



Designing Safe and Supportive Physical Classroom Environments: A Checklist

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Physical classroom environments are a frequently overlooked but crucial aspect of creating safe and supportive learning environments. The term *physical classroom environment* refers to the overall design, layout, and content of a learning space—including furniture, décor, organization, and even lighting. Well-maintained, high-quality, and safe physical environments, according to the National Center on Safe Supportive School Environments (n.d.) and the California Center for School Climate (Magby & Cerna, 2023), are critical for positive school climate and support student morale, behavior, and achievement.

Knowing that physical classroom environments can help you achieve your classroom goals is one thing; knowing how to do it is quite another! This checklist offers recommendations backed by peer-reviewed research as well as expertise from experienced educators. The recommendations are organized by guiding principles—reminding ourselves of the *why* behind our design decisions. According to the guiding principles, classroom environments should be

1. Uncluttered and focused
2. Flexible and adaptive
3. Warm and calm
4. Supportive and caring
5. Community-oriented

All five of these guiding principles are based on the fundamental belief that all students deserve a classroom that accepts, supports, and values them as individuals with unique needs, experiences, and identities.

Using the Checklist

This checklist is not meant to be a one-time activity or a tool for teacher evaluation. It is, instead, a tool for ongoing reflection and improvement. It can help you create a positive and supportive learning environment in which students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Each of the tables that follow focuses on a single guiding principle. Each table is broken down into three columns. The first column, *Features*, prompts you to think about how the physical features of your classroom environment align with that principle. The second column, *Observations*, is designed to help you see your classroom with an empathetic eye; imagine you're a new student and take note of what you see in the classroom. Then, in the *Opportunities for Your Classroom* column, turn your observations and knowledge of available resources (including time and funding) into actionable ideas. What concrete steps can you take to shift the space to better align with the guiding principles? Think about asking your students as well!

Not every suggestion will work for you, your students, or your classroom—and that's okay! Take what you can use and leave the rest.¹ Each table also contains one open-ended row in which we invite you to delve deeper. There, you can consider your students' unique needs, developmental stages, and perspectives to generate additional ideas for designing safe and supportive spaces.

Whether you start with one small change or commit to a complete overhaul, it is important to remember the *why*: You and your students deserve to spend your days in an environment that feels good, promotes wellness, and cultivates learning and connection. That, and this work is *fun*! Don't forget to enjoy the process of imagining and shaping your classroom into a magical place.

¹ We understand that each educator will have varying levels of control over what they can and cannot change in their schools and classrooms. All suggestions and ideas are well-supported by experts, but you are the expert of your specific context! Work with your school community to make the best decisions for you and your students.

The Physical Classroom Environment Checklist

Guiding Principle 1: Uncluttered and Focused

An uncluttered and focused classroom environment optimizes physical space by removing unnecessary and distracting elements. Clutter overloads your students' brains (and yours too!) with a great deal of stimuli, causing their senses to work overtime on unnecessary tasks (Thorpe, 2019). Clutter is linked to higher levels of cortisol, a stress hormone (Saxbe & Repetti, 2010). Reduce clutter and prioritize features that serve a specific and distinct purpose.

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Walls that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight classroom norms, routines, and procedures. • Share and celebrate student work that not only is high quality but also demonstrates hard work, dedication, and growth. • Spotlight student achievement and growth by sharing student data in affirming, inspiring ways. (Examples of how to engage students in this process can be found in this ASCD article.) 		
Surfaces that are <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean, free of clutter, trash, or anything that is unnecessary. • Clearly labeled and easily accessible to students (e.g., where they turn in their worksheets or homework). 		

