

What to look for in your child's classroom

Middle level

As a parent, you know that the key to your child's success in school is the classroom "unit": your child, the teacher, and the other students. But how can you know whether or not the learning environment in that classroom is positive—and whether quality teaching is going on there?



This document provides some answers to those questions, based on the Pittsburgh District's goals, and conclusions from research on high-achieving classrooms across the country. Wherever possible, general statements are followed by "evidence": specific examples you can look for over the course of several visits. (If you can only visit once or twice, this document will be more useful if you choose one area to focus on.) Please note: this is an outline only. It is not intended to cover every aspect of a successful classroom.



Teaching

Teaching reflects the District’s learning goals for students.

Evidence:

• Literacy examples:

- Along with reading textbooks, there is a “classroom library” with many books at different reading levels.
- The classroom library is organized by type (“genre”), such as “biographies,” “science fiction”...
- Students are aware of the District goal to read 25 books a year, and to read a range of fiction and nonfiction, some of the same type (mystery novels, poetry...), some by the same author.
- Students learn challenging vocabulary words by discussing a wide variety of examples.
- Each student keeps a literacy “portfolio” (a purposeful collection of work), with samples of writing for different purposes, a list of books they’ve read, evidence of oral presentations, and other materials.

• Math examples:

- Each student keeps an organized math notebook, with vocabulary words, homework assignments, notes, and other information.
- Students have access to calculators, graph paper, measuring instruments and other tools, and “manipulatives” (objects such as cubes, counters, plastic strips, tiles).
- Lessons follow this format: the teacher introduces a task, presents examples, and guides students through them; students work alone, in pairs, or in small groups; students present their conclusions and discuss them with the class.

The teacher supports students in learning new things by drawing connections to what they already know (*this is like that*).

Evidence:

- The teacher links new facts and information to ideas previously discussed.
- The teacher encourages students to connect new learning with the world outside of school, including news items, local events, TV shows, or individual student interests.
- Examples of these connections can be seen in the classroom—displayed on charts or posters, or found in student writing.



The teacher asks students to think, not just to memorize and remember facts.

Evidence:

- Students are invited to discuss, debate and/or defend their ideas, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies.
- The teacher poses questions that require thoughtful answers.
Why do you think the author wrote this? Why is this skill important to anyone? Is there another point of view? Could there be a different solution to this problem?
- The teacher allows students to discover skills and concepts on their own by providing time and support for them to struggle with ideas and meanings.
- Classroom and homework assignments often involve more than one activity. Examples:
 - Researching, planning and conducting an interview, and writing a report
 - Creating and distributing a survey, gathering responses, and graphing the results



The teacher offers many ways for each child to learn.

Evidence:

- He/she teaches the whole group, works with small groups, and sometimes works with one student individually.
- At times during the day, some students work on different tasks and/or use materials that are matched to their individual needs or interests.
- During whole-group lessons, the teacher meets individual students' learning needs. For example, he/she re-states directions, provides hands-on tools, or allows more time to complete a task.
- Students have opportunities to be active and creative while learning: drawing, building, dancing, acting, performing, presenting, experimenting...

The teacher promotes the idea that students learn from one another.

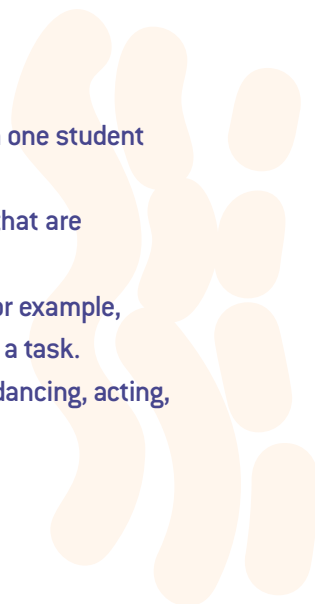
Evidence:

- Students are encouraged to develop “expertise” on different parts of a group project.
- Students have opportunities to work in pairs or teams. For example, pairs of students read each other's writing and recommend improvements (called “peer editing”), teams work together to solve math problems, small groups discuss books they're reading.
- During a class discussion, students are encouraged to “build on” what their classmates have said and to pose questions of classmates, not just the teacher.

