Outdoor Learning Environment Pilot Project (OLE PP)

Community Connections for Children is introducing an Outdoor Learning Environment Pilot Project (OLE PP) to support child care programs in enhancing their outdoor learning environments and nature-based early childhood education (NbECE) practices.

This pilot project is open to child care programs within Early Learning Resource Centers 8, 9, and 10 through an application process.

Please read all of the following information before applying.

Timeline

- **Applications** will be accepted through midnight, **Monday, October 30, 2023.**
- Application finalists may be invited to a virtual meeting between November 5th - 13th to gather more information.
- **Notifications** will be sent during the week of **November 20, 2023.**

About Community Connections for Children

Community Connections for Children supports families in finding and paying for quality childcare and provides resources, training, and on-site technical assistance to help all types of early childhood education providers improve their programs to ensure that every child is successful in school and life.

Project Description

Given the evidence that supports the vast benefits that nature play has on children's health and wellbeing, the Outdoor Learning Environment Pilot Project (OLE PP) aims to expand the quantity and quality of nature play for children within childcare settings through landscape architect design services and nature-based early childhood education (NbECE) professional development.

This pilot project is based on the following values:

- Young children thrive and their minds and bodies develop best when they have free access to stimulating outdoor environments for learning through play and real experiences.
- Connecting to the natural world is a fundamental human need essential to the well-being of children and the adults who care for them.
- All children have the right to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors.
- Knowledgeable and enthusiastic adults are crucial to unlocking the potential of outdoors.

What is an Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE)?

An Outdoor Learning Environment promotes healthy, nature-based play and hands-on, discovery-based learning at early childcare and education (ECE) programs. A well-designed, rich and diverse Outdoor Learning Environment builds upon what is possible on a playground and includes natural design elements such as vegetable gardens, fruit trees, looping pathways, grasses, and other free choice activity stations that more fully support child development, food awareness, and nature connection.

Photo credit: OLE! Texas

Photo credit: Natural Learning Initiative, NC State

Project Details

Community Connections for Children recognizes that each site and child care program is unique, and planning will vary to meet each location's specific needs. The anticipated project timeline for conceptual design and planning and nature-based ECE professional development is 6-9 months.

Funding, installation of OLE features, and implementation of nature play practices require additional time and are the responsibility of the child care program.

The OLE Pilot Program will provide technical services including:

- Background research and site analysis that identifies assets and challenges for nature play.
- Site visit and meetings, in person and virtual.
- Conceptual designs of Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE) options ranging from a DIY approach to complete site transformations.
- Follow up meetings to co-create design iterations in response to stakeholder feedback.
- Site-Specific Master Plan and an Action Plan to guide next steps.
- Whole-staff professional development in nature-based early childhood education (NbECE), including best practices for designing, using, and maintaining an outdoor learning environment.

What the OLE Pilot Project *IS:*

- An opportunity to reconsider the potential of your current outdoor space to support broader child development and a nature based ECE approach.
- Technical service to create a master plan for future site improvements.
- An opportunity to receive professional development and coaching around nature-based ECE, including child-led play and best practices systems understanding.

What the OLE Pilot Project is *NOT*:

- A way to address backlogged maintenance or pre-existing damage in your playground.
- A landscape service.
- Funding for installation, implementation or ongoing maintenance of your outdoor learning environment. Success with these follow-up steps is dependent on the capacity, motivation and resources of the ECE program.
- Indoor classroom support (this can be provided separately through STARS Technical Assistance Coaching if interested).

Photo credit: Natural Learning Initiative, NC State

What your organization needs in order to participate:

- A belief that time in nature is essential to children's health and well-being.
- A commitment to re-think your outdoor space, how children use it, and the amount of time children spend outside.
- A commitment to increase the number and quality of Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE) features in your outdoor play space.
- A commitment to participate in professional development to incorporate nature play best practices.
- A willingness of teachers and caregivers to take children outside daily, in all seasons, as long as the weather is not dangerous.
- A willingness and commitment to educate the families you serve and secure their buy in regarding the importance of OLEs and NbECE.
- A commitment to engage in collaborative, program-led participation including ECE staff, families, and community stakeholders about the best practices for designing, using and maintaining an outdoor learning environment.
- A willingness to use your OLE as a demonstration site to inspire and educate other ECE professionals.
- A commitment to implement the OLE master plan (conceptual design + best practices).
- A completed application.

Notes:

- Even if you think little can be done to improve your outdoor space, we encourage any program within ELRC 8, 9 or 10 to apply.
- For questions about the Outdoor Learning Environment Pilot Project or the application process, please email Elizabeth Marcello at emarcello@cccforpa.org.

Early Learning Resource Center

pennsylvania

CLICK HERE TO APPLY

Community Connections for Children