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
<p>Storage spaces that are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clean, organized, and well labeled for ease of use. (<u>Great ideas on organization</u> can be found on <u>The Simply Organized Teacher</u>.) ▪ Accessible with student-friendly instructions about use. 		
<p>How else might your space be uncluttered and focused? Add your ideas here:</p>		

Guiding Principle 2: Flexible and Adaptive

A flexible and adaptive classroom environment prioritizes meeting students where they are and providing them with what they need to be engaged, comfortable, and safe. This includes being mindful about the physical classroom environment, such as seating, spacing, and opportunities for safe movement. Having designated spaces for different activities helps students transition between tasks and even provides a level of predictability, which can be soothing for students (Rohrer & Samson, 2014).

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Seating that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows opportunities to engage in solo, paired, and group work. Provides students with options for where and how to sit (e.g., a reading nook with a rug and beanbag chair, opportunities to stand, etc; check out some great examples of flexible seating from the staff at Bored Teachers). Adapts to students' physical and mental needs (e.g., a wheelchair accessible desk, wobble chairs, chair leg bands). 		
Spacing that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for safe and easy movement throughout the classroom. Encourages students to move their bodies in ways that keep them energized and healthy. Examples of movement in learning can be found on Edutopia. 		
How else might your space be flexible and adaptive? Add your ideas here:		

Guiding Principle 3: Warm and Calm

Through thoughtful inclusion and exclusion of various stimuli, a warm and calm classroom environment helps to promote feelings of serenity in each student. Several studies have found that natural light, the presence of indoor plants, and even fish tanks can improve student health, focus, and achievement (Bringslimark et al., 2009; Heschong et al., 2002; Langfield & James, 2009).

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Sounds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing loud and irritating noise in the classroom through norms and increased sound absorption (e.g., rugs and fabrics) Using a white noise machine, soft music, or even nature sounds to create calming sounds Using gentle sounds to cue transitions (e.g., chimes, music, cute online timers, etc.) 		
Sights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letting natural light shine Replacing harsh fluorescent bulbs with softer light (or even fluorescent light filters) Growing indoor plants to brighten the space Contemplating a fish tank for the class pet 		

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Smells: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening windows to let in fresh air • Making <u>essential oils</u> or other pleasant smells available (e.g., lavender for calming, citrus for energy) • Avoiding strong scents (e.g., garbage) 		
Touch: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Sensory and fidget tools</u> for all students to support focus and calming • Encourage respectful physical contact between students (e.g., fist-bumps, high-fives, and hugs when consented to) 		
How else might your space be warm and calm? Add your ideas here:		

Guiding Principle 4: Supportive and Caring

A supportive and caring classroom environment promotes each student's mental health and social-emotional wellness by signaling to students that they are welcomed, safe, and valued in the classroom. It is critical that all students have this feeling for their well-being and success (CAO Central, 2021). They can better focus on learning and skill development when they feel safe and supported.

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
<p>Care for emotional needs by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking students to share their energy or stress levels using cards, hand signals, or magnets on the board. (Note: It may be helpful to do this anonymously and use it as a whole-class temperature check.) Providing students with cards to ask for what they need (e.g., a walking break, the calming corner, a conversation with the school counselor).² 		
<p>Celebrate and appreciate students by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing students with stickers or cards they can use to thank and celebrate their classmates. Making space for students to bring in and share their culture or personal interests with the class. Creating a portrait corner where students <u>share their identities</u> and explore perceptions and acceptance as a community. 		

² Please note that this suggestion—and all suggestions in this checklist—require clear norm and expectation setting and student practice to ensure the successful and beneficial outcomes of these physical environment features.

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
<p><u>A calming corner:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Designed to aid in calming and self-regulation when students need a break (i.e., students can request and be offered this space) ▪ Contains soft and comfortable furnishings (e.g., beanbag chair, pillows) ▪ Includes soothing items like stuffed animals, sensory tools, Play-Doh, and/or notebooks for journaling ▪ <u>Worksheets</u> that assist students to reflect on how they are feeling and what they need 		
<p>How else might your space be supportive and caring? Add your ideas here:</p>		

Guiding Principle 5: Community-Oriented

A community-oriented classroom environment communicates the value of each member through practices and norms that are enhanced by the space. This is significant because sense of belonging contributes to students' physical and mental health, influences academic performance, and has long-term benefits (Ralph, 2022).

Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
<p>Opportunities to connect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a “Get to Know Us” space where students and teachers can share information about their favorite animals, activities, and more. Update regularly! • Make use of group spaces and communication norms to encourage genuine connection between students. (This guide from Learning for Justice is excellent for facilitating critical discussions!) 		
<p>Opportunities to contribute:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host community discussions where students are encouraged to voice their preferences for the classroom. (Morning meetings and restorative circles are great options.) • Cocreate <u>student roles</u> that allow each student to meaningfully contribute to the running of the classroom (e.g., passing out snacks, wiping down the board, leading small group discussions). • Cocreate classroom agreements to provide autonomy, community building, buy-in, and ownership. 		
<p>How else might your space be community-oriented? Add your ideas here:</p>		

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Antoinette Miller for reviewing and providing essential feedback on drafts of this brief. A special thank you to Cesar Solis, a secondary educator, and Jennifer Zhang, an elementary educator with the Huntington Beach City School District, for their contributions and feedback on this brief.

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Suggested citation: Pfister, T., Magby, N., & Betz, J. (2023). *Designing safe and supportive physical classroom environments: A checklist*. California Center for School Climate at WestEd.

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Classrooms

- ☐ The children in your care will need appropriate environments to foster positive learning and social interaction. For this reason, classrooms that exceed the minimum footage required are highly recommended.
- ☐ Classrooms should have space for children to meet as a large group, work in small groups, and have time alone with adequate supervision.
- ☐ Child-size furniture and equipment are essential to the classroom. Chairs, tables, cabinets, and shelving should be the appropriate heights for children.
- ☐ Each learning center should have at least two areas for storing materials. Cabinets and open shelving units can be used to define the center areas.
- ☐ Learning center materials that children use each day should be easily accessible and kept in storage bins.
- ☐ If children eat meals in classrooms, consider tables large enough to accommodate 6-8 children instead of long cafeteria-type tables.
- ☐ Classrooms should be light with neutral walls.
- ☐ Natural light provides an inviting area and gives a nice atmosphere to classrooms.
- ☐ Some states require minimal lighting levels; check with licensing agencies regarding any regulations.
- ☐ Each classroom should have bathrooms available for children and one conveniently located for adults.
- ☐ Fire regulations may require two exits; one is your entrance to the classroom, and the other may lead to the outdoor play area. Check with your local fire department for requirements.
- ☐ Patios adjacent to classrooms provide additional areas for messy water activities.

Materials & Equipment

- ☐ Selection of materials should be based on developmental practices of supporting the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth of children.
- ☐ Select and purchase similar furniture and materials for each classroom. This gives your center a refined look. Selection of furniture and equipment should be based on how often each will be used on a daily basis.
- ☐ Purchase the following for each child: cot, chair, table space, and cubbie for personal belongings.
- ☐ Select materials and equipment that are high quality because you will save on replacement and repair costs.
- ☐ Materials and equipment must be durable and safe.
- ☐ Materials should be open-ended and allow for a wide range of manipulative and creative uses.
- ☐ Look for furniture that is well-built and has easy-to-clean surfaces.

- ☐ Purchase furniture from an established school supply company.
- ☐ Cultural representation of the program's enrollment should be integrated throughout the classroom with appropriate materials and props.
- ☐ Creative and expressive materials that stimulate thinking, problem solving, and emergent literacy should be selected for all play areas in the classroom.

