

Early Childhood Education in Public Schools

Los Angeles Unified School District's Commitment to Providing Excellence for its Youngest Learners

by Ranae Amezcua and Dean Tagawa



Ranae Amezcua is the director for the early childhood education division in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In her role, she oversees instruction, principal professional development and assists with teacher evaluation. She also serves as the district representative on the Child

Care Local Planning Commission for Los Angeles County. She was previously the principal of Brooklyn Early Education Center, the first certified Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom in Los Angeles Unified School District. She continues to support the district's Nature Explore Classrooms through board presentations, staff development and ongoing advocacy for additional funding.



Dean Tagawa is the executive director for the Early Childhood Education Division in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Over the past year, early education and transitional kindergarten programs in LAUSD have grown to over 30,000 students.

During that time, he has developed preschool inclusion programs and implemented a new curriculum with a focus on concept development and social emotional learning. Tagawa has been instrumental in building Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms for the students, making instructional technology a reality in the early education centers and has focused on bringing 13 dual language programs into the district's preschool programs.

A Commitment to Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Los Angeles Unified School District provides services through its early childhood division to thousands of children throughout Los Angeles. LAUSD understands that this undertaking must be done with a strong knowledge of why developmentally appropriate practice is so important for young children. DAP is an integral part of LAUSD's early

education program and is written into the division's belief system. All students have a right to developmentally appropriate and challenging educational programs that integrate learning opportunities with high expectations. For us, this approach to teaching is grounded in the research on how young children best develop and learn, a critical component to high-quality early education. DAP is

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built on the idea that adult interactions and learning environments are designed to meet young children where they are physically, cognitively, and socially and to move them to the next level when ready.

A Commitment to Professional Development

Because of the crucial importance of adult-child interactions in early childhood programs, LAUSD has made a strong commitment to teachers' professional development. We are building teachers who are lifelong learners and have a growth mindset. This is an important piece if we want our teachers to continually refine their practices. Professional development allows staff to share, network and remain current in the field of early childhood.

Supporting Excellence Through Natural Outdoor Classrooms

Children in our centers face many adverse childhood experiences and often come from locked apartment buildings, neighborhoods that are unsafe for outdoor play or locations that are devoid of parks. In an effort to counteract these trends, we began a partnership to build Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms throughout our centers. One criterion used to identify which early education centers would get these natural outdoor classrooms first were places that did not have access to a park within a half mile. One of the greatest gifts we, as a district, can provide to our children is to give them safe, nature-oriented, outdoor places to play where they can develop a love of nature, healthy eating and physical activity habits. In today's world many children stay indoors playing video games, watching TV, or playing with smart phones, which has resulted in an increase in childhood obesity.

In his book "Last Child in the Woods," Richard Louv writes about how family

life has changed over the last 20 years because of gaming and television. Almost 10 years later, the benefits of connecting to nature continue to be well-documented. The California Preschool Learning Foundations: Volume 2, Physical Development, outlines the importance of physical growth through play. Natural environments provide opportunities for children to become exploration scientists as they play and conduct their own experiments.

Outdoor classrooms enhance the diversity of children's learning-through-play experiences and contribute to their health and physical, cognitive, and social development. The district's certified Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms incorporate a variety of plants throughout the environment. There are areas where children can run, lie in the grass and observe insects, read under a tree, play in the mud, work in the garden, and create nature art. Each of these areas is designed to help young children connect with nature while promoting their overall development. The environment supports resilience for children as well as adults as they experience it through their senses on a daily basis. Children are engaged for longer periods of time and are not hurried as they explore and learn.

In an effort to rebuild this nature connection for the district's youngest learners, LAUSD has invested in replacing asphalt with green spaces. In many of these schools over 17,000 square feet of asphalt has been removed and rebuilt as outdoor classrooms. In Japan's famous Fuji Preschool, "There is no play equipment installed, instead the architecture itself functions as a giant playground. Children are allowed to move about freely, fall down and get wet within a safe environment. Architect Takaharu Tezuka says, "Rather than impose physical boundaries on the children, I designed the space as a continuous space that allows for unfettered learning and play."

In a similar way, the district's Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms provide spaces for children to build things and rebuild them, art areas so children can enhance their creativity, and many different science areas for them to learn about living things. The opportunities are endless and are always changing based on the interests of the children. Children take ownership of their outdoor classroom and are proud to share their accomplishments with others.

Social researcher Frances Ming Kuo summarizes various research studies that show that humans benefit from exposure to green environments (parks, forests, gardens, etc.) and conversely, people with less access to green places report more medical symptoms and poorer health overall. Researchers Samuel Dennis, University of Wisconsin and Christine Kiewra, University of Nebraska, are completing a comprehensive study (carried out with hundreds of sites across the nation) on the effectiveness of Nature Explore and Outdoor Classroom Project Outdoor Classrooms. LAUSD sites participated in this national study. Preliminary results are showing increased pro-social behavior on the part of students; positive benefits for children with special needs; increased job satisfaction on the part of teachers; support for whole-child learning; and many other benefits. The final study will be released soon.

