

DEVELOPING A PROPOSAL PLAN TO CREATE NATURE BASED  
CLASSROOMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS TO SUPPORT INQUIRY  
LEARNING

by

Alaina Dee Zapata

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Capstone Project Facilitator: Maggie Struck  
Content Reviewer: Liz Denn

## **Project Introduction**

The following is a written proposal to create a nature-based classroom at an Early Childhood Center to answer the question: *How can a nature-based setting support inquiry learning in early childhood education?* The final product is a researched proposal to the school leadership team to transform the existing courtyard on the north side of community center. The space has had multiple purposes over the years, but when students and staff returned to in-person learning following the shut down due to the pandemic, it was used as a classroom space for students to safely attend school. Since then, the courtyard has been slowly emerging into a nature- based classroom to support preschool students' learning.

## **Project Summary**

The practices defined in environmental education reflect the lens I look through to guide my teaching. Many of the preschool lessons and standards I have developed revolve around the idea of utilizing a nature element. Now that my school has adopted Creative Curriculum, a completely inquiry-based curriculum, I have found myself seeking ways to implement the studies in our outdoor courtyard learning space. In my experience, four- and five-year-old students prefer a learning environment that is experiential in an outdoor setting rather than indoors. It is this answer- seeking mindset creating in early learners and current school practices that have inspired my research question: *How can a nature-based setting support inquiry learning in early childhood education?* Using this question as my guide in research, I will be creating a proposal to the school leadership team to transform our small, cement- filled, outdoor space, into a nature-based classroom for the Edina Early Learning Center students to use.

## **Rationale**

This capstone project proposal will be centered around the positive impact this space can make on the educational experience for our youngest learners and how we can transform this space into a fully functional nature classroom within the borders of the Edina Community Center, a secret place that students can learn, grow, explore, create, and play. This project would provide all the students at the Edina Early Learning Center access to nature-based learning. This access will expand to learning and understanding about the environment, developing a recognition of the world around them, how they relate to it, and how they can preserve it at the earliest age. I do believe that the global environment challenges we face today and those to come will only be resolved with the development of a generation who has a deep desire to care for that which surrounds them. And one way forward is through an education that grows within the spirit and soul a love for nature.

I used this as an opportunity to integrate my work into the studies developed in Creative Curriculum. I took a step back and rearranged my thinking. How can our outdoor setting and nature-based learning work together with our inquiry-based resources through Creative Curriculum? Looking at it with this lens made the process less forced and more open for interpretation. Creative Curriculum offered an ideal platform to advocate for this space. Lessons to encourage students to display their large motor development, cognitive and language skills, and literacy and math competencies are a significant piece of each study. Currently teachers are utilizing the indoor gym or a small grassy area next to the parking lot that has many safety concerns to consider. Providing an outdoor motor space for early childhood educators to teach these components of the

curriculum in would be not only a safer option but equally beneficial for students getting more exposed to a nature-based setting.

### **Project Overview**

This proposal plan will be in a presentation format with a PowerPoint and include printable handouts for presentation participants. The intended audience for this presentation is the school directors, including general education and early childhood special education, the community education director, the parent advisory committee members, and team leads. This is a flexible list of audience members. If there is opportunity or interest in a larger group, that can also be accommodated. Overall, the presentation length will be between 20-45 minutes, depending on the number of questions asked. This presentation can be given in a variety of settings, ideally, close the courtyard so we can take a walking tour of the space following the presentation to give the audience a hands-on experience of the space before making any decisions.

The presentation will begin with the rationale for the project and an overview of the current space and how it is being utilized. Next, a section to convey the benefits for students and staff. To follow, will be a proposed layout plan. This section of the presentation will include the budget and material breakdown. Materials have been selected based on quality, weather proofness and if it will meet an educational need. There are two blueprints included in the presentation and will also be included on the handout for a closer visual. Blueprint One will display the current courtyard configuration. The materials that are currently in the courtyard classroom are donated or hand-crafted items. Blueprint Two will be the proposed layout that includes the pre-researched materials as part of the design. To conclude, there is a budget for the supplies.

