

How to Improve Environments for School-Age Programs  
Commissioned by MOST  
(Making the Most of Out of School Time)

# Great Spaces Fresh Places

*Second Edition 2001*

## Introduction

For child care providers, program space can represent a particular challenge. A growing body of research emphasizes the importance of physical environment on a child's intellectual, emotional, and social development. Yet many child care programs—particularly those serving low-income communities—find themselves operating in space chosen for its availability, not its suitability. Renting or borrowing space in schools, churches, and other institutions, the providers of school-age programs may feel they lack the funds, flexibility, or expertise necessary to make the environment appropriate to their needs. Physical improvements, or even cosmetic enhancements, can seem overwhelming.

But small changes can make a large difference; low-cost solutions can have a high impact on the atmosphere and effectiveness of school-age programs. The purpose of this publication is to demonstrate simple, creative solutions to common facility problems in spaces used for out-of-school activities. This manual is a companion piece to *Great Spaces, Fresh Places: How to Improve Environments for School-Age Programs*. Commissioned by MOST, (Making the Most of Out of School Time) *Great Spaces, Fresh Places* documented three classroom makeovers, demonstrating simple, affordable ways in which problem areas could be transformed into creative, stimulating environments. (For more information on MOST, see page 13.)

In its continuing effort to offer achievable solutions to common facility problems, the Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF), in collaboration with MOST, completed makeovers in three additional school-age classrooms during the summer of 2000. Conducted with a maximum budget of \$3,500 per classroom, the three makeovers documented in this manual explore cost-effective ways to maximize the potential of available space, and create more suitable, inviting, and developmentally appropriate environments for children.

No facility can replace a good program. But this manual seeks to demonstrate that—with a creative and realistic approach to needs, resources, and possibilities—it is possible for any space to complement, enhance, and enrich the out-of-school activities that take place within it.

## The Relationship Between Programs and Space

There are common facility problems that providers of out-of-school activities face, but every program is unique. A successful redesign of any space must be based upon the functions and activities of the room's occupants. A good way to begin, therefore, is to list all of the activities, events, and materials that each space accommodates. The aim is to maximize children's opportunities to move freely and to help them feel comfortable and competent in the space. Teachers, administrators, parents, and even the children themselves should be involved in identifying the problems and possibilities of the available space. Encouraging children to participate in the process of improving their classrooms teaches them problem-solving skills, and gives them a sense of ownership and investment.

Well-designed activity areas should incorporate some of the following attributes: **1)** A well-defined physical location—is there a separate entrance or is it a shared space arrangement? **2)** Visible boundaries that promote circulation—what will children first see or hear as they enter the space? Where should children go first—the coatroom, a snack table, or an activity area?

**3)** Work and sitting surfaces—where should children do homework? Are there quiet areas where children can be alone and independent, and other areas where they can meet and interact in groups?

**4)** Materials and storage—what will children be bringing to the classroom and where should they put these items? Do children have quick and easy access to items they need? **5)** Mood or personality—is an activity area calming or stimulating? Answers to some of these questions may change as programs and ages of children change; ideally the room configuration should be flexible enough to accommodate such changes.<sup>1</sup> After listing the various space requirements, how does one begin to prioritize the numerous possible improvements? All too often the task of solving facilities problems can seem overwhelming or beyond the expertise of program directors or teachers. Many program providers either resign themselves to accepting mediocre surroundings or believe the only solution is to relocate. However, a few simple steps can make the problems more manageable. Sorting the various facilities issues into a few major categories can help administrators focus on achievable, high-impact solutions.

<sup>1</sup> Anita Olds, "Psychological and Physiological Harmony in Child Care Center Design." *Children's Environments Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1989.

