on their way to being healthy adults, adults who will be way better than we adults have been.

Do not say it is too hard. Do not say we don’t have the energy, the resources, the time. We have all that and more if we think it’s important.

And it is important. Because we should never have to be in a room with kids and discuss “hardening” a school. We should never have to discuss bulletproof glass for schools. We should never need to talk about “lockdowns” and “active shooter drills.”

In 2018, I wrote: “We have done so little.” Sadly, eight years later, that remains true, as does this: We owe the future so much more.

VOCABULARY

This offering of terms reflects the collective knowledge of *Let Kids Be Kids'* diverse contributors. Rather than fixed definitions, the descriptions are meant to be explored, questioned, and applied in the context of designing safe and welcoming places for all learners.

Designing Environments to Support 21st-Century Skills

As this publication was being shaped, the most diverse crew ever assembled for a lunar mission traveled farther from Earth than anyone ever had. Four humans flew to the far side of the Moon and back, squashed together in a living space the size of two minivans for a 10-day expedition of exploration.

In their cramped capsule speeding through space, the crew collaborated on projects and problem-solving, communicated with each other and the watching world, and created moments of insight and connection, as when they proposed naming a lunar crater in homage to a crew member's lost loved one.

These accomplishments were possible thanks to an environment meticulously built to keep the crew safe in a perilous place and supported in living and learning. A reconfigurable cabin, coupled with choreographed movement and a flexible flyby plan, allowed them to observe and record parts of the Moon no human had seen directly.

Although at times the crew said what they saw at the Moon was hard to describe, their words were often moving and the mission's nomenclature deliberate, as in "Integrity" for the capsule and "front porch" for the splashdown raft. Trained for this mission as field scientists, the Artemis II astronauts made description part of the science itself, speaking with precision and passion. May that inspire us on our own moon shot.

Spaceship Earth | NASA astronaut and Artemis II Mission Specialist Christina Koch peers out of one of the Orion spacecraft's main cabin windows, looking back at Earth, as the crew travels toward the Moon. Image credit: NASA

Academic content

The standards-aligned instructional material, knowledge domains, and skills formally adopted by an educational institution and delivered through curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Acceptance

An institutional practice demonstrated through policies, behaviors, and learning environments that affirm individual identity, ability, and background without requiring conformity for access, participation, or success.

Access

The degree to which all users can physically, cognitively, socially, and digitally engage with spaces and resources.

Access to choice

The structured availability of meaningful options within learning, environment, and support systems that are equitably offered to students and not limited by disability, socioeconomic status, race, or institutional bias.

Accessibility

The degree to which institutional facilities, programs, technologies, communications, and services meet established accessibility standards, enabling full participation by individuals with disabilities without the need for retroactive modification.

Accessible spaces

Physical and virtual environments within educational settings that are designed, constructed, or adapted to meet accessibility standards and support independent, dignified use by all individuals.

Accountability

A defined system of responsibility within educational institutions that assigns roles, measures outcomes, monitors compliance, and enforces corrective action related to academic, operational, safety, and equity objectives.

Acoustics

The management of sound (reverberation, absorption, transmission) to optimize speech intelligibility and cognitive performance.

Activation

The intentional design and programming of environments to encourage engagement, participation, movement, learning, and social interaction.

Active classrooms

Spaces configured for participation, collaboration, and movement rather than passive reception.

Active design

Design strategies that promote physical movement as part of learning and daily routines.

Adaptive environments

Spaces capable of changing in response to user needs, time, or activity.

Adaptive reuse

Repurposing existing structures for educational use while retaining cultural and material value.

Adult learning centers

Educational facilities or programs specifically structured to serve adult learners, characterized by flexible scheduling, applied learning, wraparound supports, and alignment with workforce or credentialing pathways.

Adverse childhood experiences

Documented categories of early life trauma recognized by educational institutions as risk factors for learning, behavior, and health outcomes, informing preventive support, interventions, and trauma-responsive practices.

Affinity space

An environment intentionally designed to support shared identity, belonging, and connection among individuals with common experiences or backgrounds.

Affordances

A property or quality of an object or environment that invites possibilities for interaction and nudging behavior.

Agency

The measurable capacity of individuals within the educational system, particularly students, to make informed decisions, influence their learning conditions, and exercise voice within institutional structures.

Agent provocateur

A person that intentionally disrupts expectations to provoke curiosity, questioning, or critical thinking.

Air quality

Environmental condition, defined by levels of ventilation, pollutants, particulate matter, and gases such as CO₂, that influence human health, comfort, and cognitive performance.

Alcoves

Small semi-enclosed niches supporting focused, individual, or small-group activity.

Alone together

A condition in educational spaces where individuals are physically co-present but socially disconnected, identified through engagement data, participation patterns, and environmental design analysis.

Ambient space

The background environmental conditions of a space, including light, sound, temperature, air quality, materials, and spatial character, that influence human perception, comfort, behavior, and wellbeing.

Ancestral knowledge

Culturally rooted knowledge systems recognized by educational institutions as valid sources of learning and incorporated into curriculum, pedagogy, and community engagement practices.

Anxiety disorders

Clinically recognized mental health conditions that, within

educational settings, necessitate accommodation, supports, or services to ensure equitable access to learning and participation.

Areas of autonomy

Zones where learners can self-direct behavior without constant supervision.

Areas of refuge

Spaces that are intentionally designed to allow individuals temporary withdrawal for regulation or self-management while maintaining safety, supervision, and dignity.

Art

Creative expression formally recognized by educational institutions as a mode of learning, communication, emotional processing, and cultural engagement.

Artificial light

Non-natural lighting systems used within educational facilities, evaluated for their impact on visibility, safety, health, and learning conditions.

Assessment tool

A standardized or institutionally approved instrument used to measure learning outcomes, behavioral needs, environmental conditions, or program effectiveness.

Assessments

Structured processes used by educational institutions to evaluate student learning, development, wellbeing, or program performance, aligned with policy and accountability standards.

Asset-based

Design approach that builds on strengths of learners and communities rather than deficits.

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

A neurodevelopmental condition recognized in educational

policy as requiring instructional, environmental, and behavioral accommodations to support equitable learning access.

Authentic care

An institutional commitment to creating conditions in which individuals can safely express identity, needs, and perspectives without fear of penalty or exclusion.

Authenticity

The alignment between stated institutional values and observable policies, practices, and behaviors within educational environments.

Autism spectrum disorder

A recognized neurodevelopmental condition that, within educational institutions, requires documented identification and the provision of individualized instructional, environmental, and social-emotional accommodations through formal support plans.

Autonomy

The institutionally supported ability of students and staff to exercise independence and self-direction within defined educational, safety, and accountability frameworks.

Barriers

Physical, social, cognitive, cultural, or systemic obstacles that limit access, participation, inclusion, or opportunity within environments and experiences.

Be seen

Within educational environments, a condition in which individuals experience recognition, visibility, and acknowledgment by peers and institutional systems.

Beautiful and comfortable

A design and operational standard for educational spaces that prioritizes aesthetic quality and physical comfort as contributors to wellbeing and engagement.

Behavior versus conduct

A policy distinction recognizing

behavior as a response to internal or external conditions, while conduct refers to rule-governed actions subject to disciplinary procedures.

Behavioral science

The interdisciplinary study of human behavior, decision-making, and interactions, examining how biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors influence actions and outcomes.

Behaviors

Observable actions within educational settings that are assessed, supported, and addressed through behavioral frameworks rather than solely disciplinary mechanisms.

Being known

An institutional condition in which students and staff are personally recognized through relationships, data-informed support, and responsive practices.

Belonging

A measurable institutional outcome where individuals report feeling accepted, valued, and connected within the school community.

