



Preschool Facilities: Are States Providing Adequate Guidance?

By Dennis R. Lea, Ed.D., and Patty Poppe Polster

The preschool facility is a critical element of an effective preschool program. Yet according to Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, “Little attention is paid to the role facilities play in shaping high-quality preschool programs” (NIEER 2007).

The recent economic downturn in the United States makes it difficult for states and individual school districts to consider developing new preschool programs or enhancing current programs or facilities.

According to an NIEER report, “Even states that have not announced cuts to pre-K are considering contingency plans for enrollment cuts, reductions in program standards, and postponing plans for expansion” (Barnett

and others 2008, p. 9). Yet many Americans still agree that public investment in preschool education is important to our nation’s economic well-being.

In that comprehensive report, Barnett and others cite the following national statistics regarding preschool education:

- Twenty-four percent of all four-year-olds attended a state preschool program.
- Thirty-nine percent of all four-year-olds were enrolled in some type of public program (state preschool, Head Start, or special-education programs).
- Thirty-eight states provided some type of public preschool opportunity for four-year-olds, whereas 12 states had no regular state preschool education program.

- One state (Oklahoma) provided a preschool opportunity for virtually all the state's four-year-olds.
- Four percent of three-year-olds attended a state preschool program.
- Fourteen percent of three-year-olds attended some type of public program (state preschool, Head Start, or special-education programs).

In 2007, NIEER published a policy brief devoted to the topic of preschool facilities (Sussman and Gillman 2007). The authors commented, “States are increasingly taking responsibility for addressing the need for high-quality early education programs—now engineering policies for blending funding streams . . . and setting quality standards” (p. 2).

When it comes to facility planning, the golden rule is *Form Follows Function*.

In one state, the impetus for developing preschool facility recommendations came in the form of a state supreme court decision. In *Abbott v. Burke* (1998), the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the state to provide adequate preschool facilities in certain disadvantaged districts.

As a result of this ruling, the New Jersey Department of Education requested that an early childhood committee be formed to address the issue of early childhood facility standards. The state developed two goals for the process: (1) provide guidance to school districts and community providers in constructing and renovating preschool facilities that will ensure a quality learning environment and (2) provide architects and facility planners with maximum flexibility in meeting the educational needs of each district's three- and four-year-old children.

The committee developed recommendations for New Jersey school districts that covered the following areas: preschool buildings (new and renovated), preschool classrooms, classroom environment, administration and support rooms, entrance/exits and security, outdoor play areas, and health (Education Law Center 2004).

The State of Preschool Guidelines

Given the importance of preschool education and the physical environment that is necessary for its successful implementation, the authors reviewed all 50 states' department of education Websites for documents related to facility planning or construction. An analysis of that work indicates that decision makers should be familiar not only with the state facility planning or construction document(s) but also, in many cases, with state early childhood learning standards documents.

At press time, 31 states had documents specifically related to school facility planning or construction (see table). Only North Carolina has a document exclusively focused on early childhood facilities (Public Schools of North Carolina 1998). Some documents make no mention of early childhood environments, whereas others, such as Ohio's, address specific topics, such as program activities, spatial relationships, environmental considerations, finishes, features, and loose furnishings (Ohio School Facilities Commission 2008). The Ohio document also includes a sample classroom layout diagram.

The majority of the state facility documents merely mention preschool in reference to some specific standard (e.g., square footage). The most often addressed topics are classroom square footage minimums; playground space requirements; and restroom, window, and exit requirements.

As previously mentioned, some fairly specific requirements for preschool environments could be found embedded in state early childhood program documents. Louisiana's *Prekindergarten Program Guidelines* (forthcoming, p. 16), for example, specify square footage requirements and call for “space set aside for children to play alone or with a friend, protected from intrusion from other children.”

Similarly, some states outline facility-related requirements in specific early childhood grant program documents. In some of the preschool program documents, the information most relevant to facility planning is readily identified. For example, the *Illinois Preschool for All Implementation Manual* (Illinois State Board of Education 2009) includes a section titled “Environment” and outlines minimum square feet per child, as well as room arrangement guidelines.

However, in some documents, relevant information is not as readily located because it is embedded within a discussion of curricular program requirements. For example, Mississippi's *Early Learning Guidelines* (2006, p. 7) state that “instructional delivery should be organized around learning centers and responsive interactions among children and adults.”

Form and Function

When it comes to facility planning, the golden rule is *Form Follows Function*. Simply put, the facility design must reflect the instructional approach that has been selected by the community. This understanding is what makes the early childhood standards documents discussed earlier all the more important. In planning an early childhood facility, one must be familiar not only with the *facility* standards or guidelines of the state, but also any *curricular* standards or guidelines, as they will affect the facility planning process.

Many states offer some form of guidance related to preschool facilities. However, those states provide research-based guidance specifically related to preschool

AVAILABLE STATE FACILITY CONSTRUCTION/PLANNING DOCUMENTS

State	Document Title
Arkansas	Arkansas School Facility Manual
Colorado	Colorado Public School Facility Construction Guide
Delaware	State of Delaware School Construction Technical Assistance Manual
Florida	State Requirements for Educational Facilities
Georgia	General Criteria for Public School Construction
Hawaii	Hawaii High Performance School Guidelines
Illinois	Illinois Resource Guide for Healthy, High Performing School Buildings
Indiana	State Board Construction Guide
Kansas	Kansas State Department of Education School Construction Project and Plan Submittal Guide
Kentucky	Kentucky School Facilities Planning Manual
Maine	Public School Standards and Guidelines for New School Construction and Major Renovation Projects
Maryland	Facility Guidelines for General Classroom Design
Massachusetts	Educational Program Space Standards and Guidelines
Minnesota	Guide for Planning School Construction Projects in Minnesota
Mississippi	School Design Guidelines
Missouri	Recommendations Made by Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education School Building Services
Nebraska	Title 92 Nebraska Department of Education, Chapter 11 Regulations for Early Childhood Education Programs
New Hampshire	Manual for Planning and Construction of School Buildings
New Jersey	Facilities: New Construction and Renovation Guide
New Mexico	Funding, Building and Maintaining Schools in New Mexico
New York	New York Manual of Planning Standards
North Carolina	Early Childhood Education Facilities Planner
Ohio	Ohio School Design Manual
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Department of Education School Construction Regulations
South Carolina	South Carolina School Facilities Planning and Construction Guide
Texas	Commissioner’s Rules Concerning School Facilities
Utah	Resource Manual (on Facilities and Safety Website)
Vermont	Vermont School Construction Planning Guide
Washington	School Facilities Manual for the School Construction Assistance Program
West Virginia	School Building Authority of West Virginia Quality and Performance Standards
Wyoming	Wyoming Public Schools Facility Design Guidelines

learning environments. Preschools, for the most part, need only meet minimum local or state standards that are generally items related to health and life safety and minimum square footage requirements for indoor and outdoor areas.

The development and enhancement of preschool facilities and programs state by state may be the most important educational change for the future success of our nation and its children.

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