

Early Learning & Family Center Final Board Report

May 2026



About this Document

Two years of imagining, researching, and collaborating have shaped this document and the vision it represents for a transformed Early Learning and Family Center. It builds on a series of School Board presentations, November 2024, February 2025, September 2025, and January 2026 and brings that ongoing conversation to this moment.

These findings are offered for discussion and reflection. The School Board is not being asked to act tonight. We are sharing the thinking behind this work, and where it could lead.

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Section 1: Our Journey

A Shared Commitment to Minnesota's Premier Early Learning Program

Two years ago, Edina Public Schools embarked on a journey to envision a transformed Early Learning and Family Center, reinforcing the district's commitment to premier E-12 education that truly begins at birth. Throughout this journey, one vision has remained constant: to position Edina as Minnesota's premier E-12 district by establishing the ELFC as a foundational cornerstone, a destination where excellence in early childhood education meets comprehensive family support in an intentionally designed environment.

If early childhood education is a garden, the curriculum is the seed, the teacher is the gardener, and the physical environment is the soil — it must be rich, supportive, and intentionally prepared. — Dr. Lilian Katz, Early Childhood Researcher

Key Milestones

November 2024	Initial vision shared with School Board; potential opportunities explored
February 2025	Proposed transformation framework developed and presented
August 2025	Community engagement strategy launched; ThoughtExchange generated 750+ ratings from 74 participants
September 2025	Action Plan presented to and adopted by School Board
December 2, 2025	First cross-functional team meeting: building leadership, teachers, support staff, PTO, district administrators, and architect
January 20, 2026	Second cross-functional meeting: learning neighborhoods, family engagement design, and future-proofing enrollment
April 2, 2026	Parent Leadership Council meeting; ELFC vision shared with broader community stakeholders
Spring 2026	Mid-year progress update shared with our School Board; Wold Architects advanced to preliminary space needs analysis
April 28, 2026	Final cross-functional meeting: Stakeholders affirmed design priorities and identified limitations a dedicated ELFC would address
May 19, 2026	Final report presented to our School Board

Section 2: The Case for Our Vision

Early Learning Is School

There is a persistent misconception that early childhood programming is a warm-up act, something children do before real learning begins in kindergarten. Research has dismantled this idea entirely. The years from birth through age five are the most neurologically significant period in a human life, the window during which the architecture of the brain is built, when language, social-emotional capacity, executive function, curiosity, and the ability to take risks as a learner are all established.



90% of brain development occurs before age five. The neural connections formed during early childhood establish the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health.



Children who arrive at kindergarten prepared with strong language skills, executive function, and social-emotional regulation, maintain measurable academic advantages through elementary school and beyond. Quality preschool environments show statistically significant associations with language and math outcomes at kindergarten entry. [1]



Longitudinal studies show that high-quality early childhood experiences are linked to higher graduation rates, greater earnings, lower grade retention, stronger social skills, and better health outcomes in adulthood. These are not marginal differences. They compound over a lifetime. [2]



For children needing additional opportunities, quality early learning is even more consequential. It is the single greatest lever a school district can pull to close opportunity gaps before they open.

The Physical Environment as the Third Teacher

The research on physical learning environments is equally clear. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Young Children* (Winter 2024) frames the constructed environment as the "Third Teacher," alongside family and educators, in a child's development. A supportive and inviting atmosphere is critical for development. [3]

When children have access to well-designed outdoor spaces with natural elements such as grass, plantings, varied terrain, and sensory materials, their mathematical reasoning, scientific inquiry, language development, and physical coordination all benefit. As NAEYC's *Young Children* notes, many programs fence in space that fences out all the natural elements. Children may be outside, but they are not in nature. The distinction matters enormously.^[4]

NAEYC's landmark resource *The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children* (Rivkin and Schein) provides the research and practical framework for nature access as a non-negotiable component of quality early childhood environments. Programs like the Thomas Irvine Dodge Nature Center in St. Paul demonstrate what is possible when outdoor space is designed with purpose. [5]



