

A PLANNING GUIDE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Planning School Outdoor Environments

Insights from 35 years working with schools.

Contents

The purpose of this guide	03
Introduction	04
The outdoor environment is one of your school's largest learning assets	06
Plan before the urgency	07
Give every investment a strategic purpose	09
Why play is more than a playground	10
Designing for belonging & creating a balanced environment	11
Listen to your community before you design	13
From community voice to a clear brief	14
Leadership leaves a design legacy	16
Your school outdoor planning framework	17
Choosing the right delivery partner	19
Putting it into practice with Playform	20
Let's build on your vision	21

This guide is designed to help your school decide what it needs before deciding what to build.

The purpose of this guide

Schools are often required to make outdoor investment decisions quickly.

Funding can become available unexpectedly, budgets may need to be committed within a short timeframe, or an ageing area may suddenly become a priority.

The purpose of this guide is to help schools do the thinking before that urgency arrives.

By understanding how your current outdoor environment is being used, identifying what students may be missing out, clarifying the outcomes that matter most and establishing project priorities in advance, your school is better prepared to act when an opportunity arises.

You do not need every future project designed.

You need a clear understanding of what should come next, why it matters and what level of investment may be required.

This guide shares practical planning principles developed from more than 35 years of working with schools, to help leadership teams, staff, students and school communities make more considered outdoor environment decisions.

Plan early. Be ready when opportunity arrives.

Plan the outcome before the project

Every school has its own culture, priorities and aspirations.

Planning outdoor environments means balancing educational outcomes, student wellbeing, community expectations, available funding, compliance and long-term priorities.

No one understands your students or your school community better than the people who lead and experience it every day.

Our expertise is different.

For more than 35 years, Urban Landscape Projects has worked alongside schools to plan and deliver outdoor environments. During that time, we have seen what works, where projects become difficult and what consistently leads to better long-term outcomes.

One lesson stands above the others:

Stop planning individual projects.

Start planning the outcomes your school wants to achieve.

The purpose of this guide is to help schools ask better questions before design and construction begin.

Because when funding, opportunity or urgency arrives, the most valuable thing a school can already have is **clarity**.

A clear understanding of:

- what students need
- what the current environment is missing
- what outcomes matter most
- where the next investment should go
- what should be prioritised if funding suddenly becomes available.

Good planning doesn't remove urgency.

It makes your school ready for it.



**“The environment is the
third teacher.”**

Loris Malaguzzi

The outdoor environment is one of your school's largest learning assets

School leaders invest considerable time in curriculum, teaching, wellbeing and student outcomes.

The outdoor environment deserves to be considered through the same lens.

It is not simply where learning pauses between lessons.

Every day students use these spaces to move, build friendships, negotiate challenges, regulate emotions, develop confidence, solve problems, explore ideas and establish lifelong attitudes towards physical activity and learning.

The question therefore shouldn't begin with:

What should we build?

It should begin with: What kind of experience are we trying to create for our students?

LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Outcome First Principle

Before discussing infrastructure, define the outcome. A future investment might support:

- Student wellbeing
- Learning
- Physical development
- School culture
- Community connection
- School functionality

A project should have a purpose beyond construction.

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- What does our outdoor environment already support well?
- What experiences are missing?
- Which students could be better served?
- What outcome would make the greatest difference?



Leadership insight — Infrastructure is the investment. Outcomes are the return.

Plan before the urgency

The best time to plan your next project is before you have to deliver it.

Schools do not always control when opportunities arise.

Funding may suddenly become available. A grant may have a short application period. A budget may need to be committed before the end of a financial year. A Department program may create an unexpected opportunity. A P&C or community group may raise funds more quickly than anticipated. And sometimes a deteriorating space simply needs to be dealt with.

The problem is not urgency itself. The problem is having to decide **what to build** while the clock is already running.

That can lead to projects being selected because they are familiar, easy to procure or immediately visible rather than because they represent the school's highest priority.

A better approach is to plan the thinking beforehand.

If funding became available tomorrow, would your school know what should come next?

That is the value of having an outdoor environment strategy. You don't necessarily need every future project designed. You need to know:

- the outcomes your school wants to improve
- the gaps in the existing environment
- the priorities of students and the school community
- which areas should be addressed first
- what approximate investment may be required.

Then when an opportunity appears, the school can move quickly **without starting from zero**.

LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Three Horizon Test

Consider every investment across three timeframes.

Today: Does it solve an important current need?

Five years: Will it continue supporting the school's priorities?

Ten years: Will future students still benefit from the decision?

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- If funding became available unexpectedly, would we know what to prioritise?
- Are our projects connected by a common vision?
- Are we choosing projects because they matter most—or because they are most urgent?
- Are we building a better school, or simply replacing infrastructure?



Leadership insight — Planning early gives schools the ability to act quickly later.



