

Fact Sheet #7 - Performance Standard 7: Positive Learning Environment

POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The teacher provides a well-managed, safe, and orderly environment that is conducive to learning and encourages respect for all.

Students need an engaging, stimulating, and enriching learning environment to grow and thrive. In order to achieve this type of rich environment, effective teachers establish and communicate guidelines for expected behavior, monitor student behavior, keep students on task, and infuse humor, care, and respect into the classroom interactions, so as to develop a climate that is conducive to student learning. As a result, research has indicated that a positive learning environment can shape student outcomes in cognitive, motivational, emotional, and behavioral domains.¹

Among others, the attributes of caring, supportive, safe, challenging, and academically robust help define what it means to have a positive learning environment that is conducive to student success.² However it is defined, virtually all teachers and administrators, and even students, themselves, recognize how valuable a positive classroom climate is to learning. The most prevalent criteria used to define learning environments are probably the physical arrangement of the classroom, discipline and routines, organization of learning activities, and the engagement of students with tasks, among others. The key features highlighted next can elucidate what research indicates about an effective learning environment.³

Key Features of an Effective Learning Environment

Defining Characteristics	Focus
Physical arrangement of the classroom	The teacher develops functional floor plans with teacher and student work areas and furniture/materials placement for optimal benefit. ⁴

Discipline and routines	The teacher establishes classroom rules and procedures early on in the school year. ⁵
Organization of learning activities	Classroom activities have an academic focus. The teacher orchestrates smooth transitions and maintains momentum throughout teaching and learning. ⁶
Engagement of students	The teacher uses effective questioning, smooth transitions, and challenging but interesting activities to increase student engagement in learning and student accountability. ⁷
Maximizing instructional time	The teacher protects instruction from disruption and makes the most out of every instructional moment. ⁸
Communication of high expectations	The teacher assumes responsibility for student learning, sets high (but reasonable) expectations for all students, and supports students in achieving them. ⁹
Care and respect	The teacher establishes rapport and trustworthiness with students by being fair, caring, respectful, and enthusiastic. ¹⁰

Research has found that an effective teacher:

- Is adept at organizing and maintaining an effective classroom environment.¹¹
- Has a sense of “with-it-ness,” which can be translated as being aware of when routines need to be altered or an intervention may be needed to prevent behavior problems.¹²
- Fosters relationships where respect and learning are central so students feel safe in

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taking risks that are associated with learning and believes in the students.¹³

- Is culturally competent and attuned to students’ interests both in and out of school.¹⁴
- Establishes good discipline, effective routines, smooth transitions, and ownership of the environment as components of establishing a supportive and collaborative climate.¹⁵

A review of research connecting learning environment and student achievement emphasizes a number of key dimensions, including classroom management and structure, positive classroom climate, and classroom talk.

Classroom management and structure: Teachers who emphasize structure in the classroom are more effective than those who do not.¹⁶ In general, structure means “an aggregate of elements of an entity in their relationships to each other.”¹⁷ For our purposes in education, specifically, structure involves physically orienting the classroom for instruction, preparing and organizing materials, and framing lessons in a coherent and logical manner. Effective teachers implement good classroom management to establish order, engage students, and elicit student cooperation, with an ultimate purpose to establish and maintain an environment conducive to instruction and learning.¹⁸ Two key features of effective classroom management are:

1. Good management is preventive rather than reactive.
2. Teachers create well-managed classrooms by identifying and teaching desirable behaviors to students.

Effective teachers were found to maintain their management system by “monitoring and providing prompt feedback, pacing class activities to keep them moving, and by consistently applying classroom procedures and consequence.”¹⁹ The extant research is fairly clear that good classroom management has a positive influence on students’ motivational development.

