Let Kids 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?

Playful Learning Landscapes' Urban Thinkscape | Temple Infant & Child Laboratory | Photo: ©Sahar Coston-Hardy

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

Playful Learning Landscapes' Urban Thinkscape | Temple Infant & Child Laboratory | Photo: ©Sahar Coston-Hardy

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

Playful Learning Landscapes' Urban Thinkscape | Temple Infant & Child Laboratory | Photo: ©Sahar Coston-Hardy

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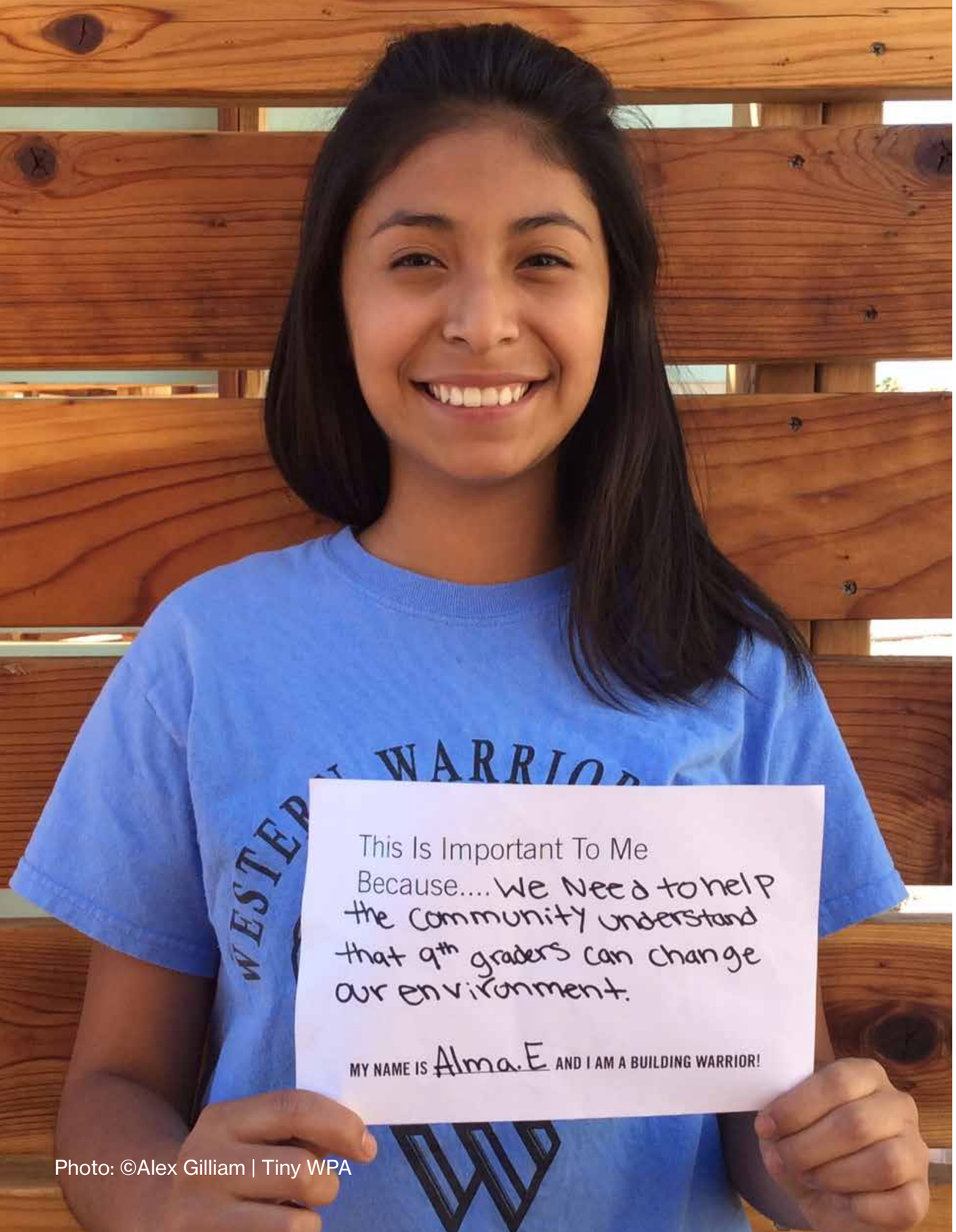

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What if we put the values of kids first?

