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.

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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.

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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.

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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 · **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 · **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).**		

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Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Storage spaces that are · **Clean, organized, and well labeled for ease of use. (Great ideas on organization can be found on The Simply Organized Teacher.)** · **Accessible with student-friendly instructions about use.**		
How else might your space be uncluttered and focused? Add your ideas here:		

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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 · **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 · **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:		

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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 · **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 · **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**		

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Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
Smells: · **Opening windows to let in fresh air** · **Making essential oils or other pleasant smells available (e.g., lavender for calming, citrus for energy)** · **Avoiding strong scents (e.g., garbage)**		
Touch: · **Sensory and fidget tools 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:		

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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:
Care for emotional needs by · **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]**		
Celebrate and appreciate students by · **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 share their identities 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.

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Features:	Observations:	Opportunities for Your Classroom:
A calming corner: • **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** • **Worksheets that assist students to reflect on how they are feeling and what they need**		
How else might your space be supportive and caring? Add your ideas here:		

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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:
Opportunities to connect: · **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!)**		
Opportunities to contribute: · **Host community discussions where students are encouraged to voice their preferences for the classroom. (Morning meetings and restorative circles are great options.)** · **Cocreate student roles 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.**		
How else might your space be community-oriented? Add your ideas here:		

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