Positive classroom climate: Effective teachers build a classroom climate where error (i.e., risk taking) is welcomed, where student questioning

is high, where engagement is the norm, and where students can gain reputations as effective learners.²⁰ Teachers who make the effort to engage in positive interactions with students make a difference in the academic and social development of their students.²¹

Classroom talk: The interaction between teacher and students, and among students, is another significant indicator of learning environment. Authority is more distributed than centralized through the communication that happens in a positive classroom environment. Additionally, the talk between teacher and student is personalized and personal. Exemplary teachers have been found to use authentic conversation to learn about students and encourage students to engage their peers’ ideas.²²

A safe school always starts with individual safe classrooms. Cornell and Mayer stated that “academic success for students begins with a trusting and mutually respectful relationship between student and teacher, extends to classroom order, and culminates in a safe and supportive school climate that is profoundly and inextricably linked to learning outcomes.”²³ The classroom environment refers to the conditions, circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting the development and performance of learners. The classroom climate is the shared perceptions of learners about the classroom environment. The classroom climate can range from a warm, welcoming and nurturing atmosphere to one characterized by coldness and indifference.²⁴

Attributes of Positive Learning Environment

Positive Attributes	Descriptions
Classroom management and structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying and communicating desirable behavior • consistently applying rules and procedures • monitoring student behavior • taking preventive rather than reactive management actions • pacing class activities and

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	<p>transitioning between tasks smoothly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maximizing instructional time • keeping students on task • making learning meaningful²⁵
Positive classroom climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cooperation among teachers and students • common interest and values • pursuit of common goals • a clear academic focus • well-organized and well-planned lessons • explicit learning objectives • appropriate level of task difficulty for students • appropriate instructional pace²⁶
Classroom talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respectful, supportive, and productive • modeled by teachers • practiced to students

Anderson suggested that classes have a distinctive personality or “climate” which influences the learning efficiency of their members. The properties that make up a classroom environment include interpersonal relationships among students, relationships between students and their teachers, relationships between students and both the subject being studied and the method of learning, and the students’ perception of the structure of the class.²⁷

As early as 1973, Moos, the first researcher who popularized the concept of classroom climate, developed a measurement scale that measures the climate within a classroom on three broad categories:²⁸

- *Relationships* – the degree to which individuals in the environment help and support each other and express themselves openly and freely.
- *Personal development* – the degree to which personal self-enhancement can occur.
- *Maintenance and change in the system* – the degree to which the environment is orderly,

clear in its expectations, maintains control, and is able to change.

Similarly, the scale developed by Sinclair and Fraser measures classroom environment from five aspects:²⁹

- *Cooperation* – the extent to which students cooperate with each other during class and activities.
- *Teacher Support* – the extent to which the teacher helps, encourages, and is interested in the students.
- *Task Orientation* – the extent to which it is important to the class to stay on task and complete class work.
- *Involvement* – the extent to which students participate actively in their class activities and discussions.
- *Equity* – the extent to which the teacher treats all students equally, including the distribution of praise and questioning and the inclusion in discussion.

Research has demonstrated that students in cooperative learning environments typically perform better than those in competitive or individualistic situations in terms of their reasoning, the generation of new ideas and solutions, and how well they transfer what they learn from one situation to another, as well as on traditional test measures.³⁰ The trust between the teacher and students and among students themselves is a key element to effective classroom environment. Tschannen-Moran explained the importance of trust in this way: “Without trust, students’ energy is diverted toward self-protection and away from learning.”³¹

A synthesis of research studies indicates that learning outcomes and gains are positively associated with learning environment characteristics like cohesiveness, satisfaction, task difficulty, formality, goal direction, democracy, and the material environment, but negatively associated with characteristics like friction, cliqueness, apathy, and disorganization.³² Students’ perceptions of their learning environment impact their self-concept as a learner. Byer found a positive relationship between students’ perceptions of classroom