Belonging as an equity lever

The principle that fostering belonging can improve participation, wellbeing, and outcomes, particularly for historically marginalized groups.

Biological reactivity

Physiological responses (stress, arousal) influenced by environmental conditions.

Biophilia

The innate human tendency to seek connection with nature and natural systems, influencing psychological and physiological wellbeing.

Bioswale

A landscape feature used on educational campuses to manage stormwater while supporting environmental learning and sustainability goals.

BIPOC community

The recognition and inclusion of this interconnected constituency (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in spatial representation and participation.

Body and mind

Holistic design approach addressing physical and cognitive states as interdependent.

Breakout spaces

Designated areas within educational facilities that support small-group learning, collaboration, or individualized instruction.

Building a community

Creating intentional spaces to foster community-led practices.

Built environment

The physical systems, including buildings, infrastructure, land use, and transportation systems, that influence human health, behavior, and wellbeing.

Bullying

Repeated, targeted behavior within educational environments that causes harm or distress and requires formal prevention, reporting, and intervention procedures.

Burden of safety

The disproportionate responsibility placed on individuals, often students or staff, to manage safety risks due to institutional design, policy, or resource gaps.

Calming environment

An educational setting that is intentionally structured through design, routines, and adult practices to reduce stress, support emotional regulation, and promote psychological safety, consistent with trauma-informed and Social-emotional learning-aligned standards.

Campfires and watering holes

A learning framework describing complementary environments that

support knowledge sharing through expert instruction (“campfires”) and peer interaction through informal social exchange (“watering holes”).

Campus as beacon

The role of a school environment as a visible symbol of welcome, identity, connection, and community value.

Campus identity

The collective character and meaning expressed through spatial organization, architecture, and culture.

Can be seen

A spatial condition in which individuals remain visually accessible to trusted adults or peers, supporting connection and safety without excessive surveillance, and balancing safety requirements with those of dignity and privacy.

Carbon emissions

The release of greenhouse gases associated with human activities that contribute to climate change and environmental impact.

Celebrate

An institutional practice of formally recognizing learning, growth, identity, milestones, and contributions through inclusive, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate means.

Celebrate often

A policy-supported expectation that recognition of progress and success occurs regularly and equitably, not only at high-stakes academic benchmarks.

Celebrating ancestral knowledge

The intentional recognition and incorporation of intergenerational knowledge, cultural practices, and lived traditions as valid systems of knowledge that inform identity, learning, and relationships to place.

Checklist

A standardized operational tool used by educational institutions to

ensure consistent implementation, compliance, or evaluation of policies, procedures, or design standards.

Child-centered design

Design prioritizing developmental needs, scale, and agency of children.

Choice and collaboration

An educational setting intentionally structured through design, routines, and adult practices to reduce stress, support emotional regulation, and promote psychological safety, in alignment with trauma-informed and social-emotional learning principles.

Choice and comfort

A condition of physical and emotional ease within educational environments that supports sustained agency, engagement, focus, and wellbeing.

Choice of environment

The institutionally supported ability for students to access varied learning or regulation spaces based on instructional needs, emotional state, or learning preferences, within supervision and safety guidelines.

Choices for students

Structured options provided within curriculum, assessment, and environment that allow students to demonstrate learning and self-regulation without lowering academic or behavioral expectations.

Civics

Instructional content and experiences designed to develop students’ understanding of democratic systems, civic responsibility, and societal engagement, aligned with academic standards and community contexts.

Climate

The long-term environmental conditions of a region that influence the design, performance, resilience, and habitability of learning environments.

Climate change

Long-term changes in earth’s climate resulting from natural processes and human activities, particularly the increased concentration of greenhouse gases, affecting environmental, ecological, and human systems.

Co-creation

A design principle asserting that meaningful participation and shared authorship among stakeholders are essential to equitable and effective outcomes.

Co-creators

Individuals or groups who collaboratively contribute knowledge, expertise, and lived experience to shape shared decisions, processes, or outcomes.

Co-design

A collaborative design methodology that engages learners, educators, families, and communities as equal partners in creating learning environments that reflect shared needs, values, and aspirations.

Coercive systems

Structures that enforce compliance through control rather than engagement.

Co-evolution

The dynamic process through which learners, educators, communities, and learning environments continuously influence, adapt to, and evolve with one another.

Cognition

The mental processes involved in perception, memory, reasoning, learning, and decision-making.

Cognitive benefits

Positive effects on mental processes such as attention, memory, reasoning, and learning influenced by environmental stimuli and structure.

Cognitive development

The progression of mental processes related to thinking,

reasoning, memory, and problem-solving, recognized by educational institutions as foundational to learning design and supports.

Cognitive engagement

The degree of mental effort and active processing involved in learning or interaction.

Co-learning

A pedagogical approach recognizing that educators and learners engage in reciprocal learning, supporting professional growth, student agency, and inclusive practice.

Collaboration

A structured process through which individuals or teams work interdependently toward shared educational goals, supported by time, tools, and accountability structures.

Collaborative spaces

Physical or virtual environments that are intentionally designed to support group learning, shared problem-solving, and peer interaction.

Comfortable

An operational design and environmental standard indicating that spaces support ergonomic, sensory, and emotional needs without compromising safety or supervision.

Common language

Shared terminology formally adopted by an educational institution to ensure clarity, consistency, and equity in policy implementation and communication.

Communal spaces

Designated spaces within schools intended for shared use, relationship-building, and informal interaction among students, staff, and other members of the community.

Communality

The condition of shared participation, belonging, and

collective use within a social or environmental system.

Community

The collective body of students, staff, families, and partners connected to an educational institution and engaged in its mission.

Community access

Policies and practices that allow appropriate, safe, and equitable use of school facilities or programs by community members.

Community as experts

A principle recognizing lived experience and local knowledge as valid forms of expertise in decision-making and design processes.

Community asset

A resource, relationship, or capacity within the local community recognized and leveraged by the educational institution to support learning and wellbeing.

Community at large

External stakeholders beyond the immediate school population who are impacted by or engaged with the institution’s operations and outcomes.

Community building

Deliberate institutional actions aimed at strengthening relationships, trust, and collective identity within the school ecosystem.

Community-centered design

A planning and design approach that prioritizes the needs, values, and lived experiences of the school community.

Community engagement

Active participation of stakeholders in design and use.

Community expertise

The knowledge, insights, and understanding that individuals and groups develop through lived experience and local context,

leveraged to inform decision-making and problem-solving.

Community-focused
Policies, practices, or spaces that explicitly prioritize community engagement, partnership, and responsiveness.

Community-focused spaces
Spaces with social programming that supports interaction, collaboration, and shared purpose among community members.

Community health
Physical, social, and environmental wellbeing of the broader community.

Community infrastructure
The interconnected social, physical, and institutional systems that support community wellbeing, participation, and functioning.

Community narratives
Stories and identities arising from the community that are embedded and expressed in the environment.

Community of connections
A school culture characterized by intentional relationship-building, trust, and reciprocal engagement.

Community ownership
The shared sense of responsibility and stewardship over educational spaces and outcomes among students, staff, and community partners.

Community pride
A collective sense of value, ownership, and positive identity associated with shared places, relationships, or environments.

Community space
Spaces designed to invite the broader community into the school environment.

Compartmentalized layout
A spatial organization model in which functions or groups are separated into discrete areas and

assessed for impact on supervision, inclusion, and connection.

Compassion
An institutional value operationalized through policies and practices that recognize distress, respond with care, and seek restoration rather than punishment.

Competence
The demonstrated ability of individuals or systems within educational institutions to effectively perform required roles, supported by training and evaluation.

Competing demands
The presence of multiple institutional priorities requiring balancing of time, resources, or attention, addressed through transparent decision-making.