Learning is the main activity in the classroom.

Evidence:

- Minimal time is spent on busywork, discipline, giving directions and other management issues, and interruptions.



Learning

Students understand what they are expected to learn, and how to learn.

Evidence:

- The “objectives” of the lesson (daily learning goals) are available: written on the blackboard, posted in the room, and/or discussed during the lesson.
- “Student-friendly” standards—broad learning goals for each subject area—are posted in the room and referred to by the teacher.
- Students can discuss what they’re in the process of learning, and why it’s important.
- Scoring guides—“rubrics”—and examples of good work are readily available, so students can evaluate and improve their own work. Examples:
 - Posted examples of student writing show a range of techniques and styles used for different purposes (informational reports, letters, responses to literary works...).
 - Posted examples of math assignments show a range of strategies for solving problems and different ways to show solutions (graphs, charts, pictures, written explanations...).
- Students know where to find answers to their questions, beyond asking the teacher. For example, they turn to:
 - Books
 - Computers
 - Other students
 - Posted lists of strategies, such as steps to follow to improve their writing or to solve math problems
 - Vocabulary words posted on the wall (“word walls”)
- Students keep their important work in portfolios, work folders or math notebooks, which are readily accessible so they can see where they need to improve.

In many ways, students show what they’ve learned.

Evidence:

- Students engage in discussions about what they’ve learned, with their teachers and with classmates.
- During discussions, students refer to sources to back up their statements (“In the paragraph at the top of page 3...”).
- Students suggest alternatives, such as another perspective on an author’s intent, and argue for a point of view.
- Students identify important ideas and summarize what they have read.
- Students describe how their work meets the standard, according to a “rubric” or scoring guide (“The rubric says to show your work. I wrote how I solved the problem and I made a chart”).
- Students reflect on improvements in their own work by comparing pieces in their portfolios, work folders or notebooks.



Social environment

The teacher models respect for others.

The teacher treats each child as an individual, while promoting the class as a learning community.

Evidence:

- The teacher recognizes and celebrates individual student accomplishments and goals, and class accomplishments and goals.
- Students take pride in their individual accomplishments and in class accomplishments, and look forward to future events or projects.
- Student work—not just commercially-produced material—is posted on the walls.

Students have choices about what, when, and how to complete assignments and other learning activities.

Evidence:

- Students have opportunities to choose from a group of related tasks.
- Students have opportunities to choose materials, formats and products (a poster, a diorama, a piece of writing, a web page...) to express what they've learned.

The teacher knows where students live and looks for ways to bring their communities into the classroom.

Evidence:

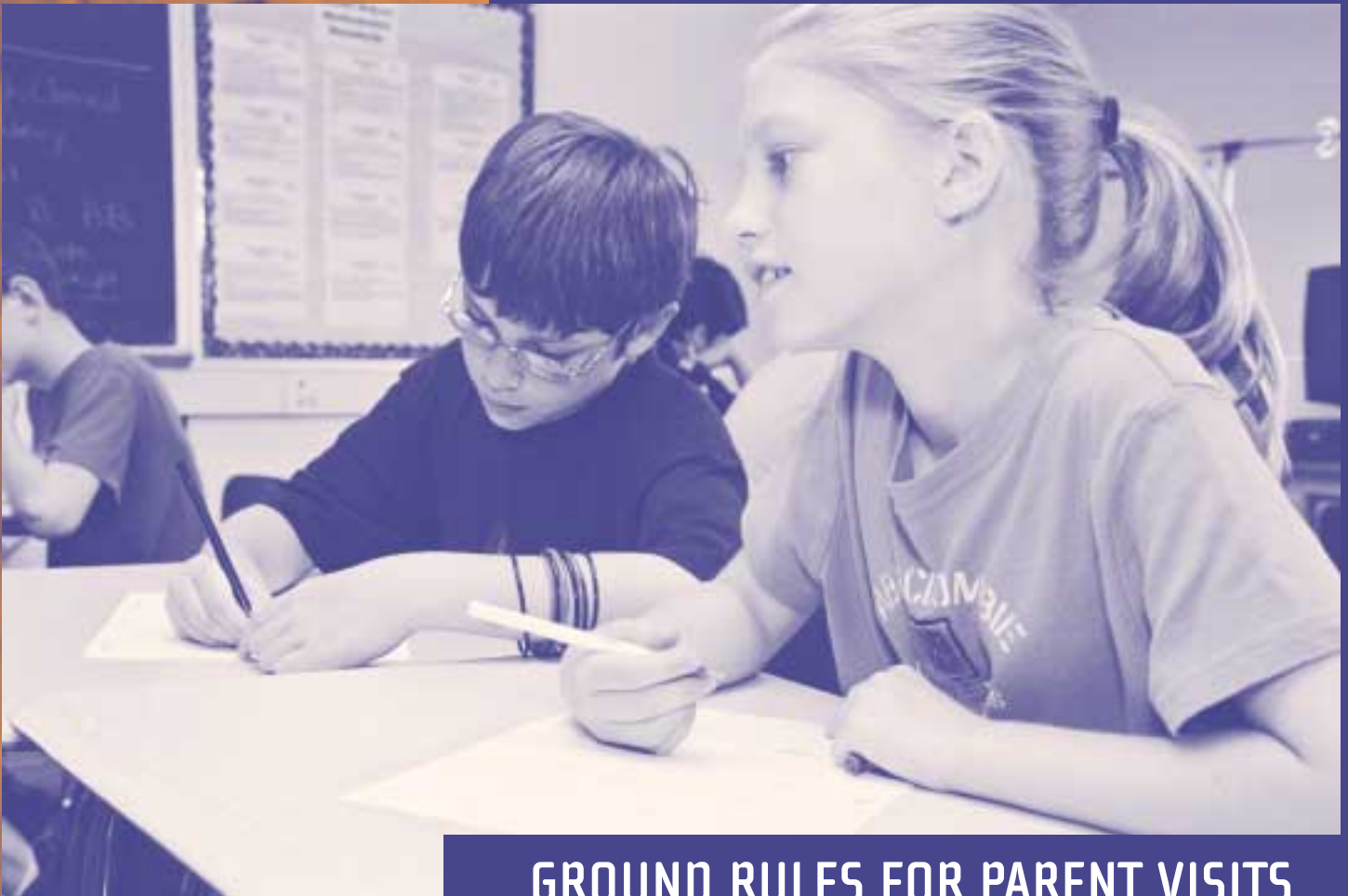
- Solving a community problem becomes a class project.
- Parents and other adults from students' neighborhoods are seen as resources for the class.

The teacher appears to like children, the age group he/she is teaching, and the subject.

The teacher manages the classroom without obvious effort.

The teacher has clear expectations for student behavior and enforces the rules consistently.





GROUND RULES FOR PARENT VISITS

Physical environment

The classroom is clean and well-stocked with tools (including computers), supplies, books and other materials. Students know where to find what they need.

Desks or tables are arranged to allow students to work in small groups and pairs.

There are comfortable places for students to read.

- Call ahead to schedule your visit. If you want to ask questions and/or discuss your observations with someone afterward, arrange it with the principal in advance.
- Stay in the back of the classroom and observe quietly, without interrupting the teacher or students.
- If you have concerns, discuss them with the principal afterward, and/or call the District's Parent Support Specialists, at 412.622.3800.

Note: Schools handle parent visits in different ways, but all schools should provide opportunities. For help facilitating your visit, call one of the District's Parent Educational Resource Centers:

North: 412.323.3302

South: 412.488.4670

East: 412.665.4952

West: 412.778.2160

Central: 412.338.8126

See "What You Can Do" for ways to get involved in school improvement.

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