Five basic steps can lead to a clear understanding of the relationship between facilities and programs:

- 1** Identify the core problem(s), focusing on one or two key areas: Answers may be geographic ("The play corner is too cluttered" or "There's too much foot traffic near the kitchen door"); or thematic ("The room is not warm and inviting").
- 2** Identify realistic possible solutions to these one or two problems: Consider solutions in terms of both facilities and programs.
- 3** Identify the implications and requirements of each solution: Consider whether the changes will be temporary or permanent, and if they will affect the licensing of your space.
- 4** Estimate costs and create a budget for each proposed solution: In some cases, it will be necessary to obtain professional assistance to get good estimates. Investigate the possibility of in-kind donations or volunteer labor to keep costs down.
- 5** Select the options that are most realistic, effective, and achievable: Beginning with a grandiose vision of an ideal classroom is not an effective approach to improving classroom facilities on a small budget. Sweeping and drastic changes will be too overwhelming, and anything less will be disappointing.

## Creative Tools for Creative Solutions

Once criteria are established for redesigning the space, the next goal is to identify and coordinate design elements that will both define activity areas and create a unified inviting space. The IFF developed a decision-making tool called the makeover "Kit-of-Parts" to assist providers with visualizing materials that might be used together in classroom modifications. The Kit-of-Parts was created to showcase palettes of coordinated colors and materials. Samples of tile, paint, carpet, and fabrics, chosen by interior designers, were grouped together and mounted on four color boards. Again the underlying idea is to limit the number of choices to facilitate decision-making. The three classroom makeovers described in this manual were accomplished using the principles outlined above. Each program's staff identified facilities issues that could not be solved with program adjustments and selected one or two they wished to focus on. Possible solutions were estimated and evaluated. Then each school-age program provider selected one of four color schemes from the Kit-of-Parts. Colors and materials chosen from the selected color boards were used in the following examples.

## Center #1

Bethel Educational School Age Services  
4215 West Westend Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60624

### Major Facility Challenges

The school-age program at Bethel Educational School Age Services serves 35 children ages six through 12 during both the school year and the summer. The program currently operates in a large basement space in a school building.

The fundamental problem with this space was thematic: the room felt dark and gloomy, and children did not enjoy being there, preferring other rooms in the building. Two elements contributed to this unappealing environment. Peeling paint in dark, primary colors made the space feel old and foreboding. Five small

windows set high in the wall offered little natural light. Inadequate fluorescent lighting added to the cold stark ambiance; the low ceilings also made these uncovered fluorescent bulbs a potential hazard in a space used for active play. Exposed pipes on the ceiling and inconsistent design elements throughout the room added to a haphazard appearance that made the space feel old and run-down.

A splotchy concrete floor represented another challenge. The cost of installing a carpet or tile floor covering was more than the agency could afford.

### Solutions Implemented

1) Bethel chose to brighten up its basement space by repainting walls and columns with lighter colors and softer finishes. To achieve a bright and airy look, the program director selected three muted, soothing paint colors from the color boards in the Kit-of-Parts. A different color was used on the ceiling, the walls, and the columns.

*Manufacturer: Benjamin Moore Paint in Aqua Pearl Finish*

*Ceiling: BM#198; Walls: BM#200; Columns: BM#203*

The concrete floor was painted with a hard enamel epoxy paint as a cost-saving alternative to tiling or carpeting.

*Manufacturer: Benjamin Moore Epoxy Reinforced Floor Paint in Platinum Gray #74*

**Cost: \$2,100 for labor and materials**

2) The old two-lamp bare bulb fluorescent light fixtures were replaced with twelve new four-bulb covered ceiling fixtures. Increased wattage, even spacing, and diffuser covers on the new fixtures worked well to both brighten and soften the light in the space.

*Manufacturer: Metalux 4' four-lamp 120-volt T8 surface mounted fixtures*

**Cost: \$1,400 for labor and materials**

### Solution Principles

Even though the room still lacks natural light, the addition of more unified, softer artificial light and painting the entire space with lighter colors have changed the appearance of the room from an old damp basement to a large and inviting recreational room.