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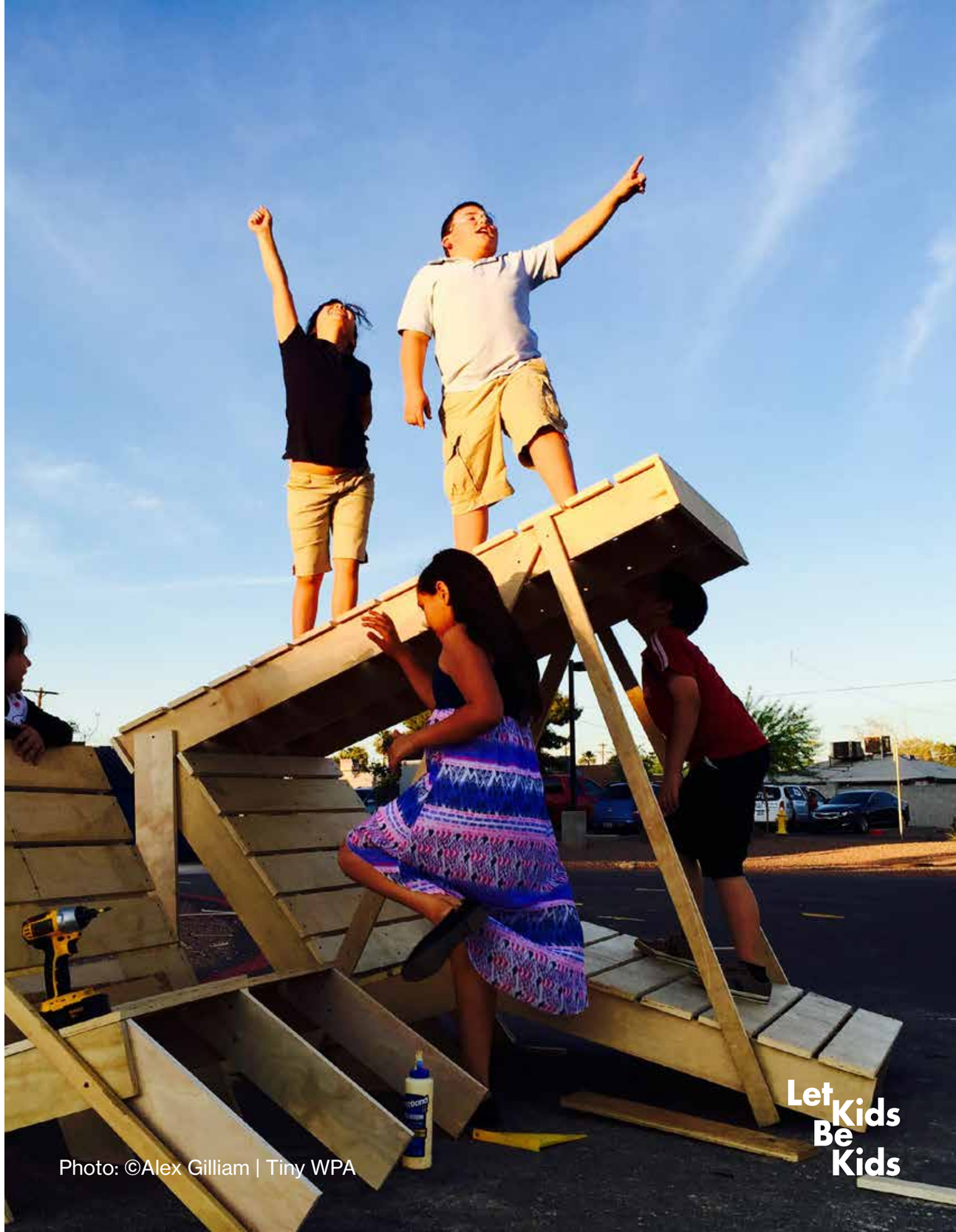
Would we design safer schools?

