



Trust for Learning

Ideal learning made real.

Principles of Ideal Learning Programs

Drawing from the strength of world-renowned early childhood approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Friends, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education, and Waldorf, these principles outline core concepts that form the foundation of quality early childhood education or “Ideal Learning.” These principles allow for multiple pathways, approaches and models and take into account the varied contexts within which early educators and care providers work. There are several essential beliefs, however, that thread throughout that are worth noting, including a commitment to play, relationship-based interactions, an ecologically-focused, child-centered perspective; equity; and a strength-based and inquiry-based approach with children, adults and families. Together, they balance principles of attachment and independence that are meaningful for young children’s development.



This document is intended to enable educators and those who work with them to:

- Understand and see themselves in a vision of quality aligned with the Trust’s Ideal Learning standards (i.e., make the concept of “ideal” more identifiable for providers);
- Assess their alignment with Ideal Learning and consider how educator knowledge and action could be supported by professional learning or other supports;
- Provide an anchor for educators to reflect on their work and make connections between where they are now and what they might aspire to do differently;
- Build a community that represents shared principles of quality early childhood education;
- Inform QRIS or other systems of oversight that define quality whether implicitly or explicitly; and,
- Influence policy decision-making that affects early childhood education providers.



In these ways, the tool should be useful for:

- Early childhood educators and care providers in communities across the country;
- Those who work with and support early childhood educators and care providers; and,
- States, districts and others who oversee early childhood educators and care providers.



What this is not:

- A valid, reliable, tested tool that can be used for rigorous evaluation purposes;
- A comprehensive look at every aspect of an early education setting (e.g., safety, policies);
- Inclusive of model-specific terminology;
- A comprehensive list of “look-fors”; or,
- Parent-facing.

Principles of Ideal Learning

The following principles draw from world-renowned early childhood approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, the Friends Center for Children, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education and Waldorf to represent the core concepts that form the foundation of ideal early learning.

Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity.

- A guiding premise of work is that all children are not only entitled to an education that supports human flourishing, but that all children, regardless of class or culture, have within them the potential to realize that goal.
- Every child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income has access to the educational resources that they need to thrive.
- Resources are targeted based on individual children's needs and circumstances, which includes providing differentiated funding and supports.
- All children and families are valued as contributing members of the community.
- Administrators and teachers recognize the deeply disparate opportunities and outcomes that have existed and persist for children from low-income families, those of color, English learners, and children with disabilities.
- Teachers are knowledgeable about the community in which they teach and respect families' voice and agency to authentically inform decisions.
- Children's individual differences are celebrated as unique aspects of their identity.

Children construct knowledge from diverse experiences to make meaning of the world.

- Children engage in ongoing exploration with their hands, minds and bodies (such as hypothesizing, testing theories, solving problems).
- Children have opportunities to learn through observation and participation.
- Learning experiences reflect children's interests and are organized to encourage children to learn from and with each other, about themselves and the world.
- Teachers facilitate children's learning through the preparation of enriched learning environments—both indoor and outdoor—and the provision of opportunities to engage in direct exploration and experimentation within those environments.
- Experiences reflect the context and community in which children live.
- Experiences integrate multiple domains of development (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, physical and moral).
- Teachers create opportunities for exploration and find ways to integrate them into everyday experiences.

Play is an essential element of young children's learning.

- Play is a legitimate right of childhood, representing a crucial aspect of children's physical, intellectual and social development.
- Children engage in multiple forms of play (e.g., solitary, parallel, social, cooperative, onlooker, fantasy, physical and constructive) that develop symbolic and imaginative thinking, peer relationships, language, physical development, and problem-solving skills.
- Teachers help children develop mature play skills by providing background knowledge children can use in their pretend scenarios and by scaffolding peer interactions.
- Teachers empower children to develop initiative by providing time, space and materials to support child-initiated play, appropriate risk-taking and engendering a sense of accomplishment.
- Outdoor play is important whenever possible, allowing children space to run, jump and engage in big body play.
- When outdoor play is not possible, educators incorporate large motor experiences in indoor spaces.