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

social climate, students' perceptions of classroom affiliation, and academic self-concept.³³ Byer also found a positive relationship between students' perceptions of classroom involvement and academic self-concept.³⁴ Research also found that students' perceptions of the classroom social environment (teacher support, promotion of mutual respect, promotion of task-related interaction, student support) were related to their engagement in the classroom (self-regulation and task-related interaction).³⁵

The interaction between teacher and students is a significant indicator of learning environment. Teachers and students spend much of their day interacting academically. However, social interactions and those that give the teacher opportunities to demonstrate caring, fairness, and respect have been shown to be an important element of teacher effectiveness. A teacher's ability to relate to students and to make positive, caring connections with them plays a significant role in cultivating a positive learning environment and promoting student achievement.³⁶

Teachers who make the effort to engage in positive interactions with students make a difference in the academic and social development of their students. A constructive interaction with students is a motivator for students to act in accordance with the expectation of their teacher. Studies confirm that low student achievement can result from stressful student-adult relationships, while positive relationships can lead to higher levels of student participation and engagement.³⁷

Teacher interactions with students have been found to have effects at all grade levels. Hamre and Pianta found that first grade teachers who engaged in positive interactions with at-risk students reduced the probability of those students experiencing failure in the early grades.³⁸ Barney found that middle school students developed a more positive attitude toward course content when their teachers took the time to interact with them.³⁹ Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, and DiBella found that secondary teachers who got to know their students personally were able to work with them to develop and achieve goals.⁴⁰

Cornelius-White synthesized 119 studies that examined the impact of learner-centered teacher-student relationships on student outcomes.⁴¹ Specifically, the author focused on the teacher-students relationships that are characterized by empathy, warmth, genuineness, non-directiveness, higher-order thinking, encouraging learning/challenge, adapting to individual and social differences, and composites of these. Overall, the meta-analysis found that these student-centered teacher variables have positive association with student cognitive (e.g., academic achievement in math, science, social science, and verbal achievement), affective (e.g., positive motivation, self-esteem/mental health, social connections), and behavioral (e.g., student participation/initiation, outcomes, attendance/absences, disruptive behavior) outcomes. The mean correlations ($r = .31$) are above the average compared with other educational interventions.

The following table offers an overview of five basic emotional needs of students that need to be addressed to create a classroom environment for optimal learning and growth:⁴²

Student Emotional Needs and Building an Affectively Healthy Learning Environment

Domains of Student Emotional Needs	Characteristics of an Affectively Healthy Learning Environment	What Teachers Can Do?
Psychological safety	Learners know what is expected, feel safe, and protected, are able to trust others and are able to anticipate or predict the sequence of events from experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish clearly defined classroom procedures, policies and practices. • Act responsibly and confidences. • Maintain neat, clean and orderly physical conditions within the classroom.

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Teacher Keys Effectiveness System**

A positive self-image	Learners have a strong sense of personal worth and feel capable of being loved and entitled to happiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give positive feedback that can help students to become aware of their strengths and areas for growth. • Build rapport with students. • Honor each child's uniqueness. • Demonstrate acceptance and caring.
Feelings of belongings	Learners feel that they are equal to others and they are accepted and valued as a member of something larger. The whole class is characterized by bonding, class cohesiveness and a sense of group pride.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an accepting, warm classroom culture. • Reduce feelings of isolation or competition by involving students in classroom activities. • Provide students with opportunities to be of service to others.
Purposeful behavior	Learners bring meaning to their efforts and sustain an intrinsic joy of learning and the achievement of solving their own problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a model to take responsibility for and initiative in the learning process. • Set challenging but achievable expectations. • Convey clear expectations. • Express confidence and faith in their students' abilities. • Strengthen values such as responsibility, effort, honesty, perseverance, determination, and commitment.