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

Carter G. Woodson Education Complex | Photo: ©Tom Daly Photography

What if we redesigned schools to meet many needs?



Natural Elements | Earth Spheres | Photo: ©Abe Moore

Would we create more welcoming learning experiences?

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

Photo: ©Alex Gilliam | Tiny WPA

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Discovery Elementary School | Photo: ©Alex Gilliam | Tiny WPA

What if we reimagined schools to nurture wellbeing?

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Would we create healthier communities?

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

Crow Island School | Photo: ©James Steinkamp Photography

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What if we explore these questions from many perspectives?

Cubby Building | Heart of Leaves | Photo: ©Abe Moore

What myriad of possibilities would we discover?

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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?"

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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.

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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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The Design of Safe, Secure & Welcoming Learning Environments Summit, Washington, D.C., 2018

Amy Yurko
Cultivating Community and Safety in Schools National Convening, Portland, OR, 2022

Fiona Young
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 Summits

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

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"

Let Kids Be Kids

WHAT'S IN OUR VOCABULARY

21st century skills
Academic content
Acceptance
Access
Access to "choice"
Accessibility
Accessible spaces
Accountability
Acoustics
Activation
Active classrooms
Active design
Adaptive environments
Adaptive reuse
Adult learning centers
Adverse childhood experiences
Affinity space
Affordances
Agency
Agent provocateur
Air quality
Alcoves
Alone together
Ambient space
Ancestral knowledge
Anxiety disorders
Areas of autonomy
Areas of refuge
Art
Artificial light
Assessment tool
Assessments
Asset-based
Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder
Authentic care
Authenticity
Autism spectrum
Autonomy

Barriers
Be seen
Beautiful and comfortable
Behavior versus conduct
Behaviors
Behavioral science
Being known
Belonging
Belonging as an equity lever
BIPOC community
Biological reactivity
Biophilia
Bioswale
Body and mind
Breakout spaces
Building a community
Built environment
Bullying
Burden of safety

Calming environment
Campfires and watering holes
Campus as beacon
Campus identity
Can be seen
Carbon emissions
Celebrate
Celebrating ancestral knowledge
Celebrate often
Checklist
Child-centered design
Choice and collaboration
Choice and comfort
Choice of environment
Choices for students
Civics
Climate
Climate change
Coercive systems
Co-creation
Co-creators
Co-design
Co-evolution
Co-learning
Cognition
Cognitive benefits
Cognitive development
Cognitive engagement
Collaboration
Collaborative spaces
Comfortable
Common language
Communal spaces
Communality
Community
Community access
Community asset
Community health
Community narratives
Community of connections
Community ownership
Community space
Community as experts
Community at large
Community building
Community centered design
Community engagement
Community expertise
Community-focused
Community-focused spaces
Community infrastructure
Community pride
Compartmentalized layout
Compassion
Competence
Competing demands
Comprehensive safety
Concept of traditions
Confidential spaces

Connect
Connected communities
Connection to nature
Connection with the teacher
Connections
Connectiveness
Constructivist
Control wave theory
Conviviality
Counseling
Creativity
Critical utopian action research
Cultivate culture
Cultivate food
Cultural celebration
Cultural reparation
Cultural responsiveness
Cultural shift
Culture
Culture of care
Culture of learning

Data-driven decision making
Deaf Gain
DeafSpace Design
Decision making structures
Deeper learning
Democratic
Design as power
Design justice
Design process
Design skills
Designing from difference
De-stimulation spaces
Detection systems
Developmental science
Dialogic
Digital play
Disabilities
Disability discrimination
Disabled joy
Discipline
Discovery
Disparities
Dissemination
Distress
Diverse population
Diverse worldviews
Diversity
Do it for me
Do it for ourselves
Drivers of change

Economic injustice
Ecosystemic approach
Ecosystems
Educational adequacy
Educational architecture
Educational needs
Educational specifications
Education inequality
Educator
Emancipatory worldview
Emotion
Emotional care
Emotional growth
Emotional health
Emotional literacy
Emotionally protected
Emotional safety
Emotional wellbeing
Empathetic environment
Empathy
Empower
Enable
Engage
Entry point
Entryways
Environmental choices
Environmental conditions
Environmental racism
Equality
Equity
Evaluation
Evaluation and improvement
Everyone can do something
Evidence-based design
Exploration

