



Office of Kindergarten to Third Education

K-3Office@doe.nj.gov

New Jersey Department of Education
Division of Early Childhood Services

Elements of High-Quality First to Third Grade Classrooms Quality Checklist

Early learners in first, second, and third grade benefit from a teaching and learning environment that supports the child holistically. These early years are a time in which children gain increasing mastery in every area of their development and learning. Developmentally appropriate learning environments support first–third grade students as they master foundational skills and concepts, develop attitudes toward school, and form ideas about themselves as learners.

Research shows that students who are consistently taught by effective teachers who are knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practices make great cognitive and social and emotional gains.

The Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education promotes learning environments that are comprised of best practices that meet the needs of students holistically. To support districts in ensuring students in the early grades experience a quality learning environment, the Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education developed this **Elements of High-Quality First to Third Grade Classrooms Checklist**. The purpose of this document is to provide primary educators and administrators with a guide for establishing and maintaining a learning environment that will meet the needs of the whole child.

This checklist focuses on high-quality elements in the following categories:

- ✓ Learning Environment
- ✓ Curriculum and Instruction
- ✓ Equity and Social Context



Each category highlights specific characteristics of developmentally appropriate practices that support early learners holistically. Primary educators and administrators are encouraged to use this checklist as a tool to analyze and reflect on practices that are implemented in their first, second, and third grade classrooms. Additional resources regarding best practices in the primary grades may be found in the New Jersey First to Third Grade Program Implementation Guidelines.

Learning Environment

Classroom Arrangement

The classroom environment should be designed to promote active engagement and support students' learning and development.

- ✓ Storage is available for materials.
- ✓ Materials are organized in the classroom in specific locations or centers where investigations and activities can occur.
- ✓ Meeting area for whole group activities is available.
- ✓ Small group areas are utilized for most of the day.
- ✓ Student seating arrangement encourages collaborative work.
- ✓ Defined private space for independent work is included.
- ✓ Relaxation area for sensory and emotional breaks is available.

Display of Student Products

Displays in the classroom should consist mostly of students' work to show that each student is valued and promote sharing and learning from one another. Display student products with a purpose.

- ✓ Student products are displayed at students' eye level.
- ✓ Student products are current and changed at least monthly.
- ✓ Students select their items to be displayed.
- ✓ Student products reflect unique, original work.
- ✓ Most children have at least one item displayed (*display with the awareness to control clutter and prevent over-stimulation).
- ✓ Student products include 3-dimensional pieces.

Classroom Accessibility

Age- and disability-appropriate furniture should be available. Classroom layouts should allow for a wide range of learning styles and be flexible to provide appropriate space for students with disabilities and any assistive equipment they may use. Room arrangement allows for efficient transitions and easy movement around the room.

- ✓ Comfortable furniture and equipment are appropriate for students' sizes.
 - ✓ Students can independently access materials.
 - ✓ Accommodations are made for students with special needs.
-

Health and Classroom Safety

The classroom environment should not have a negative impact on students' health and learning.

- ✓ Health and safety practices are followed (i.e., students and teachers wash their hands before eating meals and snack and frequently throughout the day).
- ✓ Accommodations are made for children with disabilities.
- ✓ Students' medical and emergency information are accessible to the teacher.
- ✓ A two-way communication system exists between the classroom and another adult in the school.
- ✓ First Aid equipment is in the classroom.
- ✓ Staff are First Aid and/or Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) trained (at least one per classroom).

Curriculum and Instruction

Use of Materials

Choose materials that inspire students' curiosity for learning and help make a subject more relevant to them.

- ✓ Students use hands-on materials in all or most subject areas throughout the day.
- ✓ Accommodations are made to meet the needs of all students.
- ✓ A variety of tools and materials are used that reflect diverse language, cultures, and families.

Technology

Technology should be used in an age-appropriate manner to locate information, understand new concepts, and solve problems.

- ✓ All students have equitable access to technology.
- ✓ Students use computers/laptops and other digital tools to reinforce skills, produce and publish documents, and/or to draw.
- ✓ Software programs connect to classroom activities and learning goals.
- ✓ Students use the internet with teacher's support.

Monitoring Student Progress

Collect and use data from multiple sources to make meaningful and valuable judgments and instructional decisions about students.

- ✓ Data are collected on students' progress across a balance of domains (e.g., mathematics, language, literacy, social and emotional competencies).
 - ✓ Data are used to inform instruction and reduce achievement disparities.
 - ✓ Evidence is collected primarily within the context of instruction.
 - ✓ Teacher regularly conferences with each student regarding progress made over a period.
-

Teacher and Student Interaction

Teacher and student interactions should have a positive effect on students' learning and development.

- ✓ Teacher builds personal connections and relationships with students through informal conversations (e.g., greeting all students individually at the start of the school day).
- ✓ Teacher acknowledges both individual and cultural differences enthusiastically and communicates differences in a positive manner.
- ✓ Teacher shows interest in students' statements and questions.
- ✓ Teacher's feedback is constructive and expands students' learning and understanding.
- ✓ Teacher asks critical questions requiring more than simple correct answers.
- ✓ Teacher prompts students to elaborate.

Instructional Methods

Teachers must respond to students' strengths and needs through differentiated instruction and by scaffolding learning with attention to domain-specific effective pedagogy. Learning experiences are designed with developmental incremental challenges.

- ✓ Students' interest in, and curiosity about the world are used to engage them with new content and skills and to boost repeated practice of emerging skills.
- ✓ Teacher uses a variety of teaching methods to accommodate students' learning styles.
- ✓ Teacher facilitates group discussions among students.
- ✓ Activities and materials are adapted for individual students as needed.

