

Risk-Taking and Failure: A Greenhouse for Learning
Sandra E. Lerner Jewish Community Day School
Durham, NC

History:

Lerner was established in 1995 as the Jewish Community Day School of Durham-Chapel Hill, with one K-1 class of 13 students. Today, we serve approximately 125-145 students per year in preschool through fifth grade. In 1998, we opened the doors of our own building on a wooded campus that would eventually become home to a synagogue and a Jewish Community Center.

Since 1998, the Earl Siegel Goodness Garden Grows initiative has supported integrated environmental education throughout Lerner's entire dual curriculum, educating the next generation to become Shomrei Adamah, Stewards of the Earth. By discussing and studying real-world concerns (e.g. use of resources, influence of climates around the world, and the impact of the increasing human population), Lerner's integrated cross-curriculum approach encourages students to be active members in our local community and the larger world. Our students connect physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually to the natural environment and use it as a tool to experience and articulate Jewish texts and prayer.

A main tenet of Lerner's mission is "One Child at a Time." We approach each child as a unique individual, and also recognize that each child develops his or her own way of interacting with, and in, the world around us. There is a Hasidic story, which tells of a Rabbi's son who loved to spend time in the woods. One day, the Rabbi took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder, why you go there?" The boy said to his father, "I go there to find G-d." "That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. "I am glad you are searching for G-d. But, my child, don't you know that G-d is the same everywhere?" "Yes," the boy answered, "but I'm not." Through our environmental curriculum, we strive to encourage our students to embrace the natural world and open themselves to the varied experiences of exploring, caring for the earth and its bounty, and playing, learning, observing, and simply being outside.



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The Big Idea:

Integrate Lerner's grade level environmental learning and projects into a spiraled environmental curriculum from preschool through 5th grade that incorporates both general and Jewish Studies. The curriculum would be supported by the addition of new planting beds, weather and compost stations, and an outdoor classroom. Initial investment would come from targeted donations from donors who wished to honor the memory of a community member who was deeply engaged in environmental education and strongly believed in Judaism's spiritual and ethical commitment to protecting, preserving and caring for the environment.

The Risk:

As a small school in a small community focused on early childhood education we were proposing engaging in a task that would:

1. Require funds for maintenance and expansion
2. Place another task on our teachers who already wear multiple hats with multiple responsibilities (as often happens in a small organization)
3. Stretch an already full and tight curriculum
4. Invest significant donor funds in a project without a clearly defined project leader that would ultimately be responsible for project development and implementation

The Potential Reward and Hoped for Outcome:

A spiraled environmental curriculum which would grow into a centerpiece program that highlighted Lerner's educational philosophy and offered opportunities for learning and discovery through hands-on project based learning that integrated both general and Jewish studies. This was to be the start of what would be a growing environmental learning environment that would eventually be composed of garden beds for each grade, water gardens, and possibly the addition of a chicken coop or bee hive. Lerner's environmental curriculum would serve as a model for elementary environmental education.

Planning:

Step 1:

The idea, which came through donors, but met a need at the school, was presented to the Head of School and was discussed with the Jewish and General Studies professionals. A plan was developed to meet the needs of the school and stay within the boundaries of what the donors could fund. The plan was then presented to the Board of Directors.



Step 2:

Once approved on all fronts, construction started on the outdoor learning spaces and the Head of General Studies carved out a portion of her time to work with the Head of Jewish Studies to develop the philosophy behind the curriculum development and how it integrated into Lerner's already established curriculum.

Step 3:

The environmental curriculum was spiraled from preschool through fifth grade. A teacher led committee was established to implement the curriculum and work with the teaching staff on how to best integrate not only the additional pieces of the environmental curriculum into the classroom in both general and Jewish studies but also how to make the best use of the new outdoor learning spaces.

Step 4:

Professional Development both from internal teachers and external professionals was offered to help teachers integrate the curriculum and usage of outdoor learning spaces into their already busy schedules.

Step 5:

The program was launched at the start of the 2012-13 school year.

Implementation:

The first two years of the program were somewhat successful with some fits and starts. The main obstacles were lack of time in a tight schedule and the majority of teachers' lack of comfort with their knowledge of gardening and the act of gardening itself.

Despite these obstacles, grade level projects were launched and became an integral part of Lerner's educational curriculum from water projects, to planting, tending and reaping in the garden, to a grade-level led composting program that incorporated the whole school, to a second grade social action project that incorporated gardening and picking of vegetables to be a part of a larger class project to assemble complete Thanksgiving dinners for families in need.

The new, spiraled curriculum guided students on new paths of discovery and learning and added hands on components that enabled our students to get their hands dirty, connect with the earth, and recognize their impact on the environment and ability to make a difference in its preservation and protection.



Once launched three class gifts were added to the outdoor learning spaces with the gift of a greenhouse, a woodsy walking trail and a seven species garden.