A Note on Language: Access to Nature

Following the April 2, 2026 community leaders meeting, it became clear that the phrase "nature-based" was creating confusion for some stakeholders, suggesting the ELFC might remodel itself entirely after programs like Dodge Nature Center Preschool. Our stakeholder's vision is to create intentional access to nature, outdoor spaces where children can explore, investigate, and learn, woven into a comprehensive, research-aligned program that serves the full spectrum of Edina families. The language in this report and in future communications uses "access to nature" and "nature-connected learning" to reflect this distinction accurately.

The E-12 Continuum Starts Here

Edina Public Schools takes pride in its E-12 commitment to excellence. But that commitment has a growth opportunity. The earliest years of a child's educational experience, the years when investment yields the highest return, are housed in a facility that does not reflect an optimal physical environment designed with children in mind.

When a child arrives in a kindergarten classroom, a teacher can see the difference. Children who have experienced rich, play-based early learning in well-designed environments arrive with stronger vocabulary, more confident self-regulation, and greater readiness to build relationships with peers. They know how to explore, how to try, how to ask for help. These are not innate traits. They are the outcomes of a high-quality early learning environment.

A new ELFC is the district's declaration that educational excellence begins at birth.

A Story Worth Telling

Imagine a child we'll call Mia. She is three years old, and she attends the ELFC. In a new building, she arrives each morning through a bright, welcoming entry filled with natural light. She hangs her coat in a cubby at the right height. She uses the bathroom in her classroom, on her own, with a fixture sized for her body. She steps outside into a sensory garden where she watches the seeds she planted three weeks ago now reaching toward the sun. Her teacher is nearby, in a collaboration zone connected to the outdoors. Mia is learning to regulate, to explore, to wonder. When she walks into kindergarten two years later, she will carry all of this with her, the curiosity, the confidence, the sense that learning is a place where she belongs. This is what the research describes. This is what a new ELFC would make possible for every child in Edina.

The Economics of Early Learning: Return on Investment (ROI)

The earlier the investment, the greater the return – James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

Investing in early childhood education is one of the most well-documented return-on-investment decisions in all of public policy. The research on this point spans decades, crosses disciplines, and comes from some of the most rigorous economists in the world with origins in Minnesota. Longitudinal studies have tracked children over decades measuring outcomes in health, education, employment, earnings, and reduced public costs:

With every \$1 invest in early childhood education, \$7-13 is returned in societal benefits, Heckman, 2006 (Nobel Laureate in Economics) and Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center (2025, May). *Investing in Early Childhood Education Pays Dividends*. These benefits include:

Reduced special education costs – Children who attend high-quality early learning programs are significantly less likely to require special education services, saving districts and families substantial resources.
Lower grade retention rates – Quality early learning reduces the likelihood of children repeating grades, which carries direct cost savings and improves long-term academic trajectories.
Higher graduation rates and lifetime earnings – Participants in quality early childhood programs complete more education and earn more over their lifetimes, generating greater tax contributions and reduced dependence on public services.
Two-generation economic benefits – When parents can access reliable, high-quality early childhood education, they can maintain or improve their workforce participation — increasing family income and economic productivity simultaneously.
Reduced crime and public health costs – Long-term studies, including Heckman’s landmark Perry Preschool research (2010), show that quality early learning is associated with reduced rates of crime, incarceration, and public health burden decades later.

Anticipated Relevance for Edina and Alignment with Future Enrollment

- Higher kindergarten readiness, reducing the need for intervention and support services in early elementary grades
- Stronger E-12 enrollment retention, as families who have a positive early learning experience in-district are more likely to remain in Edina schools
- Parent workforce participation, supported by access to reliable, high-quality programming
- Community economic competitiveness, as quality schools and early learning facilities are a demonstrated factor in where young professional families choose to live
- Reduced burden on kindergarten teachers, who spend less time on foundational skill-building and more time on grade-level instruction when children arrive prepared

Section 3: Edina's Early Learning Landscape

Edina Families Are Making Choices Right Now

The ELFC stands out in our community as having exceptional licensed educators and specialists, a research-aligned curriculum, inclusive programming, and a community of families who deeply value what we offer.