A sense of personal competence	Learners are attaining optimal learning and performance, both cognitively and affectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide options of learning materials and tasks based on students' ability. • Be the support and the cheerleader for the students. • Recognize the efforts exerted and the growth achieved by individual students. • Provide constructive, informative feedback to help students become better. • Celebrate success.
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Allington and Johnston observed and interviewed 30 fourth-grade literacy teachers in 24 schools from five states, who were identified as exemplary through a snowball nomination process.⁴³ These teachers' classroom talk was found to have the following characteristics:

- The classroom talk could be described as respectful, supportive, and productive and was not only modeled by the teacher in interactions with students, but also deliberately taught, and expected.
- The talk between teacher and student was personalized and personal. Exemplary teachers used authentic conversation to learn about students. They encouraged students to engage each other's ideas. The authority was more distributed than centralized.
- "No" or "Yes" were rarely uttered by the teachers except in response to gross social transgression.

Effective teachers were found to maintain their management system by "monitoring and providing prompt feedback, pacing class activities to keep them moving, and by consistently applying classroom procedures and consequence."⁴⁴ Wang, Haertel, and Walberg analyzed a knowledge base comprising 11,000 statistical findings connecting a variety of variables and student achievement in order to

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

answer the question: *What helps students learn?* They found effective classroom management was one of the most influential variables in student learning. They concluded, “Effective classroom management increases student engagement, decreases disruptive behaviors, and makes good use of instructional time.”⁴⁵ Their definition of effective classroom management included effective questioning/recitation strategies, learner accountability, smooth transitions, and teacher “with-it-ness.”

Taylor et al. also found the most accomplished teachers were experts at classroom management. In general, they had well-established classroom routines and procedures for handling behavior problems, smooth transitions between activities, and a rapid rate of instruction, thus, allowing for high instructional density. They managed, on average, to engage virtually all (96%) of their students in the work of the classroom.⁴⁶

Classroom management includes actions taken by teachers to establish order, engage students, and elicit student cooperation, with an ultimate purpose to establish and maintain an environment conducive to instruction and learning.⁴⁷ Two key features of effective classroom management are:

1. Good management is preventive rather than reactive.
2. Teachers help create well-managed classrooms by identifying and teaching desirable behaviors to students.

Elements of effective classroom management include establishing routines and procedures to limit disruption and time taken away from teaching and learning, maintaining momentum and variety in instructional practices, and monitoring and responding to student activity. These elements contribute to students’ active engagement in the learning process.⁴⁸ Research on the classroom management skills of effective teachers has consistently found that they establish routines for all daily tasks and needs.⁴⁹ Effective classroom managers orchestrate smooth transitions and continuity of momentum throughout the day to increase the amount of time spent on academic tasks. An exploratory study of effective versus ineffective teachers found that

teachers whose students make greater achievement gains use more routines for everyday tasks than teachers whose students made less than expected achievement gains.⁵⁰ Most effective teachers admit that rules, procedures, and routines take precedence over academic lessons during the first week of school, noting that organization takes a considerable investment of time but has tremendous payback benefits.⁵¹ Another research team noted that teachers who spend more time establishing instructional routines at the beginning of the school year did not need to exert as much effort on similar tasks later in the year.⁵² The investment in initial organizational strategies yielded significant gains in reading scores throughout the year. In comparison, achievement gains were lower among students whose teachers did not demonstrate similar organization skills.

A study conducted by one research team found that students’ perception of rule clarity and teacher monitoring are positively related to their development of academic interest in secondary school mathematics classes.⁵³ Another empirical study revealed that the top quartile teachers (i.e., the most effective teachers as identified by the high academic achievement of the students they taught) were more organized with efficient routines and procedures for daily tasks, and they communicated higher behavioral expectations to students than ineffective teachers. The top teachers also were found to have less disruptive student behaviors (on average, once every two hours) than did the less effective teachers (on average, a disruption every 12 minutes).⁵⁴ Disruptive behavior takes away precious classroom learning time. Teachers who can implement effective classroom management can decrease disruptive classroom behaviors and increase student engagement in academic tasks. Disruptive behaviors are particularly problematic for classrooms in that they can interfere with learning, compete with instruction, create an unsafe learning environment, and make it less likely that students will achieve academic objectives.⁵⁵ Teachers often report disruptive behavior as a major classroom concern. Based on a poll of the America Federation of Teachers, 17% of responding teachers said they lost four or

