MAKING THE CASE FOR
Ideal Learning
IN COLORADO

EARLY **MILESTONES**
COLORADO

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Introduction

Ideal Learning, also referred to as whole child or student-centered learning, is an approach that focuses on all aspects of a young child's development, including physical, academic, and social-emotional growth.[†]

Pressure on public educators and administrators to increase third grade math and literacy test scores has led to more teacher-directed, rote instruction with children as young as four years old.[1] This brief connects child development theory and research with the Principles of Ideal Learning. Grounded in research on child development, these principles offer guidance for effective, developmentally appropriate education that encourages student-initiated exploration within engaging learning environments.

The first five years are a time of rapid brain development and lay the foundation for all future learning.[2,3] Genetics is an important factor in each child's brain development; and supportive relationships, quality experiences, and enriched environments also play a major role in healthy physical, cognitive, and social-emotional growth.[4] Quality early learning also leads to reductions in special education placement and grade retention, as well as other positive long-term outcomes.[5,6]

[†] Many terms are used to describe this approach to early education. For simplicity, we use *Ideal Learning*, a term promoted by the Trust for Learning.

PRINCIPLES OF IDEAL LEARNING [7]

Developed by early childhood experts in the Ideal Learning Roundtable

- Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity.

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

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

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

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

- Young children and adults learn through relationships.

- The environment is intentionally designed to facilitate children's exploration, independence, and interaction.

- The time of childhood is valued.

- Continuous learning environments support adult development.

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THE VALUE OF IDEAL LEARNING IN EARLY EDUCATION

Effective learning approaches in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and early elementary settings are critical to children's success in school and in life. Some early learning settings are loosely structured with ample opportunities for play, yet children lack active adult support and engaging experiences that promote growth. On the other hand, highly structured settings that use a top-down approach through direct instruction often employ a "skill and drill" mindset, offering little to no opportunities for child-initiated activities or play.

Academics, social interactions, and play should not be at odds with each other.[8] When combined, they offer the best chances for children to reach their full potential.[9] Ideal Learning supports whole child development through age-appropriate instruction and offers a more balanced approach with opportunities for children to explore through play and engage in social interactions as educators guide learning with rich, experiential activities **(see Figure 1)**.

Research also suggests that learning environments implementing Ideal Learning models have a positive impact on equity and opportunity gaps in early education.[10,11,12]

Many early childhood education approaches are used in Colorado and adhere to the Principles of Ideal Learning, including:
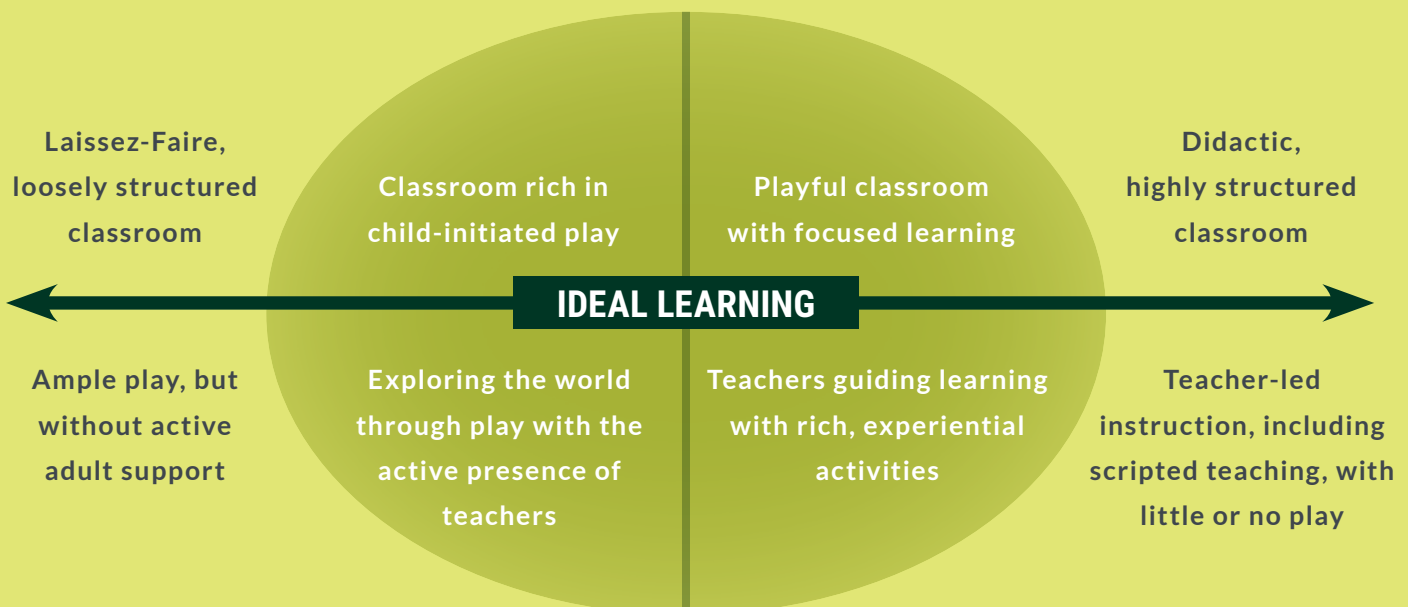
- EL Education
- HighScope
- Montessori
- Reggio Emilia
- Tools of the Mind

$13
return for every $1 invested in quality early learning [13]

FIGURE 1: INSTRUCTIONAL CONTINUUM

Laissez-Faire, loosely structured classroom

Classroom rich in child-initiated play

Playful classroom with focused learning

Didactic, highly structured classroom

IDEAL LEARNING

Ample play, but without active adult support

Exploring the world through play with the active presence of teachers

Teachers guiding learning with rich, experiential activities

Teacher-led instruction, including scripted teaching, with little or no play

Principles of Ideal Learning

The first six Principles of Ideal Learning focus on the experience of young children in the learning environment with educators and peers. The final three principles apply more broadly to practice and program administration.