However, every year families in Edina make decisions about where their youngest children will spend their days. They visit buildings. They look at classrooms. They see outdoor spaces. They imagine their child in the environment. In some cases, they choose a private early learning program because the ELFC's current facility does not have internal or external curb appeal.

Understanding the Edina's Early Learning Options

Informed by stakeholder input gathered through the cross-functional planning process, the early learning landscape is more nuanced than a simple list of programs. Understanding all the options and for whom shapes both the facility vision and programming strategy. The table below presents realistic opportunities to recruit and retain students from our community ultimately, increasing our resident family enrollment.

Early Learning Type	Programs	Our Realistic Opportunity
Core Preschool Programs	Berry Patch (two Edina campuses), Creekside, and comparable play-based preschools	Primary opportunity to retain ECFE families and compete for play-based, family-engaged preschool enrollment. A facility upgrade directly targets this.
Full-Day and Child Care Programs	ELFC, Primrose, and other licensed childcare centers	With full-day programming and Little Kids Club expansion, families who need full-day care are often choosing these programs by default, not by preference.
Language Immersion Programs	ISLA and several other Spanish immersion preschools in and around Edina	If Spanish immersion is added. These families are also most likely to stay in-district for Kindergarten, making them a strategic enrollment priority.
Private E-12 Schools	Blake School, Our Lady of Grace, and similar independent programs	Families typically choose Blake for prestige and K-12 pathway, OLG for faith-based education. These are distinct value propositions and are not appropriate to replicate.



Strategic Insight:

The clearest enrollment opportunity lies with ECFE families who already know and trust the ELFC. Families are currently choosing full day programming with childcare by necessity rather than preference, and families seeking language immersion are also the most likely to stay in Edina for elementary school. A new facility, paired with expanded programming, directly targets all three of these audiences


Programming and Facility Must Move Together

A critical insight from stakeholder engagement – the facility vision and the programming vision must be presented together. A beautiful new building without compelling expanded programming will not, on its own, attract and retain families. And expanded programming without the facility to support it will not reach its potential. The two are inseparable.

Families considering the ELFC want to know what the building will look like and what their child's day will include. The programming vision including expanded two-year-old options, flexible scheduling, language immersion, nature-connected learning, intergenerational experiences, full-day school, and Little Kids Club options are as much a part of the case for investment as the facility plan itself.

The Landscape: Where We Are and Where We Can Lead

Current ELFC	New ELFC Vision
<p>What families experience today</p>	<p>What Edina families experience in the future</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdated building not designed for early learning and non-contiguous early learning program spaces • Inequitable learning, bathrooms outside classrooms, and outdated play spaces • No dedicated nature-connected learning environment • Lack of cultural elements and family connection space • Multiple entry and exit points creating safety issues and concerns • Limited bus area for student drop-off and pick-up with inadequate parking within a multi-building campus creating safety issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed from ground up for children 0-5 • In-classroom bathrooms, sensory spaces, natural light, and equitable learning areas and play spaces • Nature-based outdoor learning with sensory gardens • Family Commons and multilingual resource center with language immersion programming • Safe, warm, and welcoming physical space that creates psychological safety and wellbeing • Parking lot and bus area that are universally designed for all families and children



What Inspires the Vision: Lessons from Exceptional Spaces

Stakeholders went on a virtual tour, visiting early learning centers around Minnesota, including one in South Dakota that are truly inspirational and designed to serve families with our earliest learners. Using examples from other early learning centers, participants experienced different approaches to space and layout. They saw what worked, what didn't, and most importantly, what might work for Edina's unique context. Every detail of these example centers communicates to a child that this space was designed with them in mind, that discovery lives around every corner, that being here is exciting. This is what inspiring early learning environments do. They are intentional. Natural light supports biological rhythms and signals welcome. Spaces designed at child scale build confidence and independence. Outdoor environments with plantings and sensory elements connect children to the living world.