Comprehensive safety
A term in current use for the combining of physical, emotional, and psychological safety. See the entry on “Safety as a matrix of needs” for this publication’s perspective.

Concept of traditions
Recognized practices or rituals within educational institutions that contribute to identity, continuity, and belonging.

Confidential spaces
Areas designed for privacy and sensitive interactions.

Connect
An action through which individuals form meaningful academic, social, or emotional relationships.

Connected communities
School communities are characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, shared responsibility, and active engagement among students, staff, families, and partners.

Connection to nature
The intentional integration of natural elements or experiences into

learning environments to support wellbeing and engagement.

Connection with the teacher
A relational condition in which students experience trust, understanding, and support from educators, linked to engagement and achievement outcomes.

Connections
The network of relationships and interactions within educational environments that support learning and wellbeing.

Connectiveness
The degree to which institutional structures, spaces, and practices facilitate relationship-building and interaction.

Constructivist
A learning theory and a philosophy of education in which learning is active, not passive and knowledge is built upon the foundation of previous learning – requiring flexible, active, interactive environments.

Control wave theory
A conceptual framework examining how control, influence, and authority are distributed and experienced across systems or environments.

Conviviality
In the context of spatial design, the joyful art and practice of being together.

Counseling
A system of professional support within educational institutions addressing academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.

Creativity
The capacity for exploration and innovation, the development of which is supported by flexible, stimulating environments.

Critical utopian action research
A participatory, iterative research methodology that integrates critical analysis of existing systems with collective envisioning of alternative

futures to inform and drive transformative action.

Cultivate culture
Sustained actions taken by educational leadership to shape shared values, norms, and behaviors.

Cultivate food
Integration of edible gardening and food production as part of learning and sustainability.

Cultural celebration
The recognition, expression, and affirmation of cultural identities, traditions, and experiences within environments and communities.

Cultural reparation
Processes intended to restore recognition, representation, or justice to cultures and communities affected by historical inequities or exclusion.

Cultural responsiveness
Design reflecting and respecting cultural identities.

Cultural shift
A measurable change in institutional norms, practices, or beliefs resulting from intentional policy, leadership, or environmental interventions.

Culture
The shared values, behaviors, expectations, and practices that define an educational institution.

Culture of care
An institutional culture in which wellbeing, dignity, and relational safety are prioritized alongside academic outcomes.

Culture of learning
A collective environment in which shared expectations, behaviors, and interactions promote curiosity, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and lifelong learning.

Data-driven decision-making
Use of measurable outcomes to inform design and operation.

Deaf Gain
A reframing of deafness as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity that contributes unique benefits to human experience, culture, and knowledge.

DeafSpace design
An architectural design framework that responds to Deaf ways of experiencing the environment by prioritizing spatial conditions, such as transparency, vibration, reflection, visibility, and shared sensory fields, that extend sensory reach, support visual communication, and enhance spatial awareness.

Decision-making structures
Systems that determine how choices are made within the environment.

Deeper learning
Learning requiring critical thinking and application, supported by immersive environments.

Democratic
Equitable participation in governance and use of space.

Design as power
The concept that design decisions influence access, behavior, opportunity, and the distribution of social and environmental outcomes.

Design justice
An approach to planning and decision-making that centers equity, inclusion, and the voices of those most impacted by institutional outcomes.

Design process
An iterative and participatory sequence of inquiry, ideation, and evaluation through which existing conditions are transformed into preferred environments based on defined values and desired outcomes.

Design skills
The competencies required to plan, evaluate, or adapt educational

environments and systems effectively.

Designing from difference
A design methodology that uses human diversity and lived experience as the primary source of insight for creating inclusive, equitable, and effective environments.

De-stimulation spaces
Environments designed to reduce sensory load by minimizing auditory, visual, and social stimuli, supporting physiological regulation, cognitive recovery, and emotional stability.

Detection systems
Technological or procedural mechanisms used to identify risks or emergencies, governed by policy to ensure proportionality and equity.

Developmental science
The interdisciplinary study of how individuals grow and change over time through interactions between biological, cognitive, social, and environmental systems.

Dialogic
An approach to communication and learning in which meaning is co-constructed through interaction, exchange, and multiple perspectives.

Digital play
Interactive engagement with digital environments that supports exploration, creativity, and learning through play-based experiences.

Disabilities
An umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions, reflecting the interaction between an individual’s health condition and contextual factors (environmental and personal).

Disability discrimination
Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction on the basis of disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the

recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.	different social, historical, and lived experiences.	construction of educational facilities as an instructional, social, and safety system.	manage and regulate emotions in ways that support learning, relationships, and safety.	staff, or community members in learning or institutional processes.	individuals possess the capacity to contribute meaningfully within a system or environment.
Disabled joy The recognition and support of positive identity, expression, and fulfillment among individuals with disabilities within educational environments.	Diversity Varied identities, abilities, experiences, cultures, and perspectives.	Educational needs Documented academic, social, emotional, behavioral, or physical supports required for student success.	Emotional literacy An individual's ability, often arrived at as a learned skill, to accurately identify, understand, and express emotions in oneself and others.	Entry point The initial point of contact, physical or otherwise, through which individuals access a system or environment, shaping first interactions and engagement.	Evidence-based design The use of research-validated principles to guide educational facility planning and improvement.
Discipline A structured institutional response to conduct that emphasizes accountability, learning, and restoration rather than exclusion.	Do it for me A design approach where systems and environments are intentionally pre-configured to anticipate needs and reduce friction, allowing users to focus on learning rather than setup or logistics.	Educational specifications A formalized framework defining spatial, functional, and performance requirements for educational environments.	Emotionally protected A condition, established through institutional policy and practice, in which students and staff are shielded from emotional harm.	Entryways The physical or spatial thresholds that mediate transition, access, and movement into and within an environment.	Exploration A process of inquiry and discovery driven by interaction with environments and stimuli.
Discovery An instructional or developmental process through which learners explore, inquire, and construct understanding.	Do it for ourselves A design approach where learners and communities actively shape, manage, and take responsibility for their environment and learning.	Education inequality Systemic differences in access, resources, opportunities, and outcomes across student groups within an educational institution.	Emotional safety The condition in which individuals perceive an environment as free from psychological threat, enabling open expression, risk-taking, and engagement without fear of harm or judgment.	Environmental choices The range of options available to individuals within an environment that influence behavior, comfort, and interaction.	Facility conditions The physical state of educational buildings as related to safety, health, and learning effectiveness.
Disparities Documented differences in access, outcomes, or treatment across student groups that require institutional action to address inequity.	Drivers of change Key factors, forces, or conditions that initiate, influence, or accelerate change within a system, shaping its direction, behavior, and outcomes.	Educator Any certified or credentialed professional responsible for instruction, supervision, or learning support within an educational institution.	Emotional wellbeing A sustained state of positive emotional functioning characterized by the ability to regulate emotions, maintain resilience, and experience a sense of balance and psychological health.	Environmental conditions The measurable physical and sensory properties of an environment that affect human performance, perception, and wellbeing.	Family kitchen A designated space within or associated with a school that supports food access, nutrition education, and community connection.
Dissemination The systematic distribution, communication, and sharing of information, knowledge, or findings across individuals, groups, or systems to increase awareness, understanding, or application.	Economic injustice The systemic unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that limits access to quality environments and outcomes.	Emancipatory worldview A theoretical perspective that seeks to identify and transform structures of oppression to enable equitable participation and agency.	Empathetic environment An environment designed to recognize, respond to, and support the emotional and experiential needs of users.	Environmental racism Disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to harmful environmental conditions affecting educational facilities.	Feedback loops Mechanisms through which information about outcomes is used to modify future actions or system performance.
Distress A state of emotional or psychological strain observed within educational settings that triggers supportive intervention rather than punishment.	Ecosystemic approach A design perspective that treats the learning environment as an interconnected system of people, spaces, processes, and relationships that evolve together.	Emotion A complex psychophysiological state involving subjective experience, neural processing, and behavioral responses, arising from the interaction between internal states and external stimuli.	Empathy The demonstrated ability within educational environments to recognize and respond to the emotions and experiences of others.	Equality The provision of the same resources or treatment to all individuals, regardless of need.	Finding synergies The process of identifying interactions that produce greater combined outcomes than individual contributions alone.
Diverse population A range of different identities, abilities, and backgrounds present in a learning environment, requiring design that supports and includes all users.	Ecosystems Interconnected systems within and surrounding educational institutions – including instructional, social, environmental, and community systems – that collectively influence student learning and wellbeing.	Emotional care Institutional practices that support emotional regulation, expression, and recovery for students and staff.	Empower An institutional action that increases individuals' capacity to influence decisions affecting their learning or environment.	Equity The allocation of resources and supports based on demonstrated need to achieve fair outcomes.	Flex spaces Adaptable environments designed to support multiple functions and changing user needs.
Diverse worldviews The presence and interaction of multiple perspectives, belief systems, cultural frameworks, and ways of knowing shaped by	Educational adequacy The minimum set of conditions and resources required to support effective learning processes and outcomes.	Emotional growth The developmental process through which individuals increase their capacity to recognize, understand, regulate, and appropriately express emotions across contexts over time.	Enable Within educational environments, the process of creating conditions that facilitate participation, access, and action.	Evaluation The systematic assessment of processes, conditions, or outcomes using defined criteria and evidence.	Flexibility The institutional capacity to adapt learning environments, schedules, or supports to changing needs.
	Educational architecture The planning, design, and	Emotional health An aspect of wellbeing characterized by the capacity to	Engage Active participation by students,	Evaluation and improvement An iterative process in which assessment data is used to inform continuous refinement and optimization.	Flipped classroom An instructional model in which foundational content is learned independently, and interactive activities occur during shared learning time.
			Everyone can do something A principle recognizing that all		Focus The ability to selectively direct and maintain attention on relevant