The budget is broken down into color-coded categories based on priority depending on the amount of funds we are able to obtain. To conclude, there is also a list of potential grant opportunities to help fund this project, both community-based grant programs and statewide grant programs. The state grant opportunities offer specifically funds for Nature Based Learning, which differ from the community-based grants. The grants chosen that have been previously researched are not available to apply for until summer. These local community grants are organized through Edina Public Schools and offer funds for various projects around the district, all with the school mission in mind. It also has been noted on this slide the grants that have already been applied to and waiting on a response.

The end of the presentation is intended to ask questions. Ideally, I would like to take the audience to the courtyard and have questions asked in the space. Each participant will have a blueprint of the current layout and the proposed layout, including the materials to transform it. I would be able to physically show the group where items could be placed, what areas need improvement, and how, with their assistance, can make this space a fully functional nature-based program for the students at the Edina Early learning center.

# The Project

## PowerPoint Presentation Slides



### Vision

The vision for this project is centered around the positive impact this space can make on the educational experience for our youngest learners and how we can transform it into a fully functional nature classroom within the borders of the Edina Community Center.

### Benefits for Students

This access will expand to learning and understanding about the environment, developing a recognition of the world around them, how they relate to it, and how they can preserve it at the earliest age. I do believe that the global environment challenges we face today and those to come will only be resolved with the development of a generation who has a deep desire to care for that which surrounds them.

### Current Courtyard Configuration

### Courtyard Proposal

Using new and existing materials, the proposal outlines what could be done to transform this courtyard space to make it a functioning nature-based classroom.

### Materials

## Budget

Landscape and Materials	Estimated Cost
Play House	\$300
Sandbags	\$4/ 50 lb bag x 6
Boulders	\$100/ per ton
Table- Short	\$1,215 x 2
Table- Long	\$1,695 x 2
Storage- Large	\$200
Storage- Small	\$160
Storage Chest	\$120
Building Materials	\$400
Water Runway with Pump	\$300
	\$7,424



The budget for materials has been based off a variety of vendors. To reduce cost, research has been conducted to choose the most cost effective materials that are developmentally appropriate for early childhood learners. This is one example of how the budget could be broken down. It is been created to be flexible depending on the funds that are collected. A list of priority items and specific ordering links are available.

## Grant Opportunities

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/no-child-grants/apply.htm>

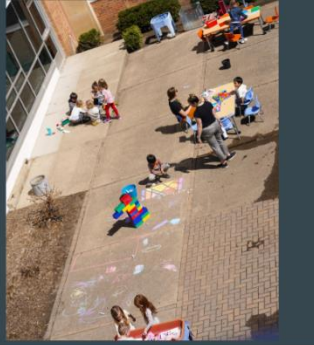
<https://minnesota.grantwatch.com/cat/10/environment-grants.html>

<https://grantsforus.io/type-of-eligible-entity/organizations/nonprofit-organizations/environmental-education-and-action-grants-in-minnesota/>

<https://www.edinaedfund.org/s/>

## Conclusion

Creating opportunities and places for students to have a meaningful relationship with nature is one of the highest priorities of this project. To learn and inquire, students need an environment that encourages questions and exploration.



## Participant Handouts

### PROPOSAL PLAN TO CREATE NATURE BASED CLASSROOMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS TO SUPPORT INQUIRY LEARNING

#### Current Courtyard Configuration



#### Current things working:

- Direct classroom access to space
- Donated materials for students to use
- Large, open space for gross motor activities

#### Current challenges:

- Tables and chairs are transferred to courtyard each time of use.
- Zero storage for learning materials
- Mostly concrete-limited places students can play and explore.



## Proposed Courtyard Layout



### Priority Items:

- Tables
- Chairs and benches
- Storage

Landscape and Materials	Estimated Cost
Play House	\$300
Sandbags	\$4/ 50 lb bag x 6
Boulders	\$100/ per ton
Table- Short	\$1,215 x 2
Table- Long	\$1,695 x 2
Storage- Large	\$200
Storage- Small	\$160
Storage Chest	\$120
Building Materials	\$400
Water Runway with Pump	\$300
	\$7,424

### New Additions:

- Sand pit
- Large group area
- Building and water area

### Transformation Projects

- Gardens
  - Observation Garden and Dramatic Play Garden

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