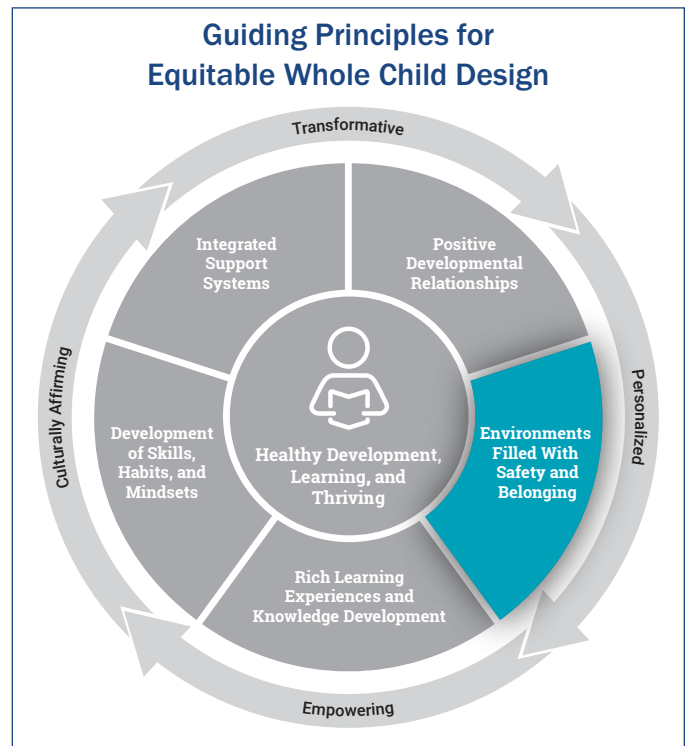


Key Takeaways: Environments Filled With Safety and Belonging

The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design show how practitioners can integrate a range of structures and practices to maximize learning and development. Among its elements are environments filled with safety and belonging, which help to buffer students from stress, provide consistency, and promote a culture of inclusion and engagement.

The contexts for development, including schools and classrooms, influence learning. The environment sets the tone through its physical features as well as how time and space are consistently used and how relationships and experiences are created. Contexts send messages about the value placed on students and staff. What is important or unimportant, what is rewarded or sanctioned, who is powerful or powerless, and who is viewed as trustworthy or untrustworthy are all communicated by the environment.

Young people are more able to learn and take risks when they feel not only physically safe with routines and order, but also emotionally and identity safe, such that they and their culture are a valued part of the community. To cultivate an environment with these features, schools can do the following:



Build a Safe and Caring Learning Environment: The brain loves order; it is calm when things are orderly and gets unsettled when it does not know what is coming next. Learning communities can intentionally implement structures and practices that reduce stress while increasing productivity, curiosity, and exploration.

These include the creation of **shared values and norms**, particularly those framed as “do’s” that guide relationships (e.g., respect, responsibility, kindness) rather than “don’ts” that direct punishments (e.g., don’t talk or move). These can take the form of codeveloped community agreements or classroom roles, which serve as part of a proactive, positive approach to classroom management that affirms each student’s value, emphasizes communal responsibility, and develops student agency. Practitioners can also establish **consistent routines** that support positive, culturally responsive interactions (e.g., daily greetings, regular community meetings, celebrations of student experiences) to create a safe and caring environment.

Develop Practices That Are Trauma-Informed and Healing-Oriented: Schools can be designed to promote wellness for all students and to provide targeted supports for students dealing with challenges when needed. In addition to providing practitioners with professional learning on the impact of trauma on student development, schools can implement:

- **healing and calming opportunities**, such as mindfulness, breathing exercises, and quiet corners, which can create a time for students to reflect, reduce stress, monitor and redirect their attention, and develop emotional awareness; and
- **trauma-informed supports**, including regular check-ins with students; empathetic responses to signals of distress; communication channels with families; access to counseling; and structures that support attachment, such as advisories, home visits, and looping, which allow school staff to know students and their families well and to get young people the support they need when they need it.

A focus on trauma alone can be stigmatizing and deficit-based and runs the risk of focusing on intervention and treatment rather than fostering the conditions that support overall well-being. Therefore, it is critical that practitioners implement healing practices that can support individuals and groups who have experienced collective harm.

Implement Restorative Practices: Restorative practices support healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing. Eliminating zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline practices is an essential step before implementing approaches such as:

- **consistent time for relationship-building and sharing**, including community circles and daily classroom meetings, which are opportunities to build trust, empathy, and connection among and between students and educators; and
- **strategies for conflict resolution**, such as restorative justice and restorative conferences, which allow students to reflect on any mistakes, facilitate empathetic communication and exchanges, and repair damage to the community with the support of trained mediators or peers.

Creating a restorative environment helps students feel safe; promotes healing; and provides the opportunity for agency that can enhance social, emotional, and academic behaviors.

Foster Inclusive, Culturally Responsive Learning Environments: Culturally responsive learning environments build on students' experiences and intentionally bring their voices and identities into the classroom. This helps to create an identity-safe and engaging atmosphere for learning and enables all students to have a sense of belonging. Structures and practices that support such efforts include:

- **culturally affirming materials and activities**, such as curriculum, community-based projects, and the use of affirmation statements, that communicate the many ways students are valued and allow for multiple modes for learning and knowledge expression;
- **inclusive learning environments**, which provide students with universal access to high-quality curricula while eliminating stigmatizing practices like tracking or other exclusionary practices that communicate differential worth and ability; and
- **inclusive and supportive extracurriculars** made available to all without screens or financial barriers, which can affirm students' identities and interests and strengthen their interpersonal skills and relationships.

Within these structures, practices should seek to dismantle stereotype threats that undermine performance. Such threats result from anxieties students may carry about how they are viewed when they are members of groups stigmatized by society on the basis of race, income, language or immigration status, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. In identity-safe and affirming classrooms, teachers avoid labeling students in ways that implicitly categorize some as worthy and others as unseen or problematic, and they find many ways to provide positive affirmations about individual and group competence.

To see the full playbook, visit <https://k12.designprinciples.org>.