Challenges:

1. During this time period Lerner started going through a number of staff changes at high levels as well as within the classrooms. None of the new teachers had any training or professional development related to the environmental curriculum, and many of the teachers who were initially trained and working on the curriculum departed the school.
2. When hiring new teachers, environmental experience or interest was not part of the process.
3. The teacher environmental committee, which required teachers to utilize their planning and free time, could not keep up with the demands of curriculum implementation and continuing professional development along with all of their other responsibilities.
4. The time needed to maintain the gardens included time spent requesting class participation, organizing work to be done by classes, training teachers, watering, starting seeds, moving plants in and out of the greenhouse, cleaning compost bins, tilling soil, etc. Many of these jobs are not easily worked into the student's school day for many reasons, including teacher buy in. The committee was spending planning time, after school time, and weekend days to maintain the garden.
5. Time and energy of the remaining teachers on the environmental committee slowly dwindled as new priorities took precedence.
6. Administrative changes that led to new priorities also led to new budgetary priorities. Lack of clear communication between the business office and the committee in charge of determining program implementation and associated costs left the committee, already under time constraints and pressures to focus on other priorities, feeling unsupported in their environmental committee role.
7. Class based projects continued, but only in kindergarten general studies classes and 3rd-5th grade Jewish studies classes. There was diminishing student care of the gardens and less integration of the outdoor learning spaces into the environmental project-based learning activities that were occurring by grade level in the classrooms.



In 2015-16 Lerner hired a new Principal. In an administrative staff meeting there was discussion about the school's messaging, as well as the new grade level benchmarks that the Principal had spent considerable time revamping. There was no mention of an environmental curriculum spiraled and integrated into Lerner's larger curricular goals and objectives. While turnover can lead to changes in priorities, it became shockingly clear that implementation of the environmental curriculum had diminished to the point where it was no longer readily visible to the new Principal in programming, class observation or teacher meetings. The environmental curriculum, which Lerner had expended donor dollars to establish and implement, and which had become a part of Lerner's messaging and sense of self as a school, had become a silo within the school. With the passage of time and the changing of positions, the continuity of the program was lost and the lack of a champion or leader within the teacher community, who was responsible for the project, allowed the usage of the outdoor learning spaces to slip and for its usage to be dependent on individual teacher initiatives.

This administrative meeting led to the reworking of Lerner's benchmarks per grade and overall curricular goals and objectives. As a school, we are learning from the process, the successes, the missteps and the assumptions that were made along the way that led to a signature program which had been with the school since its' early years to almost be lost in an effort for its growth and expansion.

Lessons Learned:

1. From the start, the project needed not only a professional champion within the faculty that would have the responsibility of guiding the program through implementation and growth, but it also needed to be integrated into teacher professional responsibilities and a part of the hiring process.
2. The role of environmental curriculum coordinator needed to be defined and attached to a particular job description and stipend/salary.
3. Before the project was implemented, there needed to be whole school buy-in to the process and a clear outline of potential additional responsibilities/requirements that would need to be taken on by teachers and staff.
4. Clear documentation of the philosophy, development of the curriculum and outdoor spaces and implementation of the curriculum as a whole was necessary for the program to withstand staff changes and initial challenges post implementation.
5. The curriculum required a strategic plan for development, implementation and funding to ensure maintenance, growth and sustainability of the program.
6. The implementation of the new curriculum required initial and ongoing professional development to keep teachers knowledgeable and comfortable with the program.



7. To maintain signature school programs the hiring committee for the Head of School needs to be equipped not only with the school mission and vision - but the essence of what makes Lerner - Lerner. This could stretch from Lerner's warm welcoming environment to its signature programs which have become part of the school's ethos. This information should be integrated into the hiring process and be a part of the transition committee work post-hiring.

Current Steps:

1. Lerner is starting the process of addressing usage and development of all of its outdoor spaces. It is in consultation with Natural Learning Institute through NC State University to develop a full site plan for integrated usage of outdoor learning and recreational spaces. We have established an in-house committee of teachers and staff to address our outdoor spaces. The committee will expand to include parent and community leaders once the school needs have been determined along with an assessment of how our outdoor space and learning environments can support our classroom learning both now and into the future.
2. Lerner is looking strategically at its curricula, administrative and teaching staff, and budget, determining how best to sustain and grow what we have established and take a holistic approach as to how to continue to innovate as a small school in a small community.
3. Based on what we have learned, Lerner will now incorporate new information sharing into its hiring process, for teachers and administrators as well into the transition period post-hiring.

Next Steps:

1. Champion/leader of the Environmental Curriculum (professional paid position).
2. Increased Professional Development (internal & external) to educate and engage teacher buy-in and participation.
3. Using this failure as a learning experience for how to assess, implement and sustain new curricular initiatives or school programs.



Outcome:

While we did not achieve the intended results in the timeframe imagined, the process left our school with valuable lessons on how the process could have been better and led to greater success. Moreover, Lerner did come out with outdoor learning spaces that are utilized and that have enhanced student opportunities to learn and engage beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Lerner itself modeled what we teach to our students – to be risk-takers – to go beyond what we think we are capable of achieving by using the experiences and knowledge we hold to advance our school and community to offer the best educational opportunities available. Inherent in the risk, is the possibility of failure – complete or partial, but also inherent is the opportunity to learn from the errors now visible in hindsight, and move forward. Moreover, the lessons learned serve us in all areas as we continue to push the boundaries of what a small school can accomplish and what a committed community of educators and administrators can achieve.

Submitted by Allison Oakes on behalf of the environmental team.



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