

Environment and Engagement: Precursors to Learning

A clear vision for a learning environment that is conducive to learning is the “touchstone from which all other actions flow. It is the yardstick for questions and a reference point for conversations.” Lambert, 2003



Consider the kind of learning called for in the Common Core State Standards and ask: What environment must I facilitate for that learning to take place? If students are to constructively collaborate and respectfully critique work among peers, have I ensured a socially safe environment so that can occur? If students are to persevere in rigorous academic tasks, am I prepared to support their struggle?

Classroom Strategy: When questioning, teachers can:

- Always emphasize what is *correct* in a response
- Allow students time to think or seek help from peers
- Ask students to paraphrase/add to another’s response

Research *proves* that school-wide efforts to create optimal conditions for learning promote students’ cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development, including increased academic achievement. By allowing true engagement in teaching and learning, a conducive school environment increases the impact of educators’ efforts.

An optimal learning environment is physically welcoming and functional, but much more than that. It must also:

- socially promote communication and interaction;
- affectively promote a sense of belonging and esteem;
- academically promote learning and self-fulfillment.

Thus, the nature of *human interactions* within a school community characterizes the learning environment. (CL7)

Good teachers instinctively facilitate positive interactions in their classrooms. A **shared school-wide vision** for the learning environment takes individual efforts to the next level, by making learning conditions an intentional and integral part of a continuous improvement process. (CI1)

Each month, this newsletter highlights best practices that help students reach their learning goals. Adoption of Common Core State Standards in Math and English are an important step in focusing teaching and learning toward the knowledge and skills students need for life success.

Yet the Common Core, like any learning standards, can only be attained within an environment that supports engagement in the learning process. Thus, information supporting the creation of a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports in schools is also included each month (and fills this issue) to detail how to promote conditions for, and reduce barriers to, effective teaching and learning. This integration is an intentional reminder that learning goals and learning supports go hand in hand, as each is a necessary reinforcement of the other. (CL1, CL2, CL3)

Continuous School Improvement Connection:

The *Conditions for Learning Indicators* discussed here (CL4, CL10) and others are included in the Rising Star on IIRC online school improvement system and also accessible via the ISBE *Learning Supports* web page.

Teacher’s words and actions matter, as they directly impact student motivation. Engagement is most effectively encouraged not through a checklist of behaviors, but the adoption of a *mindset* based on mutual respect, support, and high expectations. (CL4, CL19)

Because the learning environment stems from attitudes and competencies of educators and the students they serve, social/emotional skill building is a critical factor. State legislation requires the incorporation of social and emotional learning into educational programming, which can be done effectively through an *integrative* approach. Rather than isolating social and emotional skills in a separate curriculum, teachers can use other subject area instruction, as well as daily “teachable moments,” as natural springboards for social/emotional skill building.

Research shows that as students feel more competent and connected, levels of engagement increase. (CL10)

Student engagement increases when...

academic tasks are challenging, purposeful, and applicable to one’s own life.

students are involved in setting their learning goals.

students are encouraged to interact and discuss ideas with their teachers and peers.

praise emphasizes improvement, effort, and process.

peer cooperation, not competition, is encouraged.

instruction allows student choice and decision-making.

appropriate academic scaffolding leads to autonomy.

teachers create a socially-supportive environment.

students develop a positive perception of their school.

Professional Development Connection: (CL16, CL17)

Effective teacher practices related to environment and engagement are highlighted in the Danielson Framework and should be emphasized in preparation, development, and evaluation programs aligned for professional growth.