Facility conditions
Family kitchen
Feedback loops
Finding synergies
Flex spaces
Flexibility
Flipped classroom
Focus
Focused learning spaces
Food justice
Food security
Food systems
Forestry
Fortress-like
Fractured relationships
Framework
Freedom
Fulfillment
Furniture specifications
Furniture types
Furniture, fixtures, & equipment
Future school

Gathering spaces
Generational links
Global community
Global health
Good relationships
Group learners
Grow
Growing together
Growth mindset

Half-made spaces
Harmonious
Health
Health education
Healthy learning communities
High risk
High visibility
Holistic
Holistic approach
Holistic safety
Home life
Household
Human centered design
Human dignity
Humane
Humanistic
Hyper-connected
Hyperlocal

Ideation
Identity
Imagineer
Inclusion
Inclusivity
Increased connections
Individualization
Individualization design parameters
Inequality
Informal
Informal gathering areas
Informal learning spaces
Infrastructure
Innovative learning
Inspire
Institutional bias
Integrate
Integrated systems of care
Interconnectedness
Intellectual safety

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

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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

Let Kids Be Kids

6

Safety
Welcoming
Community
Mental Health
Design Justice
Evaluation

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03 Give Us Links, Not Locks
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05 My Life, My Insight
06 It All Matters to Me

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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.

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module

01

SAFETY

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

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See Me Know Me

01 SAFETY

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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.

Let Kids Be Kids

Relationship Building Is Radical Inclusivity

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

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

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

“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

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 relatioships and connections I design for are centered on those who feel least seen, known, or cared for?

Learner-Centered

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.

Safety Is Social

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

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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Holistic Safety Goes Beyond the Checklist

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

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

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."

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

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 move from being consulted about safety to being the authors of what safety requires?

Let Kids Be Kids

Learning Deserves to Be Joyful

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.

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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

We Belong Here

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Wayfinding Is Meaningful on Many Levels

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.

"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.

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Design for the Full Range of Experience

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.

Spacious corridors and gathering spaces reduce sensory overwhelm.

Biophilic design offers respite and encourages recovery.

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

Give Us Links Not Locks

“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.

Let Kids Be Kids

School Is a Hinge, a Point of Connection

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.

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

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?

"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

Let Kids Be Kids

We Design with, Not for, Community

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

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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Collaboration

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

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

Prioritizes

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

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

Let Kids Be Kids

The Campus Is a Civic Presence

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.

"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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

What made me proud at school?

Where in school did I see my neighborhood reflected?

What brought grown-ups to school?

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

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

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

Let Kids Be Kids

 Photo: ©Fotógrafos PMJ

MENTAL HEALTH

1 in 7 youth worldwide struggles. Architects can’t fix the crisis.

Architecture can – as a values-based practice.

module

04

Let Kids Be Kids

Believe in Us

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

Support Is a Web Stronger Than a Safety Net

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.

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

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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Putting Emotions into Words Is a Skill

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.

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.

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

"Feelings are not fixed."

– Student 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.

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?

Schools Can Shield Kids from the Outside World

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.

"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.

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 Resilience Is Central to Wellbeing

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.

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.

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.

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 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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Trauma as a Lens Sees the Whole Child

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.

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

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.

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 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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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

 Photo: ©Tezuka Architects

What gave me hope at school?

Where did I find calm in school?

Who at school believed in me?

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

DESIGN JUSTICE

Don’t guess. Ask, innovate, and co-create.

module

05

Let Kids Be Kids

My Life My Insight

05 DESIGN JUSTICE

“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.

Let Kids Be Kids

The System We're in Is One We Can Question

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 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.

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

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 community leadership, not in front of it?

Let Kids Be Kids

The Future Is a Multicultural Claim

"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

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

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?

Let Kids Be Kids

Co-creation Is a Restorative Practice

"Pay attention to who is designing."
– Ross Parker, Presenter at AIA-CAE 2022 Portland Convening

"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

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

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

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 honors the relationships built through dialogue rather than extracting value from the communities I serve?