information or activities while filtering competing stimuli to support learning, problem-solving, and goal-directed behavior.

Focused learning spaces

Environments optimized to support sustained attention and cognitive concentration.

Food justice

The equitable distribution of access, participation, and benefits within food systems.

Food security

The condition in which individuals have reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food.

Food systems

The interconnected processes involved in growing, producing, distributing, consuming, and managing food resources.

Forestry

The management and integration of tree-based ecosystems to support environmental sustainability.

Fortress-like

A spatial condition characterized by defensive features emphasizing control, protection, and exclusion.

Fractured relationships

A state of damaged trust or connection between individuals, or diminished social cohesion within communities.

Framework

A structured system of concepts used to guide understanding, analysis, or action.

Freedom

The capacity to act, choose, or participate without undue restriction.

Fulfillment

A state of satisfaction resulting from meaningful engagement, achievement, or growth.

Furniture, fixtures, and equipment

Movable and fixed elements that support the operation and use of environments.

Furniture specifications

Technical requirements defining performance, dimensions, and use of furnishings.

Furniture types

Categories of furnishings designed to support different functions and activities.

Future school

An educational model designed to respond to evolving social, technological, and learning needs.

Gathering spaces

Environments designed to support assembly, interaction, and collective activity.

Generational links

Connections across age groups that facilitate knowledge transfer and social continuity.

Global community

The interconnected network of people and systems linked through shared global relationships and challenges.

Global health

The health and wellbeing of populations influenced by conditions across local and international contexts.

Good relationships

Consistent, trust-based interactions within educational environments that support learning, wellbeing, and accountability.

Group learners

Students who learn most effectively through peer interaction, collaboration, and shared problem-solving.

Grow

A developmental outcome indicating academic, social, emotional, or personal progress over time.

Growing together

An institutional condition in which students, staff, and community members experience mutual development and shared success.

Growth mindset

The belief that abilities and knowledge can develop through effort, learning, and persistence.

Half-made spaces

Environments intentionally designed to remain incomplete, allowing users to adapt, personalize, and shape them over time according to changing needs and activities.

Harmonious

A school climate characterized by balance between academic rigor, wellbeing, safety, and relationships.

Health

The interconnected physical, mental, emotional, and social functioning that drives overall well-being and performance.

Health education

Standards-aligned instruction that equips students with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about physical, mental, and social health.

Healthy learning communities

Educational environments that promote physical safety, emotional wellbeing, positive relationships, and academic engagement.

High risk

Conditions associated with increased potential for harm, uncertainty, or adverse outcomes.

High visibility

A design or operational condition where spaces are easily observable to promote safety and connection.

Holistic

A mindset that considers interconnected systems influencing learning, health, and development.

Holistic approach

A design approach addressing interrelated physical, emotional, social, and cognitive factors.

Holistic safety

A term in current use for a safety framework recognizing physical, emotional, relational, and environmental dimensions of protection and wellbeing. See the entry on “Safety as a matrix of needs” for this publication’s perspective.

Home life

The family, household, and caregiving context influencing student learning and wellbeing.

Household

A social unit sharing resources, responsibilities, and living environments.

Human-centered design

A design approach that prioritizes human needs, experiences, and wellbeing.

Human dignity

The inherent value of individuals that warrants respect, equity, and ethical treatment.

Humane

Policies and practices that uphold dignity, compassion, and proportionality in treatment of all individuals.

Humanistic

An approach that emphasizes human dignity, agency, wellbeing, personal growth, and the realization of individual potential.

Hyper-connected

An institutional condition characterized by constant digital or social connectivity, straining attention, wellbeing, and boundaries.

Hyperlocal

An approach emphasizing local context, culture, and community conditions in educational decision-making.

Ideation

The cognitive and collaborative process of generating, developing, and evaluating ideas to address a problem or achieve a desired outcome.

Identity

An individual’s self-defined sense of self, including cultural, racial, gender, ability, and personal dimensions, recognized and respected within educational environments.

Imagineer

A person who uses creativity and imagination to turn ideas into real experiences or solutions.

Inclusion

The intentional design of policies, practices, and environments that enable full participation of all individuals, particularly those historically marginalized.

Inclusivity

The practice of creating environments, systems, and processes that enable equitable participation, access, representation, and belonging for all individuals.

Increased connections

A measurable rise in meaningful interactions among students, staff, and community members.

Individualization

Tailoring environments or experiences to meet the unique needs, preferences, and abilities of each individual.

Individualization design parameters

Design criteria intended to accommodate individual differences, preferences, and needs.

Inequality

Unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, or outcomes within educational systems.

Informal

Conditions or environments

characterized by flexibility and reduced structure.

Informal gathering areas

Non-instructional spaces that support social interaction, rest, and relationship-building.

Informal learning spaces

Non-classroom areas that support spontaneous, social, and self-directed learning.

Infrastructure

Underlying systems and services that enable environments to function.

Innovative learning

Instructional approaches that depart from traditional models to enhance engagement, relevance, and skill development.

Inspire

An institutional outcome in which learners experience motivation and purpose connected to learning.

Institutional bias

Systemic inequities embedded within structures and practices.

Integrate

The intentional alignment of programs, supports, or systems to function cohesively.

Integrated systems of care

Coordinated academic, health, mental health, and social supports operating within or alongside educational institutions.

Intellectual safety

Freedom to express ideas without fear of judgment or harm.

Interconnectedness

The recognition that educational outcomes are shaped by overlapping systems and relationships.