Storage

- ☐ Cots and rest mats require a large storage area.
- ☐ Each classroom should have an easily accessible closet or cabinet that can be closed, and is available on a daily basis. Storage areas should have adjustable shelving for flexibility as needed.
- ☐ There should be a main storage area for the entire center for large items, shared items, and bulk purchases such as art supplies and other materials.
- ☐ A locking closet should serve as a storage area for cleaning and maintenance supplies and equipment.
- ☐ Audio-visual equipment should have adequate storage. If the center has multiple classrooms, consider dedicating an area as the main storage area.

Learning Centers

- ☐ Each classroom should have learning centers. These centers provide children with appropriate, stimulating learning environments. Materials used in all learning centers should include items that reflect language, culture, and diversity in the broader world.

Art:

- ☐ Children will create a wide range of artwork: drawing, painting, coloring, clay sculptures, collages, and structures.
- ☐ The floor covering should make it easy to clean up any messes.
- ☐ The art area requires a table and chairs for a group of children to work comfortably.
- ☐ Storage cabinets are needed for containers of materials and tools children will use.
- ☐ Suggested Materials: paper in a variety of sizes and textures for drawing and coloring, construction paper, painting paper, collage materials, and clays.
- ☐ Suggested Tools: crayons, markers, colored pencils, paints, brushes, cups, aprons, clay tools, trays, storage containers, and work trays.
- ☐ The area should have a bulletin board to display children's work at their eye level.
- ☐ Children should have easy-to-clean work surfaces and height-appropriate chairs.

- ❑ The art area should have easels for painting and a place for drying artwork. This area should also have different clays and assorted surfaces.

Blocks:

- ❑ A large, carpeted area is ideal for construction and building activities because carpet helps keep the noise level down.
- ❑ Each classroom should have several complete sets of blocks. For a center with multiple classrooms, consider purchasing a wide variety of complete block sets that can be rotated. Hollow blocks add dimension and variety to construction.
- ❑ Props may include play figures, transportation toys, play animals, block-size doors, windows, and signs. Include containers and adequate space for appropriate storage.

Dramatic Play:

- ❑ Each classroom needs child-size house furniture that includes table and chairs, refrigerator, stove, sink, cupboard, doll beds, ironing board, high chairs, sofa, and rocking chair.
- ❑ Role play props include dolls and doll clothes and a variety of dress-up clothes, play food, dish sets, and pots and pans.
- ❑ This area should have an unbreakable mirror and storage for dress-up clothes.
- ❑ Puppets enhance the dramatic play area.
- ❑ Shelving and containers keep role play props organized.
- ❑ The carpeted area needs a child-size workbench. Include safety goggles and an apron for each child who works in this area. Include a basic play carpenter tool set for this area.

Discovery/Science Area:

- ❑ Include a variety of collections of things such as stones and seashells for children to look at, play with, and explore.
- ❑ Make scientific tools available such as magnets, scales and balances.
- ❑ Provide fish or other classroom pets in appropriate habitats.
- ❑ Arrange tables and chairs for children to look at and work with the collections or science tools.

Music and Movement Area:

- ❑ You will need a radio, CD, or MP3 player for this area. Include a high quality collection of age-appropriate music.
- ❑ Create a classroom collection of musical instruments so each child has an instrument to play.
- ❑ Collect instruments that reflect diversity of sound and culture. Include storage and shelving.

Manipulative Area:

- ❑ Include materials that allow children to classify objects, build structures, and solve problems, such as puzzles and table toys that fit together for building and designing.
- ❑ Include fine motor materials such as pegs and peg boards, beads, and other items to string and lace.
- ❑ This area should offer manipulatives to be used in creating designs.
- ❑ Provide tables and chairs for children to work at in the manipulative area. Consider using carpet for this area because children also like to work on the floor.
- ❑ This area will need storage containers for manipulatives and storage racks for puzzles. Include a shelving unit to hold racks and containers.

