

Optimal Learning Environment

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 academic excellence and joyful learning. Educators prioritize knowing their students, have deep understanding of the content they teach, and collaborate regularly to maximize student success. Optimal Learning Environments are based on the belief that instruction should be strengths-based, student-centered, and rigorous to ensure students meet the demands of grade-level standards. Kind and caring relationships among adults and students cultivate a sense of community and serve as springboards for learning. 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 every learner.		
Domains	 Foster a Supportive and Intellectually Rich Environment	 Engage and Support Every Learner	 Facilitate Effective Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
Characteristics	• Co-create a joyful and engaged learning community through shared agreements, routines, and collaborative learning practices. • Facilitate developmentally appropriate practices that support a healthy expression of emotions. • Nurture self-awareness, academic excellence, and sense of community through intellectual preparation of content and pedagogy. • Cultivate relationships that support intellectual risk-taking and meaningful discourse. • Foster academic persistence through learning experiences worthy of students' time, attention, and effort.	• Support cognitive and affective growth by building on students' strengths, experiences, and knowledge. • Cultivate learner agency through practices that support choice, interests, and self-advocacy. • Promote confidence through meaningful goal-setting, feedback, reflection, and refinement. • Differentiate instructional practices and implement appropriate accommodations and/or modifications that are responsive to students' strengths, abilities, and needs. • Create multiple pathways to learn and demonstrate learning using a variety of materials and tools.	• Provide instruction that is aligned to grade-level standards through curriculum and assessments that are adapted and supplemented. • Use grade-level standards to create learning experiences that foster inquiry, collaboration, and productive struggle. • Design meaningful, engaging, and intellectually challenging tasks by leveraging students' zones of proximal development. • Plan opportunities for students to learn about themselves, others, and the world. • Facilitate opportunities for students to engage in discourse to express and extend thoughts, ideas, and arguments.



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Glossary



Accommodation

A change in how a student learns content or participates in assessments while meeting learning objectives and grade-level expectations. An accommodation may be outlined in a legally binding Individualized Education Plan, 504 Plan, or other specialized learning plan.



Affective Growth

The development of one's ability to process, regulate, and express feelings, emotions, and attitudes.



Cognitive Growth

The development of one's ability to acquire knowledge, reason, think critically, problem-solve, and understand concepts and ideas.



Learner Agency

The capacity to actively participate in making choices in service of learning goals. Learning environments that support learner agency are purposeful, reflective, resourceful, authentic, strategic, and action-oriented (adapted from cast.org).



Intellectual Preparation

The process of internalizing content knowledge and drawing upon students' strengths and experiences to intentionally plan meaningful learning for every learner.



Modification

An adjustment to expectations, content, assessments, or the grading scale as outlined in a legally binding Individualized Education Plan, 504 Plan, or other specialized learning plan that allows a student to participate meaningfully in instruction.



Multiple Pathways

Use of instructional materials and strategies to productively address barriers and support learning that incorporates a variety of methods to:

- engage students (provide choice, align with students' 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 cast.org)



Productive Struggle

Effort and use of strategies to engage and persist with challenging content; productive struggle 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



Self-Awareness

Sense of knowing and understanding what one is experiencing, including feelings, thoughts, needs, behaviors, values, and preferences.



Standards-Aligned

What is taught and how it is taught are grounded in the cognitive demands of high-quality, grade-appropriate, college and career ready standards.



Zone of Proximal Development

The space beyond a learner's current capabilities and understandings, between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with support. Researchers have expanded on the range of interactions that can support learners' potential development to include adult guidance, collaboration with peers, and/or on their own using learning strategies, resources, and internalized scaffolds (Walqui, 2006). This notion applies to all learning and is especially critical when designing instruction for students who identify as multilingual and neurodiverse.

References:

Walqui, A. (2006). Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(2), 159–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050608668639>