Intersectionality

A framework recognizing that individuals may experience overlapping forms of advantage or disadvantage.

Intimate A spatial or relational condition characterized by closeness and trust within safe boundaries.	data, understanding, or experience that affect decision-making.	collaboration occurs.	Loneliness A subjective psychological state arising from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships or connectedness.	determine effectiveness, impact, or progress.	Movement Opportunities for physical activity integrated into learning and daily routines.
Intimate localities Small-scale environments that support closeness, comfort, and personal connection.	Knowledge creation The process through which new understanding, ideas, or meaning are generated.	Learning styles Preferred ways individuals engage with and process learning experiences.	Longevity The ability of environments to remain functional and relevant over time.	Measures as value making The concept that evaluation metrics not only assess outcomes but also shape priorities, behaviors, and cultural norms.	Multicultural Recognition and inclusion of multiple cultural identities, traditions, and perspectives within educational environments.
Intimidating Environmental conditions that evoke fear, discomfort, or perceived threat.	Knowledge sharing The exchange and dissemination of information, experiences, or expertise among individuals or groups.	Lens Perspective guiding interpretation and decisions.	Long-term relationship design A design approach recognizing environments as evolving relationships among users, communities, and systems over time.	Media Tools and channels used to create, communicate, and exchange information and experiences.	Multigenerational An institutional approach that intentionally engages individuals across age groups in learning, mentorship, or community participation.
Intrusive Conditions or interventions that excessively penetrate personal boundaries, privacy, or autonomy.	Layering The strategic combination of multiple supports, design features, or interventions to address complex needs.	Let kids be kids A declaration of the intention to preserve developmentally appropriate play, exploration, rest, and joy within educational environments. Can be institutional.	Loved A condition in which students experience consistent care, affirmation, and positive regard from adults within the educational environment.	Mental health A state of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing that affects learning, behavior, and functioning.	Multilingual learners Individuals who use or are developing proficiency in multiple languages.
Inviting A characteristic of spaces or practices that encourages approachability, participation, and comfort.	Learner-centric design parameters Design criteria prioritized around learner needs, experiences, and outcomes.	Liberate learning Removing barriers and constraints so learners can engage freely, authentically, and meaningfully in their learning.	Maker space Designated learning environments that support hands-on creation, experimentation, and applied problem-solving.	Mental health services School-based or school-linked clinical supports addressing emotional and psychological needs.	Multimedia spaces Environments designed to support interaction with multiple forms of media, including digital, visual, and auditory content.
Isolation A sustained lack of social connection or engagement within educational environments.	Learning The process by which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and understanding through instruction and experience.	Liminal space A transitional environment that connects people, places, or experiences, supporting orientation, reflection, social interaction, and the psychological transition between different modes of learning and activity.	Marginalization The exclusion of individuals or groups from full participation or access within systems.	Mental health training Professional learning that equips staff to recognize, respond to, and support mental health needs.	Multiple narratives The coexistence and recognition, within a system or environment, of a collection of narratives reflecting a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and interpretations.
Iterative A process of continuous testing, feedback, and improvement.	Learning, growing, nurturing, tasting Integrated processes supporting development, care, exploration, and experiential learning.	Listen to hear An institutional practice of engaging with stakeholders in ways that prioritize understanding them over eliciting compliance or response.	Materials Physical elements that shape sensory experience and use of space.	Mentoring hours Designated time within institutional schedules for relationship-based guidance and support.	Natural elements Features such as plants, water, daylight, and natural materials incorporated into educational environments.
Joy A positive emotional state associated with satisfaction, pleasure, or meaning.	Learning landscapes A network of diverse, connected spaces that support learning across different settings, activities, and experiences.	Lived experience Knowledge and understanding derived from direct personal or collective experiences that shape perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making.	Meaningful encounters Interactions or experiences that foster connection, trust, understanding, or a sense of belonging between individuals or groups.	Mentorship Guided support through relationships that foster learning and development.	Natural environment Outdoor or nature-integrated settings used for learning, recreation, or restoration.
Just environments Environments structured to support equity, dignity, and inclusive participation.	Learning modalities Different ways in which individuals engage with and process learning, supported through varied environments, tools, and experiences.	Living systems Dynamic, interconnected environments that adapt and evolve over time.	Measurable intentions Clearly defined goals or desired outcomes that can be systematically evaluated using observable, quantifiable, or evidence-based indicators.	Mind-body wellness An integrated approach recognizing the connection between physical and mental health.	Natural light Daylight introduced into educational spaces through windows, skylights, or open design.
Just systems Interconnected institutional, social, and organizational systems designed to promote fairness, inclusion, accountability, and equitable outcomes across populations.	Learning process The sequence of cognitive, social, and experiential changes through which knowledge develops.	Lobbyist An individual or entity advocating for policy, funding, or regulatory outcomes that affect educational institutions.	Measurable outcomes The evaluation of results to	Minimal design A design approach emphasizing simplicity to reduce sensory overload and distraction.	Natural stimuli Sensory inputs derived from natural elements that affect cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses.
Justice The equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources.	Learning space Any physical or virtual environment where instruction, exploration, or				
Knowing the unknowns Institutional awareness of gaps in					

Natural surveillance

Safety achieved through visibility, presence, and design rather than technology or force.

Natural systems

Light, air, materials, landscapes, and ecological processes that are integrated into educational environments to support health, cognition, stewardship, and emotional regulation.

Naturalness

The degree to which environmental conditions reflect characteristics commonly found in natural settings.

Naturalness design parameters

Design criteria used to integrate natural qualities that influence human perception, comfort, and wellbeing.

Nature

The living and nonliving components of the natural world, including ecosystems, organisms, landforms, water, and ecological processes that support life and human wellbeing.

Nature based

Environmental qualities derived from natural elements that support sensory and cognitive engagement.

Nature-relatedness

The psychological and experiential connection individuals develop with nature, influencing wellbeing, environmental stewardship, learning, and behavior.

Neighborhood

A localized community comprising people, places, infrastructure, and institutions that collectively shape social interaction, access to resources, and quality of life.

Neocolonialism

The continuation, beyond formal colonial structures, of unequal power relationships through economic, cultural, or institutional influence.

Neurodiversity

The natural variation in human brain structure and function that results in diverse patterns of cognition, learning, behavior, perception, and social interaction.

Neuronal information processing

The biological and cognitive processes through which the nervous system receives, interprets, stores, and responds to information.

Neuroscience

The study of structures, functions, and development of the nervous system and brain to understand behavior, cognition, and health.

Noninstitutional environments

Environments designed to minimize the physical, social, and organizational characteristics traditionally associated with institutional settings, promoting comfort, autonomy, dignity, and wellbeing.

Nontraditional learning

Instructional models that differ from conventional classroom structures, including flexible scheduling, experiential learning, or alternative pathways.

Nonvisual engagement

Interaction with environments through sensory modalities other than vision, including hearing, touch, smell, proprioception, vestibular perception, and vibration.

Nooks

Small-scale spaces within educational environments designed for quiet focus, regulation, or individual work.

Normative practice

The established patterns of practice, decision-making, and behavior that reflect and reinforce the dominant values, assumptions, and power structures within a profession, institution, or society.

Novel spaces

Environments intentionally designed

to provide unfamiliar or distinctive experiences that encourage exploration.

Novelty

The environmental quality of introducing new, varied, or unexpected experiences that stimulate curiosity, exploration, creativity, and learning.

Nurture

The intentional cultivation of environmental and relational conditions that support learning, wellbeing, growth, resilience, and human flourishing.

Open sightlines

Design features that allow visual connection across spaces to support safety and supervision.

Open space

Large, flexible areas within educational facilities designed for multiple uses.

