

Why Early Childhood Facilities Matter: The Case for Public Action

Too frequently, public policy in the early care and education arena overlooks the importance of physical facilities. Yet facilities play a key role in shaping the availability and quality of services. State policymakers need to address this critical ingredient for four reasons:

1 Supply

States need to increase the physical capacity of the early care and education system to serve the growing numbers of children who are eligible to enroll. Inadequate supply forces policy makers to trade off quality for access by shortening the program day or extending

subsidies to lower quality programs. Both solutions defeat the goal of supporting high quality early education. Sometimes programs expand into readily available space, such as church basements or elementary schools with declining enrollments—facilities that usually fall far short of standards needed to support high quality programs. In the case of elementary schools, for example, the campus, building, and classrooms require investments to accommodate play-based learning,

outdoor play needs, and appropriate drop-off and pick-up arrangements.



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2 Child development & program quality

The primary reason facilities

matter is that the layout, size, materials and design features can improve program quality and contribute positively to child development.

- **Behavior** – There is a strong link between behavior and spatial design and layout. Poorly designed classrooms can frustrate children and cause outbursts or aggressive behavior, or lead to over-stimulation. On the other hand, well-designed child care space promotes a more rewarding experience for children and teachers.
- **Program Quality** – One of the most important structural indicators of quality is adequate staffing. However, in centers where teachers must leave the room frequently to accompany a child to the bathroom or get materials or supplies from storage, the effective teacher-to-child ratio drops, and, along with it, the program's quality.
- **Exploratory Learning** – Young children learn through play and by exploring and interacting with their environment. They need indoor and outdoor space that is fundamentally different from conventional elementary school classrooms and playgrounds. A variety of design considerations—such as classrooms divided into activity areas—support uninterrupted self-directed play and exploration.



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3 Workplace environment

Staff retention is one of the greatest challenges faced by early care and education programs. Better quality facilities can help foster staff retention by using teachers' time more efficiently, creating physically and psychologically comfortable workplaces, and facilitating professionally rewarding interactions with children, parents and co-workers.

- **Professional Setting** – Work with young children is physically and emotionally demanding, and teachers need time to regroup during the day and have outlets for their professional creativity and development. Centers should provide resource and break rooms where teachers can prepare classroom activities and exchange curriculum ideas.
- **Physical Conditions and Comfort** – Space that is well-designed for children with appropriately scaled furniture and equipment can also support teachers by fostering

children's independence and allowing them to safely use the bathroom, get a drink, or access play materials without adult assistance. Equally important, teachers need adult-height work-surfaces, comfortable seating and storage for personal belongings. Poor acoustics, harsh lighting, inadequate ventilation, uneven heating and cooling and other adverse conditions cause physical discomfort and contribute to stress, fatigue, and low morale.

- **Rewarding Work** – Teachers are drawn to early education because they enjoy spending time with young children and creating projects and activities for them. In poorly-designed environments time for one-on-one interactions can quickly be replaced with custodial and classroom management chores. For example, the lack of sufficient classroom space requires teachers to continually rearrange furniture to prepare for naps or meals instead of focusing on the children.

4 Parent engagement & support

Facility design and location

affect parents' willingness to enroll their children and their level of engagement in the program.

- **Location** – Programs should be located where parents will use the services: near homes, workplaces, and commuting routes.
- **Parental Perception** – Facilities need to appeal to parents who naturally want their children to attend safe, physically attractive, and well-maintained centers. These features tend to be far easier for parents to assess than other characteristics such as the quality of staff-child interactions.
- **Supportive Environment** – The physical environment can facilitate and encourage parent involvement by providing spaces for parents to help a child transition into the classroom; interact with staff and other parents; and confer privately with teachers or staff.