“Good environments invite children to move, explore, imagine, connect and discover.”

Give every investment a strategic purpose



No single outdoor space can achieve everything.

Strong school environments provide a balanced collection of places that support different aspects of student development and school life.

Rather than asking only what should be built, ask: **What experience is currently missing?**

LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Four types of school environments

Play Spaces

Support movement, confidence, challenge, resilience, creativity and social interaction.

Outdoor Learning Spaces

Extend teaching, inquiry, collaboration, environmental education and hands-on learning beyond the classroom.

Sports Spaces

Encourage participation, teamwork, physical literacy, movement and lifelong engagement in physical activity.

Campus Spaces

Improve the everyday experience of the school through gathering, arrival, shade, circulation, social spaces and practical infrastructure.

No category is more important than another. The objective is **balance**.



CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- Which category currently receives the most investment?
- Which receives the least?
- Does that balance reflect the needs of your students?
- Where is the greatest opportunity for improvement?



Leadership insight — Sometimes a school doesn't need more space. It needs a better balance of spaces.

Why play is more than a playground

Play is not one activity. And it is not one piece of equipment.

Children engage with outdoor environments differently according to their confidence, interests, personalities and stage of development. A well-planned school therefore provides different ways to participate.

PLANNING FRAMEWORK

A balanced play environment

PLAY TYPE	WHAT IT CAN SUPPORT
Physical Play	Confidence, coordination, strength, physical literacy and resilience
Social Play	Communication, teamwork and belonging
Imaginative Play	Creativity, storytelling, language and problem solving
Constructive Play	Collaboration, STEM thinking and experimentation
Quiet / Passive Play	Reflection, conversation, wellbeing and self-regulation
Strategic Play	Planning, concentration, patience and decision making
Nature Play	Curiosity, environmental awareness and wellbeing

The 30-minute playground test

Stand in your outdoor environment for thirty minutes. Don't begin by looking at the equipment. Watch the students.

What are they doing? What aren't they doing? Who is participating? Who isn't? Which areas are heavily used? Which spaces are being avoided?

This simple observation can reveal more about what your school needs than beginning with a catalogue of products.

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- Which forms of play are well supported?
- Which are largely absent?
- Does one activity dominate the playground?
- Do students have genuine choice?



Leadership insight — A broader definition of play creates broader opportunities for students.

Designing for belonging

A successful outdoor environment gives different students different ways to participate. Some seek movement and challenge; others prefer conversation, creativity or quiet observation. Neither is more important — the objective is enough variety that every student can find a place where they feel comfortable, capable and connected.

The Belonging Test: can students find opportunities to move, connect, learn, reflect, create, participate and belong?

- Which students are well served by our current outdoor spaces, and which may be overlooked?
- Is there somewhere for students who don't want to be at the centre of active play?

Creating a balanced outdoor environment

Once the desired outcomes are understood, the next step is translating them into physical opportunities.

- ▣ **Create more opportunities for learning** — outdoor classrooms, gathering circles, writable surfaces, gardens, nature investigation, STEM elements.
- ▣ **Create more purposeful play** — climbing, balancing, traversing, swinging, sand, digging, loose parts, cubbies, imaginative play, open space.
- ▣ **Create more opportunities to belong** — seating nooks, small-group spaces, quiet retreats, regulation spaces.
- ▣ **Support physical development** — climbing, balancing, hanging, traversing, jumping, circuits, ball play, open running areas.
- ▣ **Encourage creativity & expression** — stages, amphitheatres, cubbies, construction areas, chalkboards, sand, loose parts and natural materials.
- ▣ **Support STEM & hands-on learning** — water, measurement, pulleys, levers, ramps, construction, productive gardens, composting, worm farms, Sustainable Learning Areas.

The balance test

Does your outdoor environment give students opportunities to:

Move • Play • Create • Learn • Connect • Explore • Retreat • Belong



Leadership insight — Variety allows different students to participate, develop, connect and belong.



**“The world needs all kinds
of minds.”**

Temple Grandin

Listen to your community before you design

A successful school project should reflect the community it serves.

Students, staff, parents, leadership teams and P&C/P&F groups all bring useful perspectives.

But **when** those perspectives are gathered matters.

One of the most common problems we see occurs when consultation happens after a design has already been substantially developed.

New ideas are then introduced late. The brief reopens. Design changes multiply. Budget alignment becomes harder. And the project can become increasingly difficult to resolve.

Gather the voices first. Design second.

The objective of early consultation is not to ask everyone to design the finished project. It is to understand:

- what is working
- what is missing
- who is not well served
- what outcomes matter most
- what priorities appear repeatedly.

That information becomes the basis for a stronger project brief.

From community voice to a clear brief

1. Listen

Invite students, staff, parents and relevant groups to identify needs and opportunities. At this stage, gather perspectives rather than solutions.