The director comments that the children now enjoy being in the space and using it for work and play.

# before



# after



**Center #2** Tots 'n' Tales Preschool  
5784 South Archer Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60638

**Major Facility Challenges**

The Tots 'n' Tales Preschool and school-age child care facility serves 44 children in a configuration of three classrooms. The center classroom is used for a school-age program for 10 children. Two main problems were identified by staff: the room felt small and dark, and it was always cluttered and messy.

The room was painted in a primary blue color, and had very little storage space. The room also received very little natural light from the two small windows set high up in the wall. The program director wanted to reorganize the room to make it look and feel more open and inviting.

**Solutions Implemented**

1) It was determined that one way to achieve a more open effect was to replace the two small windows in the exterior wall with two large 40"x 48" glass block windows with operable air vents. These windows provide more natural light and ventilation to the space and make the room feel less enclosed.

**Cost: \$1,025 for installation, labor, and materials**

2) The IFF also suggested opening a hole in an interior partition wall and installing a window between two classrooms. A 41"x 48" interior window with clear tempered glass was installed in the wall separating the two classrooms. This see-through glass partition serves two functions: it makes the room feel larger and less isolated, and it borrows natural light from the other classroom.

3) The program director also chose to repaint the entire room with colors selected from a Kit-of-Parts color board to give the space a completely renovated appearance. Two colors were chosen: one a shade of a ready-mixed white, and the other a subtle shade of red.