What Makes the ELFC Standout

Here is what we do best: offer an exceptional E-12 experience. When a child attends the ELFC, they are already part of Edina Public Schools. Their teachers know what is expected in kindergarten. Their records travel with them seamlessly. Their developmental screenings are aligned with what their future teachers will need to know. The transition from the ELFC to kindergarten is not a leap between institutions, it is a step within one and the first important benchmark along our learners' journey to grade 12 graduation.

What Other Programs in Edina Offer	What the ELFC Can Offer
Purpose-built, inspiring indoor spaces	All of that , plus seamless E-12 curriculum alignment
Quality outdoor play environments	All of that, plus developmental screening integrated with district systems
Enrichment: music, language, arts	All of that, plus a public-school commitment to equity and access for every Edina family
Strong K-readiness programming	All of that, plus a transition to Edina elementary schools that is a step, not a leap
Family engagement and parent education	All of that, plus ECFE, ECSE, inclusive classrooms, and a full spectrum of family support services in one place
A welcoming, child-centered environment	All of that, plus a community hub serving all of Edina across generations

Section 4: Three Meetings, Three Layers of Insight

Over three cross-functional team meetings spanning December 2025 through April 2026, stakeholders representing building leadership, teachers, support staff, PTO, district administrators, and Wold Architects engaged in structured dialogue around the future of the ELFC. Four overarching principles surfaced and remained consistent across all three conversations.

December 2, 2025: Establishing Core Principles

The first meeting introduced the concept of the physical environment as the Third Teacher and invited participants to brainstorm across five areas: learning spaces, family connection, programs and services, practical priorities, and vision for the future.

1

Nature-Connected Learning

Intentional access to outdoor learning experiences as central to our early childhood philosophy, with natural materials throughout indoor and outdoor spaces, secured courtyards with meaningful plantings, and strong visual and physical connections between classrooms and the natural world.

2

Universal Design

Universally-designed from the first moment of arrival: zero-entry access points, generous and efficiently organized parking, wide corridors and doorways supporting diverse mobility needs, and flexible spaces that adapt to varied learning styles and abilities.

3

Family Partnership

A Family Commons area at the building entry where parents gather before and after programs; multi-purpose spaces for school-wide events; resource centers in multiple languages; adult-sized, culturally proficient spaces that honor families as first teachers.

4

Purposeful Design

Spaces designed from the ground up for children ages 0 to 5, not adult spaces adapted for small bodies: in-classroom bathrooms, quiet and sensory areas in every classroom, teacher collaboration zones adjacent to learning neighborhoods, and adequate organized storage built in from the start.

January 20, 2026: Deepening the Vision

The second meeting moved from broad principles to detailed design questions, exploring future stable and sustainable enrollment, translating the learning neighborhoods concept into design specifications, and positioning the ELFC as a true community hub.

- Pod-based learning neighborhoods organized by age group, with shared common spaces and motor rooms within each pod
- Flexible programming capacity to accommodate a broader age band and more scheduling options for working families
- Intergenerational programming connected to a Senior Center presence, with dedicated volunteer coordinator
- A community hub model extending beyond early learning hours, including parent education and co-location of community partners near the front entrance
- Language programming, including dual language options in French and Spanish, as a distinctive program offering

April 28, 2026: Affirming, Expanding, and Grounding the Vision

The final cross-functional meeting brought the same core group of stakeholders together for a focused conversation organized around four questions: what a dedicated space would make possible, who else could be served, what current limitations could be addressed, and what the ELFC is already doing well.



Section 5: Five Design Priorities

Combining research, three rounds of cross-functional team engagement, survey feedback from stakeholders, and architectural analysis from Wold Architects, five specific design priorities have crystallized for the vision of a new Early Learning and Family Center.