2. Look for patterns

What ideas keep appearing? What problems are repeatedly identified? Which outcomes matter across different groups?

3. Prioritise

Separate the discussion into **must have** (essential outcomes or requirements), **should have** (important opportunities that substantially improve the project) and **could have** (valuable ideas that can be incorporated if budget, site and priorities allow). Not every idea needs to become part of the project; the objective is to understand what the ideas collectively reveal.

4. Create the brief

A professional design team can then translate those priorities into an environment that balances educational outcomes, student voice, site conditions, compliance, budget, functionality and long-term value.

Playform Student Workshop

Structured student participation can provide an important additional layer. The Playform Student Workshop helps capture how students experience their existing school environment, what matters to them and what they want future spaces to enable. Students are not asked to design the finished project. Their insights help inform the professional design process.

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- Have we gathered community input before committing to a design?
- Are we hearing from a representative range of students?
- Have we separated priorities from individual wish lists?
- Could we clearly explain what our community wants the future space to achieve?



Leadership insight — Listen broadly. Prioritise carefully. Design professionally.



“People support what they help create.”

A principle of participatory planning.

Leadership leaves a design legacy

Leadership shapes places. Places shape culture.

Every school environment reflects decisions made over many years.

Some happen through careful planning. Others happen because funding becomes available, infrastructure reaches the end of its life or an immediate need has to be resolved.

Over time, these individual decisions shape much more than the appearance of the school. They influence where students gather. How students play. Where learning happens. How welcoming the school feels. And how future generations experience the place.

A clear long-term direction helps each individual investment contribute towards something larger.

LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Leadership Lens

Before committing to a significant outdoor investment, ask:

- What outcome are we trying to improve?
- Who will benefit?
- Does it address an identified gap?
- Does it support our longer-term direction?
- Will it still represent good value years from now?



Leadership insight — The best time to decide what matters is before the deadline arrives.

Your school outdoor planning framework

Be ready before the opportunity arrives.

The planning process does not need to be complicated.

1. **Define the outcomes.** What do we want students to experience more of?
2. **Observe the current environment.** How are spaces actually being used? What is missing? Who is well served—and who isn't?
3. **Identify opportunities.** Where could investment create the greatest improvement?
4. **Listen to your community.** What do students, staff and families see that leadership may not?
5. **Prioritise.** What should happen first? What should follow? What can wait?
6. **Understand the approximate investment.** Knowing likely project scales allows schools to plan, budget and respond to funding opportunities.
7. **Keep the plan ready.** Priorities may change. Funding may change. The sequence may change. But the thinking is already done.