Integration and Breadth of Content Areas

Provide students varied learning experiences through a developmentally appropriate curriculum with connections to previous learning, coherent instructional practices, and connections across domains.

- ✓ Content areas are integrated through projects and inquiry-based learning experiences throughout the school year.
 - ✓ Teacher creates learning centers or exploratory work stations that integrate content learning and provide students with opportunities to investigate, ask questions, make choices, work collaboratively, and solve problems.
 - ✓ Teacher develops activities, projects, and experiences that require students to use skills from multiple-subject areas.
 - ✓ Physical activities are integrated into various learning experiences whenever possible.
 - ✓ Students have gross motor activities outside (weather permitting) for at least 20–minutes daily.
-

Equity and Social Context

Student Choice and Voice

Provide students with opportunities to make meaningful decisions that allow them to take ownership of their learning experiences.

- ✓ Students make choices in the classroom throughout the day.
- ✓ Students make decisions that affect the entire class or group.
- ✓ Students choose whom they sit by, work with, or play with.
- ✓ Students decide which activity to do (e.g., choice board, choose the focus of projects, or inquiry-based activities).
- ✓ Students may express their voice creatively (e.g., art, writing, music).
- ✓ Students are given discussion time to explore and express their ideas.

Diverse Learners

Teachers must assist all students to become competent learners who have mastery over a variety of subject areas and are able to work as a community to apply and inquire about their learning.

- ✓ Appropriate modifications are made to include all students, particularly students with an Individualized Education Program, or 504 Plan in classroom learning activities.
- ✓ Resources are provided to all students, including the gifted and talented, to explore, extend, and apply individual learning.
- ✓ Strategies are used to build on students' strengths, regardless of their placement on a developmental continuum and mastery of academic knowledge and skills.
- ✓ Teacher creates a language- and literacy-rich environment to support English language learners.
- ✓ English language instruction is integrated into content-area teaching.

Social Skills

Create a positive learning environment that supports students to develop age-appropriate social skills and manage behaviors.

- ✓ Teacher models positive social and emotional skills throughout the day.
 - ✓ Teacher builds students' emotional literacy (i.e., feeling words) to help them recognize, understand, and express emotions.
 - ✓ Students learn strategies they can use when dealing with their emotions.
 - ✓ Teacher uses redirection and positive reinforcement.
 - ✓ Appropriate, clear expectations and rules are posted.
 - ✓ Consequences are implemented consistently and equitably.
 - ✓ Positive social interactions and negotiation for solutions to problems.
-

Classroom Transitions

Transition students between activities smoothly to preserve valuable instructional time and limit students' distractions.

- ✓ Transitions are smooth without long waiting times for students to begin another activity.
- ✓ Transitions occur in an orderly fashion.
- ✓ Teacher provides advance notice about upcoming transitions.
- ✓ Opportunities to complete unfinished activities later in the day are provided to students when needed.
- ✓ Modifications are put in place for students who struggle with transitions.

Family Engagement and Involvement

Build a partnership with families that supports active family engagement in students' learning and development.

- ✓ Teacher values and uses parent and family engagement as a strategy to expand classroom learning opportunities for students.
 - ✓ Teacher uses and provides for accessible methods of two-way communication to build learning partnerships, share student learning expectations, and progress with families (e.g., family's primary language is valued and used, teachers eliminate education jargon, offer video, and phone calls, email, face-to-face meetings, flexible scheduling, individual or group communications, written notes, class website, appropriate social media messages, etc.).
 - ✓ Frequently throughout the year, teacher describes and models learning activities and gives families a variety of choices for engaging in their child's learning (e.g., live videos, online recordings, written materials, group, or individual meetings, etc.).
 - ✓ Through a lens of cultural insight, teacher asks families how they want to be involved and provides meaningful opportunities that build their capacity to support their child's learning in and outside of school.
 - ✓ Teacher regularly shares what children are learning, why it is important as a foundation for other skills, and how families can extend learning beyond the classroom.
 - ✓ Teacher provides understandable information and data in a timely manner prior to conferences so families can hold informed conversations about their child's learning progress.
 - ✓ Teacher engages school social worker, guidance counselor, child study team, school nurse, or other professional that can provide support to families whose children are struggling with learning and/or developmentally appropriate skills.
 - ✓ Equitable parent and teacher learning partnerships are differentiated for individual family and student needs.
-

Resource

The Elements of High-Quality First – Third Grade Checklist is adapted from the Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC), by Hemmeter, Maxwell, Ault, and Schuster (2001).

References

Hemmeter, M.L., Maxwell, K.L., & Schuster, J.W. (2001). Assessment of Practice in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC). New York, NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.

Kauerz, K., Ballard, R., Soli, M., Hagerman, S. (2021). Leading Learning Communities: A principal’s guide to early learning and the early learning grades (PreK to 3rd Grade). Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Kauerz, K & Coffman, J. (2019). Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P – 3 Approaches (2nd ed.). Denver, CO: National P–3 Center, School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado Denver.

New Jersey Department of Education First to Third Grade Program Implementation Guidelines (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.nj.gov/education/ece/rttt/ImplementationGuidelines1–3.pdf>.

Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education

K-3Office@doe.nj.gov

New Jersey Department of Education
Early Childhood Services

This document was created by staff at the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Services, Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education. It is part of a model of home/school partnerships that complement the state’s student learning standards.

The Division of Early Childhood Services acknowledges the term “parent” to indicate an adult who plays a legal and significant role in a child’s life. This may include parents, stepparents, parents’ partners, foster parents, grandparents, extended family caretakers, and others who regularly contribute in important ways to a child’s education and development. When known, the term “parent” or the term “family” is used precisely. When referring to groups, or those who share responsibility for the well-being of a child, the use of both terms, “parent and family” is inclusive and more accurate.