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

more hours of teaching time per week due to disruptive student behavior.⁵⁶

Goldstein stated that teachers may inadvertently contribute to student misbehavior if they do not know how to effectively use praise, attention, reward, privileges, differential attention, time out, and punishment.⁵⁷ Some common mistakes made by teachers are using behavior management techniques inconsistently, having unrealistic expectations, inadvertently reinforcing undesirable behavior, and modeling negative behavior. For example, when attempting to manage problem behavior, teachers may pay attention to a child when the child is noncompliant and withdraw the attention when the child is compliant. Teachers may also over-rely on punishment, most frequently reprimands, rather than positive reinforcement.

Sample Performance Indicators for the Professional Knowledge of Teachers

- Responds to disruptions in a timely, appropriate manner.
- Establishes clear expectations for classroom rules, routines, and procedures and enforces them consistently and appropriately.
- Models caring, fairness, respect, and enthusiasm for learning.
- Promotes a climate of trust and teamwork within the classroom.
- Promotes respect for and understanding of students' diversity, including – but not limited to – race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability.
- Actively listens and pays attention to students' needs and responses.
- Creates a warm, attractive, inviting, and supportive classroom environment.
- Arranges the classroom materials and resources to facilitate group and individual activities.

Sample Student Evidence that Teacher met the Criteria for Level III

- Follow classroom procedures consistently, contributing to a safe and orderly environment.
- Show respect for classmates and the teacher.
- Expect consequences for inappropriate behaviors because they are informed.
- Work well with others.
- Report that the teacher recognizes them as unique learners and strives to acknowledge their differences.
- Engage in discussions of differences.
- Be receptive to working with other students from all groups.
- Receive and give regular acknowledgements, celebrations, and recognitions.

Sample Conference Prompts

- What are some examples of the ways you make connections with your students?
- How have you strived this year to make your classroom an inclusive one?
- What is your process for developing classroom rules and procedures?
- How do you address inappropriate behavior?
- How do you recognize and celebrate diversity in your classroom?
- How do you encourage students to celebrate other students' success?

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Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist					
Performance Standard 7: Positive Learning Environment					
Quality		Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I
Caring	Show concerns for students' emotional and physical well-being.				
	Create a warm and supportive classroom climate.				
	Respond to misbehavior on an individual level and privately.				
Fairness and respect	Prevent situations in which a student loses peer respect.				
	Treats students fairly.				
	Create situations for all students to succeed.				
	Show respect to all students.				
Interactions with students	Maintain professional role while being friendly.				
	Give students responsibility.				
	Value what students say.				
	Encourage student cohesiveness and cooperation.				
	Emphasize functional communication between teacher and students and among fellow students.				
Classroom Management	Use consistent and proactive discipline.				
	Establish rules, routines, and procedures early on in the school year.				
	Orchestrate smooth transitions and continuity of classroom momentum.				
	Is aware of all activities in the classroom.				
	Anticipate potential problems.				
	Use space, proximity, or movement around the classroom for nearness to trouble spots and to encourage attention.				
	Prepare materials in advance and have them ready to use.				
	Organize classroom space efficiently to support learning activities.				
	Manage the physical factors (e.g., spatial environment, visual environment) to optimize student learning.				
	Use effective questioning, smooth transitions, and challenging but interesting activities to increase student engagement and minimize disruption.				
Discipline of students	Interpret and respond to inappropriate behavior promptly.				
	Implement rules of behavior fairly and consistently.				
	Reinforce and reiterate expectations for positive behavior.				
	Use both punishment and positive reinforcement to encourage desirable student behavior.				