Open versus closed

A design and policy distinction describing the degree of access, visibility, and permeability within educational spaces.

Operation conversation

An intentional relational practice centered on regular check-ins and dialogue to support emotional wellbeing, trust, and early identification of needs.

Outdoor learning

Experiential learning that takes place in outdoor environments, supporting cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and environmental development through direct interaction with place.

Outdoors

External environments that provide opportunities for learning, exploration, movement, social interaction, and connection with nature and community.

Ownership

A sense of responsibility and

control over one's environment or learning.

Parenting

The caregiving role of families or guardians influencing student development and learning.

Participatory design

A process that actively involves users in shaping their environment.

Pathway

A structured sequence of learning experiences that guides learners toward specific goals, skills, or outcomes.

Pedagogy

The systematic study of teaching and learning processes, including the methods, practices, and interactions that influence how knowledge is acquired and developed.

Perception of safety

The subjective interpretation of an environment as secure and free from potential harm.

Perceptual improvisation

The adaptive process through which individuals interpret and respond to changing environmental stimuli in real time.

Performance based

An approach that evaluates effectiveness using measurable outcomes or demonstrated function.

Permeability

The degree to which environments enable openness, accessibility, movement, interaction, and connection across boundaries.

Personal behaviors

Observable actions, habits, and responses influenced by individual characteristics, experiences, and environmental conditions that affect interactions, decision-making, and outcomes.

Person-to-person relationships

Direct interpersonal connections

that support learning, trust, and wellbeing.

Perspectives

The viewpoints shaped by individuals' experiences, culture, and identity.

Physical approach

A safety or design strategy emphasizing physical infrastructure and environmental controls.

Physical barriers

Physical features or environmental conditions that restrict or impede movement, access, participation, or interaction within an environment.

Physical dimensions of safety

The aspects of safety within educational institutions addressed through building design, infrastructure, and environmental controls.

Physical ease

An environmental condition that minimizes physical strain and supports comfort and accessibility.

Physical learning environment

The built environment and its physical conditions, including spaces, furnishings, materials, environmental systems, and spatial organization, that support teaching, learning, wellbeing, and human development.

Physical safety

The condition of being protected from physical harm or injury through environmental design, operational practices, and risk management.

Places of respite and meditation

Designated spaces within educational settings intended to support emotional regulation, reflection, or stress reduction.

Place maker

An individual or group that actively contributes to creating, transforming, or sustaining environments that support connection, identity, and community wellbeing.

Placemaking

The collaborative process of shaping environments to strengthen meaning, identity, belonging, and social interaction within communities.

Play

A voluntary, intrinsically motivated activity undertaken for enjoyment, exploration, and learning that supports cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.

Playfulness

The quality of an environment or individual that encourages curiosity, imagination, experimentation, and joyful engagement in learning and discovery.

Pleasantness

The environmental quality that promotes comfort, positive affect, and wellbeing through favorable sensory, spatial, and experiential conditions.

Pluriversal design

An approach that recognizes and values multiple ways of knowing.

Points of access

Designated entry locations into educational facilities subject to supervision and safety protocols.

Points of view

An individual's perspective shaped by experience, context, and interpretation.

Policies

Formally adopted rules and expectations governing institutional operations, conduct, and accountability.

Poverty

An economic condition affecting access to resources that influence educational outcomes.

Pre-/post-occupancy

The systematic assessment of building performance, user experience, and environmental impact following occupation and use.

Prevention and detection strategies Coordinated practices used to identify risks early and intervene appropriately.	with sheltered spaces (refuge).	Queue The organized sequencing of individuals or activities within space and time.	Refuge areas Spaces providing shelter, privacy, and withdrawal from stimulation.	dignity, rights, and boundaries in all institutional interactions.	interconnection of everyone and everything in a learning environment.
Prevention training Professional development focused on identifying and preventing harm or crisis.					
Preventive care Proactive measures taken by educational institutions to reduce risk and promote wellbeing before crises occur.					
Preventive measure A specific action or intervention designed to reduce likelihood of harm or adverse outcomes.					
Privacy The right of individuals to control access to personal information and personal space within educational environments.					
Privatization The transfer of control, ownership, or operation from public to private entities.					
Processes that repair Restorative practices used to address harm, rebuild trust, and restore relationships.					
Professional development The shared values, norms, practices, and expectations that influence behavior and decision-making within a professional field.					
Programming The systematic planning and organization of activities, functions, or uses within an environment.					
Project-based learning An instructional approach in which students learn through extended inquiry and real-world problem-solving.					
Prospect and refuge An environmental condition that balances open views (prospect)	Protect To take action to safeguard individuals from harm. Can be on an institutional level.	Quiet An environmental condition characterized by reduced auditory stimulation and minimal noise exposure.	Regenerative design A design approach intended to restore, strengthen, and enhance ecological and social systems over time.	Respite Opportunities within the environment for rest, recovery, and emotional reset.	Safety tax The disproportionate burden of safety measures placed on marginalized groups.
	Protective factors Conditions, relationships, or resources that reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience against adversity.	Racial justice Institutional actions aimed at identifying, addressing, and eliminating racial disparities and systemic inequities.	Relationship building Deliberate institutional practices that foster meaningful, sustained connections among members of the school community.	Resource allocation The systematic distribution of spatial, material, and temporal resources to support equitable and effective functioning of learning environments.	Salutogenic design A design approach focused on creating conditions that promote health, wellbeing, resilience, and human flourishing.
	Prototype A preliminary representation of a design concept used to explore, test, evaluate, and iteratively improve solutions through observation and feedback.	Rain garden A landscaped feature that manages stormwater and supports environmental education.	Relationship exploration Structured opportunities for students to develop interpersonal skills and understand social dynamics.	Responsible decision-making The practice of aligning choices with ethical standards, safety, and long-term outcomes.	Sanctuary for sick kids A designated space providing care and rest for ill students during the school day.
	Providers of care Internal or external professionals delivering health, mental health, or social services within educational contexts.	Reciprocity The mutual exchange of knowledge, care, responsibility, and influence among learners, educators, communities, and environments that supports collective learning, wellbeing, and development.	Relationships The network of interpersonal connections within educational environments that influence learning and wellbeing.	Restorative practices A structured set of relational processes that repair harm, rebuild trust, and strengthen social cohesion within learning communities.	Schedule flexibility The capacity of temporal structures to adapt in response to varying learning needs, activities, and contexts.
	Psychologist A licensed professional providing psychological assessment and intervention within educational settings.	Recognition The process through which individuals are acknowledged, valued, and affirmed within social or environmental contexts.	Relationship skills Competencies enabling individuals to form, maintain, and repair relationships.	Safe A condition in which individuals are protected from physical, emotional, and psychological harm.	School as hinge The ability of a school to connect structures that link generations, communities, resources, and learning.
	Public health The collective effort to protect and improve community health, informing school policies and practices.	Redlining The practice of denying or limiting access to mortgages, insurance, and other financial services in neighborhoods designated as high-risk based on the racial composition of residents, producing long-term patterns of spatial, economic, and social inequality that continue to influence community wellbeing and access to opportunity.	Reparative design Design that addresses and repairs past harms and inequities in environments and communities.	Safe rooms Designated spaces intended for protection during emergencies or de-escalation.	School building as teaching tool The intentional use of the built environment as an active medium for supporting and communicating learning processes.
	Public investment Allocation of collective resources to support infrastructure, services, or community development.	Reflection The intentional process of examining experiences, environments, and outcomes to deepen understanding, guide learning, and inform continuous improvement.	Replicate To intentionally adopt or adapt a program, practice, or design model in another context.	Safe versus welcoming A policy tension describing the balance between security measures and a sense of openness and belonging.	School culture The shared values, norms, relationships, and practices that shape behavior and experiences within a school environment.
	Public policies Laws and regulations enacted by governmental bodies affecting educational institutions.		Representation The visible inclusion and reflection of diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives within environments or systems.	Safety The condition in which individuals are protected from physical harm and psychological threat, enabling secure participation and engagement.	School setting The integrated physical, social, organizational, and cultural conditions that shape teaching, learning, wellbeing, and human development within a school community.
	Public space Shared environments accessible to diverse populations for interaction, movement, and participation.		Respect The recognition of an individual's	Safety as a matrix of needs A functional framework introduced by this publication recognizing that safety is made up of interwoven needs: physical, emotional, relational, environmental, and cultural. Used as a term, it is also a symbolic embodiment of the	School siting The process and criteria used to determine the location of a school, considering environmental, social, and accessibility factors.