Learning Spaces That Inspire

Natural light will flow through all classrooms, supporting children's biological rhythms and creating spaces that feel alive and welcoming. Flexible furniture will support multiple learning configurations. In-classroom bathrooms with developmentally appropriate fixtures will support independence and dignity. Designated quiet and sensory areas in each classroom will provide regulation support, and teacher collaboration zones adjacent to learning neighborhoods will foster professional learning communities. Organized storage designed in from the start will eliminate the makeshift solutions that currently characterize too many early childhood classrooms.^[3]



Nature-Connected Outdoor Learning

Quality outdoor space needs to be a core part of our programming. Outdoor environments rich in natural elements such as grass, plantings, varied terrain, and sensory materials that support math reasoning, scientific inquiry, language development, and physical coordination in ways indoor spaces alone cannot replicate. The vision for the ELFC includes outdoor classrooms designed with safety in mind, sensory gardens, raised garden beds, natural play elements, and spaces designed for both structured outdoor learning and child-directed exploration.^[4]

Family Connection at the Heart

Universally-designed entries will create welcoming first impressions from the moment families arrive. Generous parking with efficient circulation patterns will accommodate the reality of early childhood programs and families juggling multiple drop-offs. The Family Commons area at the main entry will serve as the center's living room. Multi-purpose gathering spaces will host community events, and resource centers will provide multilingual family support materials.

Programming That Meets Families Where They Are

Enhanced nature-connected learning will position the ELFC as a leader in this research-backed approach. Expanded programming for two-year-olds will meet growing demand. Flexible scheduling for 3s and 4s programs will accommodate working families. Lunch bunch and enrichment options in language, art, music, and STEAM will extend learning opportunities. ECFE programming will be positioned as a community builder. Language immersion will attract a new audience of families who are also strong candidates to remain in-district for elementary school.

Practical Considerations That Enable Excellence

Security must be balanced with a welcoming atmosphere. Parking designed for staggered program schedules will prevent the congestion that currently creates transition stress and safety issues. True zero-entry access must be designed in from the beginning. Staff support spaces, including areas dedicated to professional development, recognize that excellent teaching requires time for collaboration.

Visionary Elements That Set Us Apart

Intergenerational programming could connect seniors and young learners in mutually enriching relationships. Community partnerships with retired volunteers, high school students, and pre-service teachers could expand capacity. Multilingual communication technology would ensure language is never a barrier. An early childhood screening suite would consolidate services. Co-location with Community Education programs would position the ELFC as a true hub for lifelong learning.



Section 6: Final Cross-Functional Meeting Findings

What a Dedicated Space Would Make Possible

A dedicated ELFC space was described not only as a facility improvement but as a statement of values: a clear signal to the community that Edina prioritizes early learning and community wellness. Specific program opportunities identified included:

- Intergenerational programming, including structured interactions between young learners and seniors
- Spanish and French language immersion programming
- Expanded class offerings and more sections of existing programs, currently constrained by space
- Drop-in childcare options for families who need flexible access
- Nature-connected outdoor learning environments with intentional design
- Community spaces and play spaces accessible to the broader Edina community
- Transition services and co-location with Community Education adult programming
- A resource center for community needs and co-located mental health services





What Current Limitations Could Be Addressed

Current Limitation	What a Dedicated Space Addresses
Parking, drop-off, and shelter at entry	Designed circulation and covered lobby space
Limited and inadequate outdoor space	Intentional playgrounds, green space, and nature access
Little Kids Club space constraints	Separate Little Kids Club space, attached but with its own amenities
Lack of natural light in classrooms and offices	Natural light designed in from the start
Age-appropriate bathrooms not connected to classrooms	In-classroom bathrooms as a standard feature
Insufficient storage throughout	Organized storage built into every space
No dedicated lunchroom	Centralized kitchen and dedicated dining space
Limited meeting and office space	Functional offices, IEP meeting rooms, collaboration zones
Safety concerns that conflict with openness	Security designed with welcome in mind from the beginning
Insufficient enrichment program space	More sections possible with more purposeful space
Limited space for summer programming	Dedicated spaces that function year-round
Special education transitions across spaces	Special Education presence in each pod, reducing unnecessary transitions