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Design Justice Orients Us Toward Liberation

"Liberation is a societal orientation towards the holistic wellbeing of all."
– Karim Hassanein, Principal, Colloqate

"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

"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*

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?

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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.

Let Kids Be Kids

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/coolschools

Global Network
Global Rewilding Alliance
globalrewilding.earth

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

Let Kids Be Kids

 Photo: ©BCA Landscape Ltd.

EVALUATION

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

module

06

Let Kids Be Kids

06 EVALUATION

It all matters to me

Let Kids Be Kids

“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 and Should Measure What We Value

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.

"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"

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?

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Architecture Is a Lifelong Relationship

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.

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.

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?

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Language Links

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

Values and Criteria

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"

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?

Learners' Experiences Belong in the Data

"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

"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

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?

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Values-Based Evaluation Drives Systems-Based Change

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

"We're operating on antiquated systems."
– Participant, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

"What if we could develop an ongoing collaborative community of stewardship around our schools?"
– Julie Pfeffer, 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 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?

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

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Cues, Tools, and Metrics Are a Work in Progress

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

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?

"Why is building a typical data pipeline so difficult?"

– Dane Stokes, Presenter, 2019 Dialogues Workshop

"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

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What did I love?

Who knew?

Who at school knew what mattered to me?

Where did I feel like my experience counted?

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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
friendlyschools.com.au

Global Network
International Positive Education Network
ipenglobal.com

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 Photo: ©Daniel Bayer

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

The Finnish-Russian School | Photo: ©Hannu Rytky / RYTKY.com

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“

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

”

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“

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

”

Let Kids Be Kids

“

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

”

Let Kids Be Kids

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.

Let Kids Be Kids

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

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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 CO_2, 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.

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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,

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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.

Disabled joy
The recognition and support of positive identity, expression, and fulfillment among individuals with disabilities within educational environments.

Discipline
A structured institutional response to conduct that emphasizes accountability, learning, and restoration rather than exclusion.

Discovery
An instructional or developmental process through which learners explore, inquire, and construct understanding.

Disparities
Documented differences in access, outcomes, or treatment across student groups that require institutional action to address inequity.

Dissemination
The systematic distribution, communication, and sharing of information, knowledge, or findings across individuals, groups, or systems to increase awareness, understanding, or application.

Distress
A state of emotional or psychological strain observed within educational settings that triggers supportive intervention rather than punishment.

Diverse population
A range of different identities, abilities, and backgrounds present in a learning environment, requiring design that supports and includes all users.

Diverse worldviews
The presence and interaction of multiple perspectives, belief systems, cultural frameworks, and ways of knowing shaped by different social, historical, and lived experiences.

Diversity
Varied identities, abilities, experiences, cultures, and perspectives.

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.

Do it for ourselves
A design approach where learners and communities actively shape, manage, and take responsibility for their environment and learning.

Drivers of change
Key factors, forces, or conditions that initiate, influence, or accelerate change within a system, shaping its direction, behavior, and outcomes.

Economic injustice
The systemic unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that limits access to quality environments and outcomes.

Ecosystemic approach
A design perspective that treats the learning environment as an interconnected system of people, spaces, processes, and relationships that evolve together.

Ecosystems
Interconnected systems within and surrounding educational institutions – including instructional, social, environmental, and community systems – that collectively influence student learning and wellbeing.

Educational adequacy
The minimum set of conditions and resources required to support effective learning processes and outcomes.

Educational architecture
The planning, design, and construction of educational facilities as an instructional, social, and safety system.

Educational needs
Documented academic, social, emotional, behavioral, or physical supports required for student success.

Educational specifications
A formalized framework defining spatial, functional, and performance requirements for educational environments.

Education inequality
Systemic differences in access, resources, opportunities, and outcomes across student groups within an educational institution.

Educator
Any certified or credentialed professional responsible for instruction, supervision, or learning support within an educational institution.

Emancipatory worldview
A theoretical perspective that seeks to identify and transform structures of oppression to enable equitable participation and agency.

Emotion
A complex psychophysiological state involving subjective experience, neural processing, and behavioral responses, arising from the interaction between internal states and external stimuli.