*Manufacturer: Benjamin Moore Paint in Aqua Pearl Finish*

*Top section of wall: Ready-Mixed Whites in Navajo White #73*

*Bottom section of wall: BM#1281*

**Cost: \$2,200 for both interior window and painting**

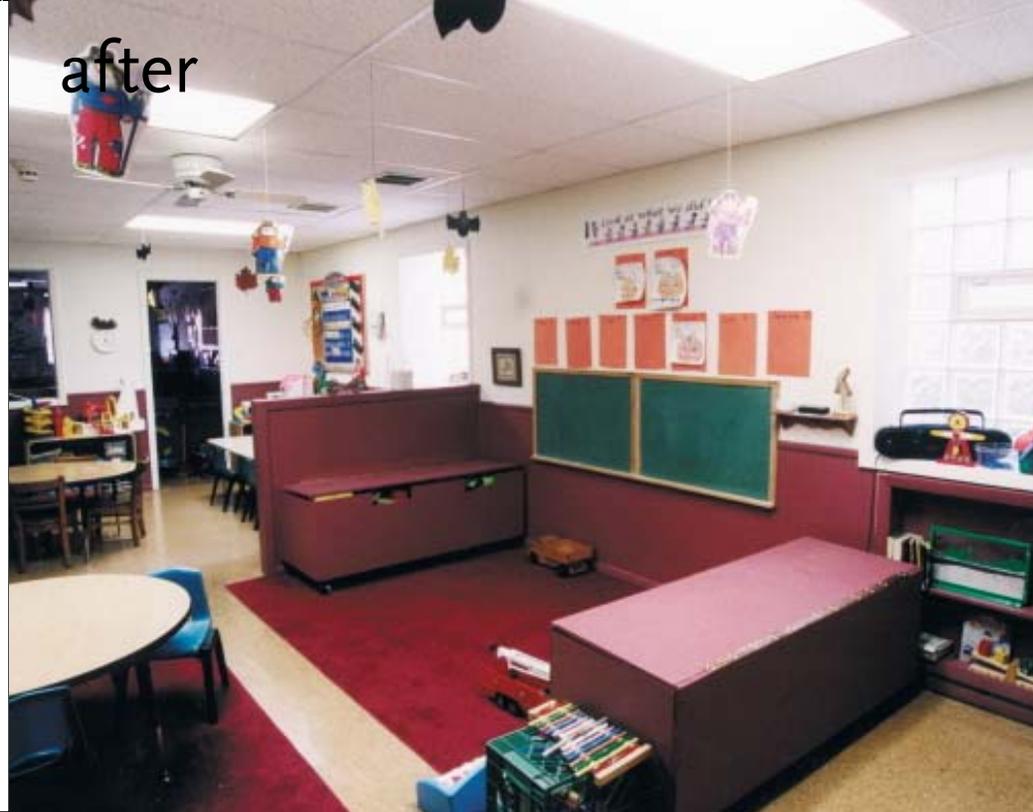
**Solution Principles**

All three windows have brightened up the space and created a cheerful, more open environment. The partition window separating the middle classroom from the other room not only provides additional light, it also increases interaction between children in each classroom. The two operable vents in the new exterior windows significantly increase the amount of fresh air in the space. To address the need for storage, the center's director independently installed built-in toy chests and bookshelves and painted them to match the wall. Finally, the director installed homesote bulletin boards covered in a fabric selected from the same color board. These boards serve the dual purpose of reducing noise levels and providing a place to display children's artwork.

before



after



### Center #3

Chicago Fellowship of Friends  
Young Friends After-School Program  
515 West Oak Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60610

#### Major Facility Challenges

The Chicago Fellowship of Friends (CFF) located in the Cabrini-Green area of Chicago serves 40 children in kindergarten through eighth grade in its Young Friends After-School Program. As part of an expansion program, the administrators purchased additional space in their current building to provide a second classroom for older children. CFF volunteers performed preliminary work to prepare the

room by painting the walls, installing new lighting, and replacing all the windows.

The classroom then needed a well-thought-out layout and appropriate furniture. Spatial design was important because of the wide variety of activities that often occur simultaneously in the space. The IFF and the program director devised a space layout that would allocate areas for individual and group activities, quiet study, and noisier group programs.

#### Solutions Implemented

1) After identifying how the space would be configured, the IFF began investigating various wholesale and retail furniture suppliers to find the necessary furniture for CFF. With the help of the Direct Advantage School Equipment and Supply Catalog, the furniture was located and ordered at considerably discounted prices. CFF also chose a color scheme from the Kit-of-Parts, and hoped to coordinate some of the furniture items with the selected scheme. The items ordered include: seven blue/gray privacy partitions and 14 t-base stabilizing feet, 24 gray folding chairs, eight navy stacking chairs, eight walnut-top side compartment student desks, one round folding table, one moveable wardrobe and storage unit, and one mini mobile storage unit.

**Cost: \$2,900 for all items, shipping and handling**

2) Used storage cubbies were brought in from a previous preschool classroom and were modified to accommodate the needs of older children. The cubbies were mounted on pedestals, increasing their height by a foot, and they were painted a shade of blue-violet from Kit-of-Parts color boards.

*Manufacturer: Benjamin Moore Paint #826*

**Cost: \$600 for labor and materials**

#### Solution Principles

Because this space was wide open, it was important to plan an appropriate layout that provided for and defined areas appropriate for the room's various activities. The director wanted to ensure that children would understand clearly what to do and where to go once they arrived. It was also important to the administrators that specific activity areas would remain separate from activity areas that might create distractions. Once the various spaces were defined and the layout plan completed, identifying the furniture was relatively easy. Volunteers adapted old wooden bookshelves by painting them the same shade of blue-violet as the cubbies, and used them to separate two different activity areas.

After hearing the director comment that children sometimes liked to "get away" and retreat to a smaller attached room used as a kitchen and small storage area, the IFF suggested converting this room into additional program space. Volunteers painted this room and furniture was added. The area was transformed into a space where the children can be alone, meet in smaller groups for homework, play board games, or just interact.

*Manufacturer: Benjamin Moore Paint in Aqua Pearl Finish*

*Bookshelves: BM #826; Walls in second room: BM #208*

before



after



The classroom makeovers highlighted in this manual demonstrate how simple elements can affect the physical environment of school-age programs.