Principles of Ideal Learning

Instruction is personalized and child-focused to acknowledge each child's individual development and unique abilities.

- Teachers understand where children are individually in their developmental trajectory and tailor their practices to each child's needs.
- Based on that knowledge, teachers prepare learning environments designed explicitly to respond to the fundamental needs and tendencies of children.
- Teachers ensure that experiences are in keeping with children's temperamental and developmental profiles, yet strive to stretch their capacities over time.
- Children's home language is valued and supported while also facilitating English-language learning in a way that is in keeping with parental goals.
- Teachers are close observers of children and use observations to both interpret and project future experiences and opportunities with children and parents.
- Teachers and other professionals work together to make schools and classrooms inclusionary, allowing for individually different needs of children.
- Daily routines and curriculum reflect an understanding of how trauma might play out in an individual child's behaviors and needs.

The teacher is a guide, nurturing presence and co-constructor of knowledge.

- Teachers have a strengths-based view of children and families, which enables them to partner with and guide them into new areas of learning and growth.
- Teachers have deep knowledge of child development that informs their practice and is extended through the regular use of observation, documentation and interpretation of children's behaviors and learning processes.
- Teachers are researchers who use their observational knowledge to interpret, adjust, refine and redirect their approach.
- Teachers are thoughtful and intentional about the decisions they make in the classroom, guided by a moral and ethical commitment to the common good of humanity.
- Relationships are reflective of authentic and honest engagement with community and families.

Young children and adults learn through relationships.

- Teachers foster a sense of community between and among the children and adults in the classroom.
- Teachers develop a relationship with each child that allows them to feel recognized and acknowledged.
- Teachers, children and families engender trust through the building of relationships and interact as partners.
- Children's relationships with each other are encouraged, valued and actively supported.
- Children engage in small- and whole-group experiences.
- Teachers engage regularly with families to support children's learning and use knowledge of family and community life to organize experiences and environments.
- Teachers know the effects of adverse experiences (ACES) on young children of different ages and ways of responding in meaningful ways.



Principles of Ideal Learning

The environment, as “teacher,” is intentionally designed to facilitate children’s exploration, independence and interaction.

- The physical environment is secure and well-organized so as to enable exploration independent of adult direction.
- The school and classrooms are designed as an enriched environment to be interacted with and upon by the children.
- Materials are organized, accessible and engaging to children.
- Materials, spaces and processes are intentionally chosen to support an emergent approach that reflects children’s interests and questions.
- Children have access to a range of materials (sensory, expressive, musical, working tools, open-ended, recycled, natural, etc.).
- Environments are created to stimulate and encourage expressions of children’s ideas, questions and emotions.
- Children interact with the natural world, including plants, animals and outdoor elements.

The time of childhood is valued.

- An intentional, calm, responsive pace informs daily learning experiences, rhythms and routines.
- Projections for curriculum aim to use unhurried time as a resource for learning, recognizing that children are born knowing how to learn and use time flexibly, repetitively, strategically, and in relation to new experiences and relationships.
- Continuity, rather than fragmentation, is a guiding principle for the adults’ organization of time.
- Children are allowed time to fully engage with materials and each other.
- Daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms are incorporated into the classroom and provide predictability and security for the children.

There is a continuous learning environment to support adult development.

- Teachers and administrators create, cultivate and maintain an intentional, coherent and shared educational philosophy that guides practice and is revisited routinely by all.
- All adults (e.g., teachers, staff, administrators) engage in a continual cycle of observation and reflection with the goal of continual improvement.
- All adults take personal and group responsibility toward better understanding and conscious countering of systemic racism.
- Substantial and consistent time and space is set aside for regular professional reflection on practice.
- Coaching and supervision are both strengths-based and inquiry-based to encourage curiosity, build resources and increase self-awareness.