Outdoor Learning

School Type: E M H

Functional Area Descriptions
Outdoor learning— bringing the outdoors in and making connections are important components in 21st Century education. The options are endless and will vary based on location, site, and climate. Some examples include outdoor classrooms, outdoor amphitheaters or performance spaces, plazas, gathering and socializing spaces, gardens for cultivation and demonstration, walking, jogging, running paths, and nature areas. The purpose of these spaces is to connect and engage the learners with the natural environment, further their health and social skills, and increase awareness of natural resources.

Outdoor learning areas should be provided to the greatest extent possible. When possible, every neighborhood should have access to an outdoor classroom. The design of this space will be coordinated with the local school, taking into account ongoing programs, local topography, and other site specific opportunities. Outdoor classrooms may be at grade, or could potentially take advantage of vegetated areas of the roof. When possible, convenient connections to outdoor learning spaces should be made from the neighborhoods and the commons. All exterior spaces should have good sight lines and be easy to supervise.

Outdoor learning and gathering areas should provide some seating and areas for shade. Some possible solutions for seating could be built-in benches, picnic tables, or raised planting beds. Shade structures should be freestanding and should be considered as site amenities, rather than part of the primary facility. Provide a combination of green space and hardscape.

Gardens provide great learning opportunities for students. The origin of food, the care of plants, the lifecycle of growing things and many other connections can be made with the curriculum. If a garden area is provided, it should be located in an area conducive to the cultivation of plants. Connections with other outdoor learning areas will reinforce multiple educational opportunities. A prefabricated storage shed should be provided near the garden area for the secure storage of tools and materials.

Other outdoor site features should be considered. Site features such as sundials, themed walkways, nature paths, bioswales, and other elements that make connections to the natural environment should be incorporated to complement the sustainable design features of the building and educational opportunities for the students.

1 Amphitheater
An amphitheater is an outdoor performance space. This site feature could function on its own, or possibly be integrated with an indoor stage as double sided seating. Preferably, the seating area takes advantage of a natural slope. Often, the tiers are constructed as a single level.
combination of concrete and grass strips; wood or stone could also be provided. The amphitheater should complement the natural features of the site and all amenities provided should be durable and weather resistant. Consider the maintenance of this area during design.

2 Exterior Connection to the Common Areas
Create at least one outdoor space with pedestrian connection from at least one location within the large activity areas. (Gym, Multipurpose, Commons, Information Center) to an exterior environment (ex. plaza, playground, water feature, facility learning experience).

3 Exterior Connection to the Neighborhood
Create at least one outdoor space that has pedestrian connection from at least one place within the general learning setting to an exterior environment (ex. plaza, playground, water feature, facility learning experience).

4 Drop-off and Pick-up Areas
Provide drop-off and pick-up areas surrounding any school building, regardless of grade level. There should be clearly identifiable bus and parent student drop-off and pick-up areas. These areas should be clearly defined and separated for ease of traffic and pedestrian congestion.

5 Gathering Space
Provide a large exterior space that includes open, maintained green space in combination with secondary hardscape (ex. sidewalks).

6 Community/School Garden
Provide an area for an expandable, fenced area for cultivation and harvest by students and/or community members.

7 Walking/Jogging/Running Path
Provide a flexible perimeter path that offers opportunities for outdoor movement. Consider providing training and obstacle equipment for enhanced physical development.

8 AT/FP (Anti-Terrorism/Force Protection)
AT/FP requirements must also be met for site amenities.

NOTE: Images shown are intended to provide real-world examples and spark design creativity.