Section 7: Investing in Our Current Strengths

The April 28, 2026 conversation was notable for its balance. Stakeholders named, with genuine pride, what makes the ELFC a standout program worth the investment. These strengths are the foundation the new facility would be designed to sustain and grow.

What We Do Well	Why It Matters for the Future
Inclusivity and kindergarten transition support	A dedicated building would deepen and sustain this approach
Flexible programs meeting diverse family needs	More space enables more flexibility, not less
ECFE as family education and community building	A Family Commons and multi-purpose spaces amplify this role
Highly qualified and expert staff	Spaces honor and support expert teachers
Strong parent engagement and support	Family Commons and resource center
High-quality, EPS-aligned curriculum	Dedicated spaces allow curriculum fidelity
Play-based and age-aligned learning	Spaces designed for 0-5 make play-based learning more possible
In-house special education support	A pod model with Special Education presence reduces transitions and stigma
Welcoming environment for all families	Intentional zero-entry, multilingual, and culturally proficient design
Community support and pride for our youngest Hornets	A new facility would deepen community investment and identity
SEL and social-emotional supports	A sensory-rich, regulation-first environment



Strategic Insight:

The community is not asking for something entirely new. They are asking for a facility worthy of the exceptional program that already exists. The staff and families who show up every day desire a building that meets them at the level of their commitment.

Section 8: Architectural Planning Progress

Our collaboration with Wold Architects has advanced from conceptual discussions to preliminary space planning. The architectural team has conducted comprehensive site assessments, analyzed program requirements for each learning area, developed preliminary square footage ideas, explored multiple configuration options, and provided initial cost projections for various scenarios.

The comprehensive space analysis examines classroom square footage by age group and program type; support spaces including offices, staff rooms, and storage; family engagement areas and the Family Commons; multi-purpose and gathering spaces; a Senior Center area for intergenerational programming; specialized areas for STEAM, sensory experiences, and gross motor development; and service areas covering kitchen, maintenance, and building systems.

Section 9: Unresolved Design Tensions

Community conversations have surfaced important design tensions that will require thoughtful resolution as planning advances. Identifying these honestly is part of presenting credible, grounded recommendations.

- How do we balance security needs with openness and genuine accessibility?
- What is the right approach to child safety while still providing natural light through child-appropriate window access?
- Can we create appropriate building scale while maintaining the intimate, neighborhood feel that young children need?
- Where should the Family Commons be positioned to maximize accessibility while maintaining separation from classroom instruction zones?
- How do we design for the full breadth of programming vision including language immersion, intergenerational spaces, and community hub functions within realistic budget parameters?
- How do we ensure that a larger facility retains the warm, relational culture that makes the current program exceptional?
- What is the right sequencing between programming expansion and facility completion, and how do we communicate both with clarity to families and funders?



Section 10: Proposed Path for School Board Consideration

Two years into this journey, the district has moved from aspiration to actionable planning. The community has spoken clearly and consistently. The Early Learning and Family Center deserves a home that reflects the quality of its work and the breadth of its vision, one that competes confidently in the Edina early learning landscape, honors the E-12 promise the district makes to every family, and positions the ELFC as a community destination for generations to come.