Literacy Area:

- ❑ Children will come to this area to read and look at books, create and listen to stories, and play with materials. Your book collection should include at least 3-5 books for each child in the classroom.
- ❑ A quality book collection should include picture books, storybooks, and poetry books that have a wide range of topics: families, humor, word and alphabet, cultural diversity, seasonal/holidays, fantasy, and true stories.
- ❑ Centers with several classrooms may consider creating a center library for all classrooms and families to use.
- ❑ Literacy areas need tables and chairs and comfortable places to sit and relax. Consider a carpeted area for some activities. Literacy areas also need a variety of age-appropriate literacy games and materials.
- ❑ Include materials for children to create pictures and stories: paper in a variety of sizes, writing tools, and writing boards.
- ❑ Flannelboard stories are ideal for both individual and group use. Audio-visual equipment is essential to your literacy area.
- ❑ Place a bulletin board in the literacy area at a child's eye level and display photo picture collections, children's stories, and art work.

Water/Sand Play Area:

- ❑ Provide an appropriately sized water and/or sand table. Flooring should be tile or messy mat.
- ❑ Include props for both water and sand activities.
- ❑ Shelving and storage areas will be needed for play materials. This area should include aprons for water play.

Indoor Large Motor Activities Area:

- ❑ Include climbing structures.
- ❑ Sturdy, movable play sets are essential to this area.
- ❑ Balls, hoops, and jump ropes are needed.

Environment Rating Scale (ERS®)

What is ERS?

An ERS observation focuses on the typical daily experiences of children in early childhood and out-of-school time settings. The assessment considers how teacher engagement, the spaces and equipment used by the children, accessible play materials, and children's activities combine to enhance learning. The ERS instruments are comprised of subscales and items. ERS items include indicators that reflect consistently occurring quality practices and provisions:

- Indoor and outdoor space and furnishings and access to developmentally appropriate toys, materials, and activities
- Interactions and activities to support social-emotional and cognitive development
- Program structure including transitions and schedules
- Personal care routines including health and safety practices
- Supports for math and number concept development
- Supports for exploring nature and science
- Supports for individualized creative expression
- Supports for language and literacy development

Which program(s) could use ERS?

ERS can be used in all early childhood and school-age settings. The age specific ERS instruments used in Pennsylvania include:

- ITERS-3: Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale - Third Edition (birth-36 months)
- ECERS-3: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Third Edition (37 months -K)
- SACERS-U: School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale - Updated (school-age)
- FCCERS-3: Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale - Third Edition (birth-school-age in a residential setting)

ERS assessment process

External ERS assessments are conducted by the Program Quality Assessment (PQA) team.

Internal ERS assessments are conducted by the program's internal assessment team. Programs partner with the quality coach and PQA assessor when planning for and conducting internal assessment, and when analyzing the information collected during the internal assessment process.

The ITERS-3, ECERS-3, and FCCERS-3 collect information during a three-hour observation in the indoor and outdoor spaces used by children. The SACERS-U observation includes an observation and an interview with program staff about unobserved practices and policies.

Please see [How to Conduct an Internal Assessment Using the ERS](#) for detailed information on using the ERS for internal assessment.

How does ERS support continuous quality improvement (CQI)?

Information gathered during an ERS observation can be used by the program to identify strengths in the classroom environment, highlight positive teacher interactions, and learn about areas for growth. The information gathered can be used to help create the program's continuous quality improvement plan and for planning professional development.

Additional information/training

- [Environment Rating Scales Institute \(ERSI\) \(ersi.info\)](https://ersi.info)
- [Environment Rating Scales \(ERS\) \(pakeys.org/pqa/poi/ers\)](https://pakeys.org/pqa/poi/ers)
- [How to Conduct an Internal Assessment Using the ERS \(pakeys.org/how-to-ERS\)](https://pakeys.org/how-to-ERS)
- [Facilitated Program Observation Instrument Orientation Request \(FPO\) \(pakeys.org\)](https://pakeys.org)
- [Program Quality Assessment Professional Development \(pakeys.org/pqa/professional-development\)](https://pakeys.org/pqa/professional-development)