As evidenced in the three classroom examples, the use of color is a cost-effective way of making a dramatic change in a program's atmosphere.

Lighting is another element that can play a significant role in improving a classroom space.

And finally the overall design and layout is probably the single most important factor in determining how well a space will function.

For more information on the contents of this manual, or to obtain a copy of the first manual:

*Great Spaces, Fresh Places:  
How-to Improve Environments for  
School-Age Programs*

please contact:

#### **MOST**

*A program of the Day Care  
Action Council of Illinois  
4802 North Broadway  
Suite 205  
Chicago, Illinois 60640  
773.564.8787*

#### **Illinois Facilities Fund**

300 West Adams Street  
Suite 431  
Chicago, Illinois 60606  
312.629.0060

#### **Resource List**

##### **Direct Advantage**

520 West Oklahoma Avenue  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53207-2649  
Telephone 800.669.7766  
Fax 888.369.0788  
www.directadv.com

##### **Brook Electrical Distribution Co.**

645 Heathrow Drive  
Lincolnshire, Illinois 60069  
Telephone 847.353.6300  
Fax 847.353.6301

##### **Benjamin Moore Paint**

Available at any  
Benjamin Moore Paint Dealer

*Costs quoted for the three classroom  
makeovers were for work completed in 2000.  
Prices are subject to change.*

#### **MOST**

Formed in 1995 as part of a nationwide initiative to strengthen and expand opportunities for school-age children during out-of-school time, MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) is a program of the Day Care Action Council of Illinois.

#### **Who we are**

MOST committee members, staff and partners are a diverse group of individuals committed to providing young people in Illinois with environments outside of school that are safe and stimulating, with challenging activities and staffed with trained professionals. While 500 youth and educational organizations actively support MOST across Illinois, anyone interested in school-age children and youth can get involved.

#### **Who we serve**

Young people aged five through 21 years, their families and communities statewide benefit from our efforts, regardless of socioeconomic status.

#### **What we do**

MOST works through collaboration with providers, communities, businesses, key stakeholders, civic and cultural institutions. We utilize our experience and expertise to empower communities to create safe, fun places for young people to learn and grow outside of school.

#### **Our challenge**

In the past decade, the demand for quality out-of-school time programs has skyrocketed. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that the current number of out-of-school time programs will meet as little as 25 percent of the demand in some urban areas (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). At the same time, training and retention of quality staff has become increasingly difficult. Although universal standards of quality exist (as defined by the National School-Age Care Alliance) they are, for a variety of reasons, unevenly applied.

#### **Our goal**

To implement community-based strategies to improve the quality of out-of-school time programs, regardless of the neighborhood or income level of the families they serve.

#### **Our strategy**

MOST employs a holistic approach in order to creatively and comprehensively address the array of challenges facing out-of-school programs, offering services in the following three areas:

- > Professional Development
- > Community Outreach
- > Program Improvement

### Illinois Facilities Fund

The Illinois Facilities Fund is a statewide nonprofit community development financial institution whose mission is to assist Illinois nonprofits through loans, facilities planning, and facilities development. Created in 1988, the IFF provides below-market loans, real estate development, capital improvement planning and technical assistance for the facility-related projects of nonprofits throughout the state. The IFF targets its activities to nonprofit human service agencies, community development agencies, and community support projects whose purpose is to serve or redevelop low-income communities. The IFF has developed a unique expertise in

the area of children's facilities. In the Child Care Facility Development Program from 1991 to 1995, the IFF built and presently owns seven large child care centers in low-income neighborhoods throughout the state. In 1999 the IFF began the planning and development of five new child care centers throughout the Chicago metropolitan region, all of which will serve school-age children. And in 2000, under contract to the City of Chicago Department of Human Services, the IFF will manage The Chicago Children's Capital Fund, a \$52 million program to create new licensed child care centers and renovate existing facilities in high-need Chicago communities. The IFF is the Midwest's leading expert on the design and finance of children's facilities.

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