Emotional care
Institutional practices that support emotional regulation, expression, and recovery for students and staff.

Emotional growth
The developmental process through which individuals increase their capacity to recognize, understand, regulate, and appropriately express emotions across contexts over time.

Emotional health
An aspect of wellbeing characterized by the capacity to manage and regulate emotions in ways that support learning, relationships, and safety.

Emotional literacy
An individual's ability, often arrived at as a learned skill, to accurately identify, understand, and express emotions in oneself and others.

Emotionally protected
A condition, established through institutional policy and practice, in which students and staff are shielded from emotional harm.

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.

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.

Empathetic environment
An environment designed to recognize, respond to, and support the emotional and experiential needs of users.

Empathy
The demonstrated ability within educational environments to recognize and respond to the emotions and experiences of others.

Empower
An institutional action that increases individuals' capacity to influence decisions affecting their learning or environment.

Enable
Within educational environments, the process of creating conditions that facilitate participation, access, and action.

Engage
Active participation by students, staff, or community members in learning or institutional processes.

Entry point
The initial point of contact, physical or otherwise, through which individuals access a system or environment, shaping first interactions and engagement.

Entryways
The physical or spatial thresholds that mediate transition, access, and movement into and within an environment.

Environmental choices
The range of options available to individuals within an environment that influence behavior, comfort, and interaction.

Environmental conditions
The measurable physical and sensory properties of an environment that affect human performance, perception, and wellbeing.

Environmental racism
Disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to harmful environmental conditions affecting educational facilities.

Equality
The provision of the same resources or treatment to all individuals, regardless of need.

Equity
The allocation of resources and supports based on demonstrated need to achieve fair outcomes.

Evaluation
The systematic assessment of processes, conditions, or outcomes using defined criteria and evidence.

Evaluation and improvement
An iterative process in which assessment data is used to inform continuous refinement and optimization.

Everyone can do something
A principle recognizing that all individuals possess the capacity to contribute meaningfully within a system or environment.

Evidence-based design
The use of research-validated principles to guide educational facility planning and improvement.

Exploration
A process of inquiry and discovery driven by interaction with environments and stimuli.

Facility conditions
The physical state of educational buildings as related to safety, health, and learning effectiveness.

Family kitchen
A designated space within or associated with a school that supports food access, nutrition education, and community connection.

Feedback loops
Mechanisms through which information about outcomes is used to modify future actions or system performance.

Finding synergies
The process of identifying interactions that produce greater combined outcomes than individual contributions alone.

Flex spaces
Adaptable environments designed to support multiple functions and changing user needs.

Flexibility
The institutional capacity to adapt learning environments, schedules, or supports to changing needs.

Flipped classroom
An instructional model in which foundational content is learned independently, and interactive activities occur during shared learning time.

Focus
The ability to selectively direct and maintain attention on relevant

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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.

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Intimate
A spatial or relational condition characterized by closeness and trust within safe boundaries.

Intimate localities
Small-scale environments that support closeness, comfort, and personal connection.

Intimidating
Environmental conditions that evoke fear, discomfort, or perceived threat.

Intrusive
Conditions or interventions that excessively penetrate personal boundaries, privacy, or autonomy.

Inviting
A characteristic of spaces or practices that encourages approachability, participation, and comfort.

Isolation
A sustained lack of social connection or engagement within educational environments.

Iterative
A process of continuous testing, feedback, and improvement.

Joy
A positive emotional state associated with satisfaction, pleasure, or meaning.

Just environments
Environments structured to support equity, dignity, and inclusive participation.

Just systems
Interconnected institutional, social, and organizational systems designed to promote fairness, inclusion, accountability, and equitable outcomes across populations.

Justice
The equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources.

Knowing the unknowns
Institutional awareness of gaps in data, understanding, or experience that affect decision-making.

Knowledge creation
The process through which new understanding, ideas, or meaning are generated.

Knowledge sharing
The exchange and dissemination of information, experiences, or expertise among individuals or groups.

Layering
The strategic combination of multiple supports, design features, or interventions to address complex needs.