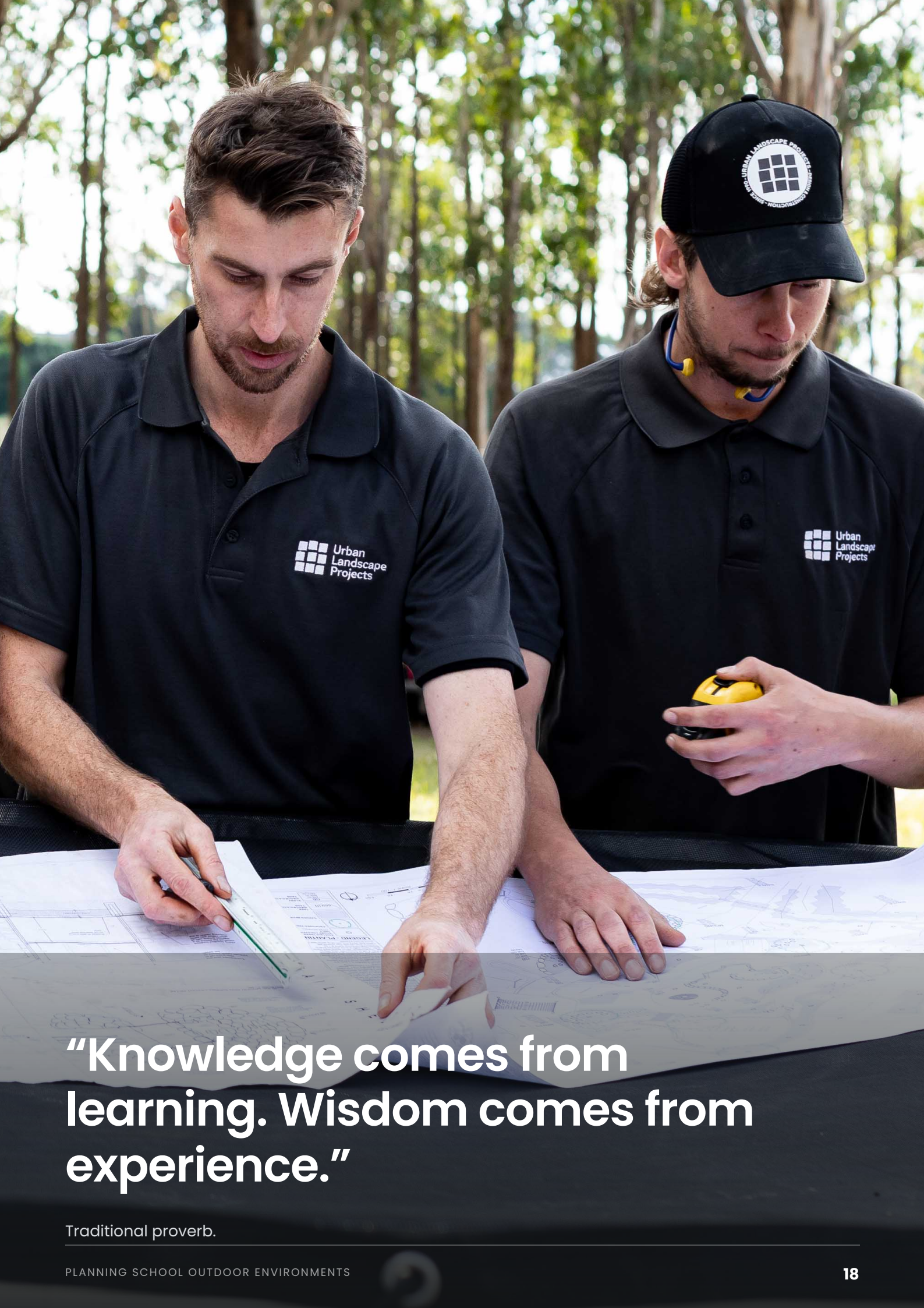
The funding-ready test

If \$50,000 became available tomorrow, would we know what to do with it? What about \$100,000? What about \$150,000? Could we explain **why that project should come first?**

If the answer is yes, your school is no longer starting its planning process when the urgency begins. It is ready to act.



Leadership insight — Plan early. Prioritise clearly. Move quickly when opportunity arrives.



“Knowledge comes from learning. Wisdom comes from experience.”

Traditional proverb.

Choosing the right delivery partner

Good planning still needs experienced delivery.

School projects are unique because construction often occurs while the school continues operating. That requires careful programming, clear communication, strong safety systems and teams experienced in working around students, staff and the school community.

Price matters. But it should be considered alongside capability, experience, safety, quality and long-term value.

Depending on the school's procurement pathway, leadership may not control every aspect of contractor selection. These criteria can still help define what good delivery should look like.

WHAT TO EXPECT

What should you expect?

Experience

Demonstrated experience delivering comparable projects in operating schools.

Safety & Compliance

Appropriate WHS systems, insurances, licences, checks and project-specific safety planning.

Capability

Experienced project managers, supervisors, trades and subcontractors.

Communication

Clear programming, updates and strategies to minimise disruption.

Quality

A demonstrated standard of construction supported by completed projects and references.

Handover

Clear defects management, warranties, maintenance information and documentation.

CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL

- Are we assessing value rather than price alone?
- Does the team understand operating school environments?
- Can they demonstrate comparable work?
- Do we have confidence in how the project will be managed from start to finish?



Leadership insight — Good ideas deserve experienced delivery.

Putting it into practice

From planning to an achievable project

We developed Playform to help schools put the thinking in this guide into practice.

The process begins with the outcome, not the product.

What does the school want to improve?

Then: **What type of environment could best support that outcome?**

Playform provides a practical way to move from that question towards an achievable project.



Play Spaces

Movement · Challenge · Creativity · Social interaction · Play

Outdoor Learning Spaces

Teaching · Investigation · Collaboration · Nature · STEM

Sports Spaces

Participation · Movement · Physical literacy · Teamwork

Campus Spaces

Gathering · Arrival · Shade · Social connection · Functionality

Playform environments are pre-planned, costed and designed around the realities of school procurement and delivery.

Schools can begin with one immediate priority or use Playform progressively as part of a longer-term outdoor environment strategy.

You identify the outcome. Playform helps turn it into an achievable project.

Let's build on your vision.



Planning doesn't need to begin when the funding arrives.

If your school is considering future outdoor improvements, now is the time to start thinking about what should come first.

We can help you:

- understand how your existing environment is being used
- identify gaps and opportunities
- clarify the outcomes that matter most
- explore appropriate project priorities
- understand likely project investment
- and prepare a clear direction before urgency arrives.

Then when the school is ready or when an unexpected opportunity appears you already know where to start.



Book a complimentary site consultation

Let's walk the school together and explore what your outdoor environment could become.

www.ulp.com.au/schools/ · (02) 9958 1988 · contact@ulp.com.au



Book a consultation



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