Direction Brought Forward	Considerations for the Path Forward
Affirm the five design priorities as the guiding framework for a new ELFC facility	How our School Board would like to engage with the design priorities and what additional input is needed before the next phase
Continue collaboration with Wold Architects to advance from space analysis to schematic design	What parameters, including budget range and site considerations, should guide architectural development
Expand community engagement to reach stakeholders not yet deeply involved in this process	What form and timeline that engagement should take, and how findings will be reported back to our School Board
Develop a facilities financing roadmap in connection with the district's broader capital planning work	How and when our School Board would like to receive a financing analysis and timeline of options
Present programming vision alongside facility vision in all future stakeholder communications	How our School Board would like to receive updates on programming development as a companion to facility planning
Provide the Board with ongoing reporting on planning progress	How our School Board would like to receive implementation updates and what metrics would be most useful

The Early Learning and Family Center belongs to every family in Edina including current ELFC families, families whose children will one day walk through these doors, and community members who understand that investing in our youngest learners strengthens everyone. The garden we are preparing will nurture growth for generations to come.

Section A: Literature Review – Supporting Citations

The following sources support the research claims and framing in this report. All NAEYC sources are publications of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the leading professional organization for early childhood education in the United States.

Early Learning Quality and Kindergarten Readiness

[1] Preschool Center Quality and School Readiness

Keys, T. D., et al. (2013). Preschool Center Quality and School Readiness: Quality Effects and Variation by Demographic and Child Characteristics. *Child Development*, 84(4). PMC4024382.

Findings: Quality in preschool center classrooms shows statistically significant associations with language and mathematics outcomes at kindergarten entry for children ages 3-5. Quality effects were consistent across demographic groups and entry skill levels.

[2] Longitudinal Outcomes of Early Childhood Quality

Vandell, D. L., et al. (2020). Quality of Early Childcare and Education Predicts High School STEM Achievement. PMC10524717. See also: Cognia (2021). Redefining the Measurement of Early Childhood Program Quality and Child Outcomes.

Findings: Higher quality Early Childhood Education is associated with math and reading achievement in elementary school, which in turn predicts high school STEM outcomes. Relations operate through skill-building foundations established in early childhood. Longitudinal outcomes include higher graduation rates, lower grade retention, and stronger adult earnings.

Physical Learning Environments

[3] A Supportive and Inviting Atmosphere: A Discussion About the Design and Function of the Physical Learning Environment

Ameley-Quaye, A. (2024). *Young Children*, Winter 2024, Vol. 79. National Association for the Education of Young Children. naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/winter2024/design-and-function-environment

Summary: An architect-turned-early-learning-environment specialist examines how the design and function of physical spaces act as the "Third Teacher" in early childhood settings. Explores how supportive and inviting spaces directly influence children's learning, interaction, and development. Featured in NAEYC's Winter 2024 issue on quality in early learning programs.

Nature-Connected Outdoor Learning

[4] Play in the Grass! Practical Considerations for Quality Outdoor Play

Smith, B. and Olsen, H. (2019/2021). Teaching Young Children, August/September 2019; reprinted Summer 2021. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/summer2021/play-in-the-grass

Key finding: "Many programs have fenced-in space that fences out all the natural elements. Children may be outside, but they are not in nature." The article provides practical criteria for quality outdoor spaces, including natural elements, accessible design, shade, and direct curriculum connections. Aligned with NAEYC's 10 standards for early learning program accreditation.

[5] The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children, Revised Edition

Rivkin, M. S. and Schein, D. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/great-outdoors-revised-edition

Summary: A research-grounded advocacy resource for intentional outdoor spaces in early childhood settings. Includes examples of Minnesota-based nature-connected programs, including the Thomas Irvine Dodge Nature Center in St. Paul. Endorsed by Richard Louv (Last Child in the Woods) and Alice Honig (Syracuse University). Provides both the research rationale and practical applications for outdoor environment design.

[6] Using Principles of Nature-Based Preschools to Transform Your Classroom

Young Children, November 2018. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2018/nature-based-preschools-transform-classroom

Summary: Explores how programs can integrate principles from nature-based preschools — including outdoor access, natural materials, and inquiry-based learning — without becoming exclusively nature-based. Directly relevant to the ELFC's approach of nature-connected learning within a comprehensive program model.