Schoolyards
Outdoor spaces associated with a school that support play, learning, social interaction, and environmental engagement.

Seating arrangements
The organization of furniture within learning environments to support instructional goals and accessibility.

Secure
A condition in which systems and spaces are protected from unauthorized access or harm.

Secure spaces
Designated areas with controlled access to support safety needs.

Security elements
Physical or procedural components implemented to reduce risk.

Security measures
Actions and systems implemented to prevent or respond to threats.

See and be seen
A spatial condition of mutual visibility, in which individuals simultaneously observe and are observed by others in ways that support communication, social interaction, situational awareness, and perceived safety.

Segregation
The systemic spatial or social separation of groups that results in unequal access to resources and opportunities.

Self-awareness
The ability of individuals to recognize their emotions, values, strengths, and limitations within educational contexts.

Self-contained
An instructional or support setting in which services are delivered within a separate environment for a defined group of students.

Self-management
An individual's capacity to regulate their emotions, behavior, and

attention in pursuit of learning and wellbeing.

Sense-centric architecture
An architectural approach that places human sensory experience at the center of design, using environmental conditions to support perception, cognition, communication, learning, and wellbeing.

Sense of belonging
A psychological state in which individuals perceive themselves as accepted, valued, respected, and connected within a social or physical environment, influencing motivation, wellbeing, participation, and learning.

Sense of determination
A learner's sustained motivation to pursue goals despite challenges.

Sense of hope
An individual's belief in the possibility of positive future outcomes, especially as supported by an institution.

Sense of purpose
The perception of meaningful connection between learning experiences and personal or societal goals.

Sense of welcome
An immediate and sustained perception that individuals are invited, valued, and safe within educational spaces.

Sensitivity
Institutional awareness and responsiveness to emotional, cultural, sensory, or contextual needs.

Sensory activation
The stimulation of one or more senses through environmental conditions that influence perception, attention, cognition, behavior, and emotional response.

Sensory challenges
Difficulties in processing or

responding to sensory stimuli that affect behavior, comfort, and performance.

Sensory design
The intentional shaping of environmental stimuli to influence perception, cognition, and emotional regulation.

Sensory focus
The directed attention to specific sensory inputs to support concentration and cognitive engagement.

Sensory rooms
Specialized environments designed to provide controlled sensory input to support regulation, focus, or therapeutic needs.

Shared accountability
A governance approach in which responsibility for outcomes is distributed across individuals and systems.

Shared narratives
Stories, meanings, or experiences that are held collectively and contribute to a sense of identity, connection, and belonging within communities.

Sharing
The collaborative exchange of knowledge, ideas, resources, or experiences that strengthens learning, relationships, and community.

Signage and wayfinding
The systems and environmental cues that support orientation, navigation, and spatial understanding.

Situated learning
A learning process in which knowledge is acquired through participation in authentic contexts and real-world activities, embedded within social and environmental interactions.

Skill-building
Intentional instruction and practice

aimed at developing academic, social, emotional, or life skills.

Social awareness
The ability to understand and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds.

Social determinants of health
External social and economic conditions that influence health and educational outcomes.

Social ecological metrics
Measures used to evaluate the interactions between individuals, social systems, and environmental conditions that influence wellbeing, behavior, and outcomes across multiple levels of context.

Social-emotional learning
A framework for developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Social-emotional skills
Competencies enabling emotional regulation, empathy, relationship-building, and ethical decision-making.

Social-emotional wellbeing
The combined emotional and relational health of individuals within the school environment.

Social engagement
The active participation of individuals in meaningful interactions, relationships, and collaborative experiences that support belonging, learning, and wellbeing.

Social health
The ability to develop and sustain positive relationships, engage meaningfully with others, and participate in supportive social environments that promote wellbeing, belonging, and learning.

Social inequalities
Systemic disparities in access, opportunity, or outcomes affecting social participation and success.

Social infrastructure
The networks, institutions, relationships, and shared spaces that support social interaction, community connection, wellbeing, and collective functioning.

Social periphery
Individuals or groups who are marginally connected to the core social life of the institution.

Social resilience
The capacity of individuals, groups, and communities to adapt, recover, and thrive in response to stress or disruption.

Socialization
The processes through which individuals engage, communicate, and form relationships within a social environment.

Socially interactive
A condition in which environments or systems facilitate and support communication, collaboration, and interpersonal engagement among individuals.

Societal engagement
Student participation in civic, community, or societal activities connected to learning.

Socioeconomic status
An individual or family's economic and social position affecting access to resources.

Soft furnishings
Nonstructural furniture elements that enhance comfort, acoustics, and warmth.

Space activation
The intentional design and programming of environments to promote use, engagement, and interaction.

Spatial agency
The capacity of individuals or communities to influence, shape, and transform environments through participation and action.

Spatial awareness
The cognitive ability to perceive, understand, and navigate the relationships between objects, people, and environments in space.

Spatial design lifecycle
The systematic process through which environments are conceived, designed, implemented, evaluated, and adapted over time.

Spatial equity
The equitable design, distribution, and accessibility of learning environments and their resources to ensure that all learners have fair opportunities to participate, belong, and thrive.

Spatial justice
The equitable distribution and organization of space to ensure fair access, inclusion, and opportunity across populations.

Spatial organization
The intentional arrangement and interconnection of learning spaces to support movement, interaction, orientation, collaboration, wellbeing, and educational outcomes.

Spatial qualities
The measurable and perceptible characteristics of an environment – such as scale, light, acoustics, materiality, and spatial configuration – that influence human experience, behavior, and performance.

Speak up
The institutional encouragement and protection of voice, reporting, and advocacy.

Specialized spaces
Environments intentionally designed to support specific activities, identities, interests, or learning experiences.

Stable
The condition of environmental consistency and reliability over time.

Staff-centered design

A design approach that prioritizes the needs, wellbeing, and functional requirements of staff to support effective performance and sustainable practice.

Stakeholder inclusion

The systematic involvement of diverse participants in decision-making and design processes.

Stay curious

A cognitive and motivational disposition characterized by sustained openness to inquiry, exploration, and the pursuit of new knowledge.

Stewardship

The ongoing collective responsibility for caring for, maintaining, and improving environments, resources, and communities.

Stigma

A socially constructed negative association attached to individuals, groups, or environments that influences perception and behavior.

Stimulation design parameters

The defined variables and thresholds that regulate sensory input within an environment to influence cognitive processing, attention, and emotional response.

Stressors

Internal or external conditions, events, or stimuli that challenge an individual's physiological, psychological, or emotional equilibrium and may influence behavior, wellbeing, and performance.

Structural injustice

Systemic inequities embedded within institutions, policies, and environments that produce unequal outcomes across populations.

Structural racism

The integration of racial inequities into institutional systems, policies, and practices that perpetuate unequal access and outcomes.

Student agency

The capacity of students to influence their learning conditions and outcomes.