Learner-centric design parameters
Design criteria prioritized around learner needs, experiences, and outcomes.

Learning
The process by which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and understanding through instruction and experience.

Learning, growing, nurturing, tasting
Integrated processes supporting development, care, exploration, and experiential learning.

Learning landscapes
A network of diverse, connected spaces that support learning across different settings, activities, and experiences.

Learning modalities
Different ways in which individuals engage with and process learning, supported through varied environments, tools, and experiences.

Learning process
The sequence of cognitive, social, and experiential changes through which knowledge develops.

Learning space
Any physical or virtual environment where instruction, exploration, or collaboration occurs.

Learning styles
Preferred ways individuals engage with and process learning experiences.

Lens
Perspective guiding interpretation and decisions.

Let kids be kids
A declaration of the intention to preserve developmentally appropriate play, exploration, rest, and joy within educational environments. Can be institutional.

Liberate learning
Removing barriers and constraints so learners can engage freely, authentically, and meaningfully in their learning.

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.

Listen to hear
An institutional practice of engaging with stakeholders in ways that prioritize understanding them over eliciting compliance or response.

Lived experience
Knowledge and understanding derived from direct personal or collective experiences that shape perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making.

Living systems
Dynamic, interconnected environments that adapt and evolve over time.

Lobbyist
An individual or entity advocating for policy, funding, or regulatory outcomes that affect educational institutions.

Loneliness
A subjective psychological state arising from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships or connectedness.

Longevity
The ability of environments to remain functional and relevant over time.

Long-term relationship design
A design approach recognizing environments as evolving relationships among users, communities, and systems over time.

Loved
A condition in which students experience consistent care, affirmation, and positive regard from adults within the educational environment.

Maker space
Designated learning environments that support hands-on creation, experimentation, and applied problem-solving.

Marginalization
The exclusion of individuals or groups from full participation or access within systems.

Materials
Physical elements that shape sensory experience and use of space.

Meaningful encounters
Interactions or experiences that foster connection, trust, understanding, or a sense of belonging between individuals or groups.

Measurable intentions
Clearly defined goals or desired outcomes that can be systematically evaluated using observable, quantifiable, or evidence-based indicators.

Measurable outcomes
The evaluation of results to determine effectiveness, impact, or progress.

Measures as value making
The concept that evaluation metrics not only assess outcomes but also shape priorities, behaviors, and cultural norms.

Media
Tools and channels used to create, communicate, and exchange information and experiences.

Mental health
A state of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing that affects learning, behavior, and functioning.

Mental health services
School-based or school-linked clinical supports addressing emotional and psychological needs.

Mental health training
Professional learning that equips staff to recognize, respond to, and support mental health needs.

Mentoring hours
Designated time within institutional schedules for relationship-based guidance and support.

Mentorship
Guided support through relationships that foster learning and development.

Mind-body wellness
An integrated approach recognizing the connection between physical and mental health.

Minimal design
A design approach emphasizing simplicity to reduce sensory overload and distraction.

Moat
A metaphorical or physical barrier separating schools from their communities.

Mobile technologies
Portable digital tools that enable flexible, on-the-go learning and interaction.

Movement
Opportunities for physical activity integrated into learning and daily routines.

Multicultural
Recognition and inclusion of multiple cultural identities, traditions, and perspectives within educational environments.

Multigenerational
An institutional approach that intentionally engages individuals across age groups in learning, mentorship, or community participation.

Multilingual learners
Individuals who use or are developing proficiency in multiple languages.

Multimedia spaces
Environments designed to support interaction with multiple forms of media, including digital, visual, and auditory content.

Multiple narratives
The coexistence and recognition, within a system or environment, of a collection of narratives reflecting a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and interpretations.

Natural elements
Features such as plants, water, daylight, and natural materials incorporated into educational environments.

Natural environment
Outdoor or nature-integrated settings used for learning, recreation, or restoration.

Natural light
Daylight introduced into educational spaces through windows, skylights, or open design.

Natural stimuli
Sensory inputs derived from natural elements that affect cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses.

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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.

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Prevention and detection strategies
Coordinated practices used to identify risks early and intervene appropriately.

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) with sheltered spaces (refuge).