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

In Ideal Learning programs, children engage in continuous exploration with their hands, minds, and bodies.[14] They test theories and solve problems with peers and educators.[15] Child development theory emphasizes children as active learners, constructing their own understandings instead of passively reproducing what is presented to them.[16,17] As children interact with their environment, they build knowledge and adapt to new information and experiences.[18] Programs that utilize a balance of child-initiated and skill-focused activities lead to better language and literacy outcomes, compared to those that rely on direct instruction.[19] When teachers serve as a guide, rather than providing direct instruction, children show better interpersonal skills and negotiation strategies.[20]

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

Ideal Learning programs prioritize time for child-initiated and teacher-guided play.[21] Play is essential for children's healthy brain development.[22,23] Key theories of development emphasize that children interact, explore, and learn about the world around them through play.[24,25] Play promotes the development of memory, social skills, oral language, and academic success.[26] Play encourages the core concepts of scientific inquiry and creativity. [27,28,29]

ORGANIZATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF IDEAL LEARNING

To make meaning of the world, children construct knowledge through diverse experiences, including:

Child-initiated and teacher-guided exploratory play, both independently and in small groups

Relationships with the caregivers, peers, and early educators in their lives

Personalized instruction and learning experiences tailored to their developmental abilities and needs

Therefore, to support children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical well-being; early educators serve as a guide, nurturing presence, and co-constructor of knowledge to curate equitable early learning environments that facilitate children's:

Exploration and learning through play, both independently and with peers

Social interactions with peers and educators

Independence and self-agency

Young children and adults learn through relationships.

Educators in Ideal Learning programs develop a relationship with each child to help them feel seen, known, and acknowledged.[30] They also partner with each family to build trust and better understand the child's lived experiences and existing knowledge.[31] These responsive, caring, and stable relationships with adults, both within and outside the home, are critical to healthy brain development and lay the foundation for success in school and in life.[32] Children who have positive relationships with educators tend to be more self-confident and excited about learning, and ultimately achieve more in the classroom.[33] Classrooms designed so that peers can interact, read books, and engage in play together appear to generate greater language and literacy growth.[34]

Instruction is personalized to acknowledge each child's development and abilities.

All children are born with an innate drive to learn and master their environments.[35] However, each child's developmental path is unique and influenced by biology, early experiences, relationships, and environments.[36] Ideal Learning educators work to understand where each child is on this path and tailor instruction to the child's unique needs.[37] Educators also personalize interactions to each child's behavior, personality traits, strengths, abilities, and interests.[38] Students who receive personalized instruction show greater gains in math and reading standardized tests when compared to peers in direct instruction classrooms.[39]

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

Ideal Learning educators continuously adjust and refine instruction based on strong student-educator relationships, their deep understanding of child development, and observation.[40] Cognitive growth is encouraged by providing children with responsive and nurturing emotional support.[41] This support is essential to the engagement necessary for young children to benefit from learning opportunities.[42] Secure educator-student relationships enable children to approach learning with confidence and a positive mindset.[43] Quality relationships have a significant impact on a child's classroom success. Students who experienced positive relationships with educators from preschool to third grade demonstrate higher achievement.[44,45]

> ## The environment is intentionally designed to facilitate children's exploration, independence, and interaction.

A child's developing brain is especially vulnerable to the impacts of physical and social environments.[46] Ideal Learning environments stimulate and encourage each child's ideas, questions, and emotions.[47] Educators create spaces with a range of materials that are organized, engaging, and accessible.[48] Children in the care of foster families showed greater gains in cognitive function compared to those in sterile institutional environments, underscoring the significance of environments on cognitive development.[49] Few studies show the educational effects of an enriched physical environment on a child's learning and development due to the difficulty in isolating this variable. An intentionally organized, aesthetically-pleasing learning environment offers stability and consistency that can encourage young children's independent exploration of learning materials, evoke interest in learning, and allow for children's choice in learning topics.[50] Peer-to-peer interaction, an important part of the learning environment, has been positively associated with cognitive, literacy, and expressive language skills.[51]

> ## The time of childhood is valued.
> ## Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity.
> ## Continuous learning environments support adult development.

The final three principles of Ideal Learning motivate decision-making that prioritizes equitable access to quality early learning and the importance of teacher training and professional development. The large evidence base concerning rapid brain development and sensitive periods demonstrates the importance of the early years, which impact future success in the classroom and in life. A guiding premise of Ideal Learning asserts that all children, regardless of background, have an innate potential to thrive.[52] Within Ideal Learning programs, decision-making prioritizes equity, and resources are targeted based on the unique needs of each child.[53] Because educators play such a critical role in children's learning outcomes, Ideal Learning invests in and supports educators' ongoing professional development.[54]

Conclusion

The recent passage of Proposition EE, a nicotine and vaping tax that will fund universal preschool beginning in 2023, presents an opportunity to improve equitable access to preschool for all children in Colorado. Expanding quality early learning will ensure this significant investment is fully maximized, giving children the best start to develop to their full potential. Grounded in the science of child development, the Principles of Ideal Learning offer a practical roadmap to quality, ensuring that all children benefit from supportive, whole child, and student-centered learning environments.

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