Student-centered design

An approach to policy, space, and program design that prioritizes student experience.

Student success

Achievement of academic, social, and developmental outcomes defined by institutional goals.

Student-teacher ratio

The number of students assigned per instructional staff member.

Student voice

Structured mechanisms through which students contribute to decisions affecting their education.

Support of students

Comprehensive academic, social, and emotional assistance provided to learners.

Supportive environment

A setting that promotes safety, belonging, and growth.

Supportive systems

Integrated structures and processes that enable care, access, and effective functioning.

Surveillance

Monitoring practices used to observe behavior or activity within educational environments.

Sustainability

Practices and designs that meet current needs without compromising future resources.

Synergies

Positive outcomes created when aligned systems or practices reinforce one another.

Systems

Interconnected physical, social, organizational, and environmental components whose interactions collectively influence

learning, wellbeing, and human development.

Systems thinking

An analytical approach that examines the interrelationships and dynamics among components within a complex system.

Table

The table functions as a socio-spatial affordance that structures interaction, collaboration, communication, and knowledge creation by influencing proximity, visibility, and patterns of participation.

Targeted interventions

Evidence-informed environmental, educational, or support strategies implemented to address specific barriers, needs, or risks and improve learner wellbeing, participation, and outcomes.

Teach and reinforce

An instructional approach that explicitly introduces skills and consistently practices them over time.

Teacher training

The systematic preparation and development of educators' knowledge, skills, and practices to support effective teaching and learning.

Teaching-learning interactions

The dynamic processes and exchanges between educators, learners, and environments that influence knowledge acquisition and development.

Therapeutic environment

An environment intentionally designed to promote physical, psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing by reducing stress and supporting healing, recovery, and positive human functioning.

Think beyond the curriculum

An institutional mindset recognizing that learning extends beyond academic content.

Threshold experience

The initial psychological, emotional, or sensory response occurring when individuals enter spaces or transition between them.

Thrive

A sustained state of growth, wellbeing, and engagement exceeding basic success.

Total health

A comprehensive approach integrating physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing.

Trailblazer

An individual or entity that initiates innovative approaches or practices, establishing new pathways that influence subsequent development within a system.

Transformative outcomes

Long-term changes in learning, wellbeing, behavior, equity, or systems resulting from sustained interventions or experiences.

Transitional space

Areas that mediate movement between environments, supporting regulation and orientation.

Transparency

The clear and open communication of policies, decisions, and practices.

Transparent suite

A spatial strategy that uses visibility to promote safety and connection.

Trauma

A response to harmful or overwhelming experiences that affects functioning and learning.

Trauma-informed design

A design approach that minimizes triggers and supports emotional regulation and safety.

Trauma-informed lens

A perspective that interprets behaviors and needs through the understanding of stress, adversity, and traumatic experiences.

Trauma recovery

The process through which individuals or communities restore functioning, wellbeing, and resilience following traumatic experiences.

Tree houses

Nature-integrated learning or play structures designed to foster exploration and connection.

Triggering spaces

Environmental conditions or settings that evoke stress responses, discomfort, or memories associated with adverse experiences or trauma.

Trust building

The process through which consistent, reliable, and transparent interactions establish confidence, psychological safety, and positive relational expectations over time.

Trustworthiness

Institutional reliability demonstrated through consistent, ethical, and transparent actions.

Typologies

The classification of environments or elements into categories based on shared characteristics or functions.

Underrepresented

Individuals or groups whose presence, participation, perspectives, or experiences are insufficiently reflected or included within educational, social, or institutional systems.

Unique relationships

The distinctive connections between learners, educators, communities, and environments that influence identity, belonging, learning, and wellbeing.

Universal design

The proactive design of environments and systems usable by all individuals without adaptation.

Values

Shared ethical principles made visible through organization, access,

governance, and daily practices embedded in the environment.

Values-based change

Systemic transformation guided by explicitly defined ethical, social, or community-centered values.

Values-based design

A design approach informed by human, ethical, and societal values that shape priorities and outcomes.

Vegetable gardens

On-site food-growing spaces supporting education, wellness, and sustainability.

Vestibule

A transitional space between the exterior and interior of a building that supports security, environmental control, orientation, and the psychological transition into a learning environment.

Vibration

The transmission of tactile sensory information through surfaces and materials, enabling environmental awareness, communication, and spatial perception beyond auditory cues, as a principle of DeafSpace architecture.

Virtual designed environments

Digitally constructed spaces intentionally created to support interaction, learning, behavior, and experience through virtual or simulated platforms.

Visibility

The design of environments to maximize unobstructed visual access, enabling communication, environmental awareness, orientation, and social interaction through clear sightlines, as a principle of DeafSpace architecture.

Visible security measures

Physical and environmental features that visibly communicate security, surveillance, and controlled access to enhance occupants' perception of safety and deter unauthorized activity.

Visual complexity

The degree of variation, detail, and diversity in visual elements within an environment that influences cognitive processing and attention.

Visual connection

The extent to which visual access and sightlines enable awareness, orientation, and interaction within a space.

Visual ease

The condition in which visual information is clear, legible, and minimally demanding on cognitive effort.

Visual intrigue

The quality of an environment that stimulates curiosity and sustained attention through visual complexity, novelty, coherence, and opportunities for exploration.

Voice

The capacity and opportunity to express perspectives, preferences, experiences, and ideas in ways that influence decisions, actions, and outcomes.

Voice alarms

Audible communication systems used during emergencies.

Vulnerability

The quality or condition of being exposed to potential risk, harm, or adverse outcomes due to individual, social, environmental, or systemic factors.

Walking

A primary mode of active mobility through which individuals navigate and experience environments, supporting physical activity, wellbeing, social connection, and spatial awareness.

Wayfinding

The systems and cognitive processes that enable navigation, orientation, and spatial understanding.

Welcoming

The quality of an environment that communicates safety, belonging, accessibility, and inclusion from the first encounter.

Welcoming façades

Building frontages that promote positive first impressions by fostering visibility, accessibility, human scale, and visual connection between the building and its surrounding community.

Wellbeing

The integrated physical, emotional, and cognitive state influenced by environmental and social conditions.

Wellbeing science

The interdisciplinary study of factors influencing human flourishing, resilience, health, and quality of life.

Wellness center

A dedicated space within a learning environment that provides integrated health, counseling, and support services to promote student wellbeing, resilience, and healthy development.

Wellness practice

Individual and collective behaviors, routines, and environmental interventions that promote physical, emotional, social, and cognitive wellbeing.

Wonder

A state of curiosity and awe that inspires exploration, inquiry, and the pursuit of understanding.

World building

The intentional process of envisioning and creating coherent systems of relationships, environments, cultures, and conditions that shape how individuals and communities live, learn, and interact.

Worldviews

The comprehensive systems of beliefs, values, assumptions, and

ways of knowing through which individuals or groups perceive, interpret, and engage with the world.

Wraparound services

An integrated, coordinated system of individualized supports and services designed to address the educational, behavioral, physical, mental health, and social needs of children, youth, and families.

Youth

Individuals in the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood whose perspectives, experiences, and capabilities continue to evolve.

Youth led

A participatory approach in which young people hold meaningful leadership and decision-making roles, supported by adult partnership.

Youth voices

The authentic integration of young people’s lived experiences, perspectives, and aspirations into the design, evaluation, and decision-making processes that shape their environments.

Zoned enclosures

Designated areas within facilities that control access for safety or function.

Zoning

A system of land-use regulation that defines how land and buildings may be used and developed to support community planning, public health, safety, and welfare.

Resources

This list brings together sources cited throughout this report alongside additional resources for readers eager to continue exploring these ideas.

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