Our goal in LAUSD is to provide outdoor classrooms where our students are learning and creating in a more relaxed atmosphere, where they are free to move around and explore at their own pace. As staff learn and develop their skills through Nature Explore workshops, and then implement them, they become excited and rejuvenated when they see the impact outdoor learning has on student learning. Not only are the students and their families excited about their learning, so are the teachers. The outdoor classroom has reignited our



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teachers' passion for early childhood education.

How Does the Outdoor Classroom Support DAP?

Children's time in the natural outdoor classrooms means we are raising students who have strong social skills, are confident in their ability to take risks, are self-confident and want to help others. For example, as younger children observe older children walking across the balance beam, the young ones are eager to try it. As a young student takes the first tentative step, an older child quickly takes them by the hand and begins to help by encouraging them and explaining how they should walk. This is a positive experience for both children as one learns a new skill and one provides support. Both children finish with huge smiles on their faces! These kinds of experiences also support the development of relationships as the children who work together become best friends and frequently seek each other out. Hearing young children say, "I did it" is rewarding for all of us. Our outdoor environments offer achievable challenges

for our children. They take safe risks and get the support they want while engaging in self-initiated activities.

In natural settings, young children move from competition games like tag and racing where there are ultimately winners and losers, to activities that build cooperation. In our outdoor classrooms, the conversation becomes one of inclusion and wonder. Children are often heard saying, "Come and see this," or "Let's go build!" Fostering cooperation and sharing is a crucial step for young children as these are skills that transfer into adulthood.

To a school, those principals who have a Nature Explore Classroom will tell you they have fewer injuries and incidents because children are working together and have free choice of areas to learn and play in. They will also tell you that both staff and children are more relaxed in the outdoor environment. Staff often go outside and relax/meditate during their lunch because of the peacefulness.

Our outdoor classrooms bring out the innate scientist in every child as they

discover new sights, sounds, and smells. Children in natural environments begin to question how things grow, are put together, or designed. What they ultimately learn is a love of learning.

A Commitment to Empowering Staff

Our commitment to empowering staff is actually part of a triple track agenda for LAUSD as we seek to empower staff, parents, and children together. Our work with the natural outdoor classrooms helps us meet this agenda. Students gain executive function skills such as decision-making and problem-solving that they will use for the rest of their lives. Staff are relaxed and enjoy their time in the outdoor classroom as they are given autonomy to support all children in the way that is best for their individual development. Parents become advocates for their children as they are able to freely engage in the outdoor classroom without being fearful of not knowing what to do. In the indoor classroom, many parents are uncomfortable because they are not educators, but outside play is second nature and they are comfortable. The children are enthusiastic about showing their parents what they have accomplished.

LAUSD's Connection to the Community

Nationally, LAUSD is setting an example for other urban school districts as it

focuses on the development of the whole child in the outdoor classroom. The district’s commitment to providing green spaces for children, and our recognition of how they support high-quality experiences for children, is encouraging others to do the same.

On a state level, we are providing an example of the importance of early education opportunities that help children understand nature. This is critical in a place like California that has a diversity of micro-climates, from mountains to deserts. LAUSD is supporting the development of children who will be stewards for their environment.

In our local neighborhoods, not only are we making sure our children have green and natural spaces to play and learn in, we are also making sure local neighborhood families have a beautiful place that their children can use. Our local city council members are embracing the idea of Nature Explore Classrooms as good for neighborhoods. We welcome neighborhood involvement with our school. We are helping families support their children in developing healthy choices. This bodes well for the next generation of LAUSD students.

A Commitment to an Indoor-Outdoor Connection

Over the years, we have also worked very hard to create indoor spaces that build upon the principles in the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. Our commitment to quality spaces both

indoors and outdoors can be found in all of the classrooms across the district. We recognize that even with strong efforts, indoor spaces can often feel constrained or limited to a child. Some children may feel less freedom in the indoor classroom. So, the benefit of more space outdoors through our Nature Explore Classrooms is that children can expand their physical play and creative learning possibilities. Making connections between indoor and outdoor learning experiences means children are able to experience more creative freedom in less-constrained spaces. It is because of this and the needs of our children that these outdoor classrooms are a priority for our district.

While our children do certainly face many challenges in today’s world, we know we are providing them with opportunities to build their resilience, creativity and love of learning in a natural and effective way. We understand the importance of what happens in the early years, and we are determined to provide an excellent foundation for students to build on for the rest of their lives.



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