Protect
To take action to safeguard individuals from harm. Can be on an institutional level.

Protective factors
Conditions, relationships, or resources that reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience against adversity.

Prototype
A preliminary representation of a design concept used to explore, test, evaluate, and iteratively improve solutions through observation and feedback.

Providers of care
Internal or external professionals delivering health, mental health, or social services within educational contexts.

Psychologist
A licensed professional providing psychological assessment and intervention within educational settings.

Public health
The collective effort to protect and improve community health, informing school policies and practices.

Public investment
Allocation of collective resources to support infrastructure, services, or community development.

Public policies
Laws and regulations enacted by governmental bodies affecting educational institutions.

Public space
Shared environments accessible to diverse populations for interaction, movement, and participation.

Purposeful
Intentional alignment of actions, design, or instruction with defined educational goals.

Queue
The organized sequencing of individuals or activities within space and time.

Quiet
An environmental condition characterized by reduced auditory stimulation and minimal noise exposure.

Racial justice
Institutional actions aimed at identifying, addressing, and eliminating racial disparities and systemic inequities.

Rain garden
A landscaped feature that manages stormwater and supports environmental education.

Reciprocity
The mutual exchange of knowledge, care, responsibility, and influence among learners, educators, communities, and environments that supports collective learning, wellbeing, and development.

Recognition
The process through which individuals are acknowledged, valued, and affirmed within social or environmental contexts.

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.

Reflection
The intentional process of examining experiences, environments, and outcomes to deepen understanding, guide learning, and inform continuous improvement.

Refuge areas
Spaces providing shelter, privacy, and withdrawal from stimulation.

Regenerative design
A design approach intended to restore, strengthen, and enhance ecological and social systems over time.

Relational safety
An institutional condition in which students, staff, and families experience trust, respect, and emotional security in interpersonal interactions.

Relationship building
Deliberate institutional practices that foster meaningful, sustained connections among members of the school community.

Relationship exploration
Structured opportunities for students to develop interpersonal skills and understand social dynamics.

Relationships
The network of interpersonal connections within educational environments that influence learning and wellbeing.

Relationship skills
Competencies enabling individuals to form, maintain, and repair relationships.

Reparative design
Design that addresses and repairs past harms and inequities in environments and communities.

Replicate
To intentionally adopt or adapt a program, practice, or design model in another context.

Representation
The visible inclusion and reflection of diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives within environments or systems.

Respect
The recognition of an individual's dignity, rights, and boundaries in all institutional interactions.

Respite
Opportunities within the environment for rest, recovery, and emotional reset.

Resource allocation
The systematic distribution of spatial, material, and temporal resources to support equitable and effective functioning of learning environments.

Responsible decision-making
The practice of aligning choices with ethical standards, safety, and long-term outcomes.

Restorative practices
A structured set of relational processes that repair harm, rebuild trust, and strengthen social cohesion within learning communities.

Safe
A condition in which individuals are protected from physical, emotional, and psychological harm.

Safe rooms
Designated spaces intended for protection during emergencies or de-escalation.

Safe versus welcoming
A policy tension describing the balance between security measures and a sense of openness and belonging.

Safety
The condition in which individuals are protected from physical harm and psychological threat, enabling secure participation and engagement.

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 interconnection of everyone and everything in a learning environment.

Safety tax
The disproportionate burden of safety measures placed on marginalized groups.

Salutogenic design
A design approach focused on creating conditions that promote health, wellbeing, resilience, and human flourishing.

Sanctuary for sick kids
A designated space providing care and rest for ill students during the school day.

Schedule flexibility
The capacity of temporal structures to adapt in response to varying learning needs, activities, and contexts.

School as hinge
The ability of a school to connect structures that link generations, communities, resources, and learning.

School building as teaching tool
The intentional use of the built environment as an active medium for supporting and communicating learning processes.

School culture
The shared values, norms, relationships, and practices that shape behavior and experiences within a school environment.

School setting
The integrated physical, social, organizational, and cultural conditions that shape teaching, learning, wellbeing, and human development within a school community.

School siting
The process and criteria used to determine the location of a school, considering environmental, social, and accessibility factors.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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