OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

NEW TEACHER CENTER

Definition

Effective, standards-aligned teaching and learning are only possible when an Optimal Learning Environment is in place. In Optimal Learning Environments, instruction addresses the needs of every learner with ever-present attention to equity and continuous academic, social, and emotional growth. Educators prioritize knowing their students, have deep understanding of the content they teach, and collaborate with each other regularly to maximize student success.

Optimal Learning Environments are based on the belief that every student can achieve high expectations. Instruction is strengths-based, culturally responsive, and personalized to ensure students meet the demands of grade-appropriate standards. Kind, caring, and respectful relationships among adults and students cultivate a sense of belonging and identity, and the social and emotional elements of learning are understood to be integral to academic success and personal well-being.

Optimal Learning Environments are supported by a positive, instructionally focused school climate and provide intellectually and emotionally safe, engaging classroom communities that are personalized and co-constructed by students and adults to support the success of each and every learner.

Domains

Create Emotionally, Intellectually, and Physically Safe Environments	Implement Equitable, Culturally Responsive, and Standards-Aligned Curriculum and Instruction	Meet the Diverse Needs of Every Learner

Characteristics

• Create positive **relationships** that are kind, caring, and respectful	• Provide **relevant, challenging content aligned to grade-level standards** through curriculum that is adapted and supplemented, if necessary	• Leverage **individual strengths** to support academic, social, and emotional growth
• Nurture **self-awareness, identity development,** and **sense of purpose**	• Create an inclusive community where all aspects of **diversity and learner variability** are understood, expected, and welcomed	• Create **multiple pathways** to learn and demonstrate learning
• Emphasize **effort, supported risk-taking,** and strategies for academic, social, and emotional **growth**	• Engage learners in **productive struggle** to support **perseverance** and **agency** for meeting high expectations of grade-level standards	• Promote **learner agency** with immediate, goal-oriented **feedback** and opportunities for **self-directed learning**
• Support **safe and engaged interactions** with co-created procedures, routines, and classroom design	• Foster **cultural competence** and curiosity to seek others' perspectives	• **Scaffold instruction** for every learner to meet expectations of the standards through practices such as **modeling, strategic grouping, sequenced questioning, timely feedback,** and **practice opportunities**
• Encourage developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant strategies for **expression of emotions** and **conflict resolution**	• Facilitate expression of **reasoned, evidence-based arguments, thoughts, and ideas**	

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Glossary

Cultural Competence
Awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families
(Source: National Education Association)

Culturally Responsive Teaching
Process of using cultural information and brain-based processes to encourage academic mindsets and nurture independent learners; involves commitment to:
- develop self-awareness and examine cultural frames, implicit biases, and assumptions to address systemic barriers to learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students
- build safe and engaging, relationship-based classroom communities
- use information processing protocols and offer authentic challenges and honest, actionable feedback
- provide cognitive scaffolding and metacognitive reflection opportunities

(Adapted from: Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain)

Identity Development
Process of "internally integrating various aspects of the self (e.g., beliefs, values, goals, roles, experiences) to create a stable and consistent sense of one's 'wholeness'"
(Source: Foundations for Young Adult Success, p. 22)

Learner Agency/Self-Directed Learning
Empowerment of learners to take control/active ownership of learning; built on knowledge of strengths, identification of learning gaps, belief that change can occur with deliberate action; involves self-awareness, self-management, self-monitoring, choice and voice in how to engage and express learning, critical thinking, metacognition, responsible decision-making, goal-setting, problem-solving

Learner Variability
Approach to instruction based in cognitive science findings that there are no "average learners"; 100% of individuals have different ways to learn

Multiple Pathways
Use of instructional materials and strategies to proactively address barriers and support learning that incorporates a variety of methods to:
- **engage** students (provide choice, align with student interests) and promote ability to monitor their own learning (goal-setting, self-assessment, reflection)
- **represent** information/content to anticipate student needs and preferences
- **express and demonstrate** understanding

(Adapted from: udl-irn.org)

Personalized Instruction/ Personalized Communities
Instruction and classrooms intentionally designed to support learner strengths and academic, social, and emotional needs based on knowledge and understanding of student culture, learning differences, preferences, values; students have choice in how to pursue/demonstrate learning

Productive Struggle
Effort and use of strategies to engage and persist with challenging content; should:
- lead to understanding/results
- make learning feel attainable and effort seem worthwhile
- promote student empowerment and agency, sense of hope, development of higher order academic skills, and independent learning

Scaffolding
Providing temporary supports and steps to allow every learner to access and succeed with grade-level standards and expectations; includes guidance and feedback on smaller, manageable tasks as students move toward proficiency

Self-Awareness
Sense of knowing and understanding what one is experiencing, including feelings, thoughts, needs, behaviors, values, judgments, and biases

Sequenced Questioning
Intentional questioning to support gradual understanding that first focuses on specific phrases and language and connects to prior learning to support basic comprehension and develop student confidence before moving on to more challenging concepts

Standards-Aligned
What is taught (content and academic, social, and emotional skills) and how it is taught (instructional practice, materials, assessment) are grounded in the cognitive demands and key shifts of high-quality, grade-appropriate, college and career ready standards