

Division of Early Childhood Education
New Jersey Department of Education
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Guidance on the Use of Structured Classroom Observation Instruments

Structured classroom observation instruments provide a lens for the examination of the many components of classroom quality from the nature of teacher-child interactions to the availability of materials and activities that support early learning and development. Using a set of criteria and a rubric for scoring, structured observation instruments allow teachers and administrators to evaluate a range of classroom features. These observations inform individual and program-wide professional development and serve as a means of tracking program quality from year to year.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Third Edition (ECERS-3)

The ECERS-3 is a nationally recognized measure of preschool classroom quality. This instrument can be used to collect data for classroom or program improvement and as a comparative index across programs and over time.

The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)

The TPOT is an observation instrument that measures the implementation of the [Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children](#). This tool should be used primarily for coaching classroom staff and secondarily for aggregating data to determine professional development or program improvement plans.

Curriculum-Based Instruments

HighScope's Preschool Quality Assessment (PQA), The Creative Curriculum's Fidelity Tool, Tools of the Mind's Preschool Teacher Self-Reflection and Curiosity Corner's Implementation Checklist and Curiosity Implementation Self-Assessment Guide are examples of curriculum-specific assessments that have a key role in maintaining curriculum fidelity.

Targeted Classroom Observation Instruments

If classrooms across the district have an average score of 5.0 or above on the ECERS-3 and achieve a high level of curriculum implementation using the measures associated with the program's curriculum, the district may want to consider more targeted instruments such as the Supports for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA), the Preschool Classroom Mathematics Inventory (PCMI) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), depending on need. While the Division of Early Childhood Education no longer provides professional development on the use of these tools, districts and programs are free to use them as they see fit.

Reliability and Calibration

Reliability is the degree to which an assessment tool produces intended results. It is the process that will help the observer use the measure in a manner consistent with the way in which it is intended to be used. Most structured classroom observation instruments come with a

recommended system of reliability to help observers use them in an accurate and consistent manner. If the instrument does not come with materials to guide the reliability process, the developer should be contacted.

Regardless of the instrument(s) administered, a system of calibration must be in place. Calibration is the degree to which multiple observers within the program observe and interpret a tool in the same way; specifically, its "consistency" across staff members. It is important that master teachers and administrators use classroom observation instruments with consistency, so that they can appropriately inform program improvement.

For coaching purposes, it is generally not required that an observer be trained to reliability on the chosen instrument. However, to ensure that staff are interpreting each item correctly, they should be trained in the scoring rubric and practice what they have learned with a "reliable" observer to make sure that they are interpreting each item correctly. When using an observation tool for high-stakes decisions, such as continuance of provider contracts, the observations must be completed by reliable and independent observers as outlined below.

Choosing a Classroom Observation Instrument

- Districts should be wary of using more than one formal observation instrument at a time, as the process can be time consuming. They should understand the purpose of each instrument and how the results will be interpreted and used. Thorough knowledge of these tools can inform supervisors and master teachers during class visits throughout the year.
- For new classrooms, classrooms with significant changes (such as a change in staff) and classrooms scoring under a 5.0, the ECERS-3 should be used on an annual basis to facilitate the quality improvement process.
- The TPOT should be administered by a specialist on the Preschool Intervention and Referral Team (PIRT) in every classroom on an annual basis. It is recommended that, whenever possible, the TPOT is administered by the PIRT Specialist at the same time the master teacher administers the ECERS-3, or other chosen observation instrument, to provide coherent, consistent coaching to classroom staff.
- For classrooms that score consistently over a 5.0 for at least two consecutive years on the ECERS-3, curriculum-based classroom assessments should be used instead (e.g. PQA, Fidelity Tool, etc.) on an annual basis to ensure high-quality implementation of the program's curriculum. ECERS-3 should be administered in these classrooms every two to three years to ensure that quality is maintained.
- Before determining that another instrument is to be used in lieu of the ECERS-3 in specific classrooms, programs should compare classroom-level data, program-wide data and data from outside, reliable sources to ensure that internal data are truly representative of classroom quality.
- For classrooms that score consistently over a 5.0 on the ECERS-3, programs may also consider using more focused instruments depending on need such as the Support for Early Literacy Assessment, Preschool Classroom Mathematics Inventory or Classroom Assessment Scoring System.

Using a Structured Observation Instrument for Coaching

The purpose of administering these instruments is to present individual teachers with a template for effective practice.

- Structured observations should be used as formative assessment tools for professional development purposes.
- Master teachers or PIRT Specialists should ask teachers to use the instrument for self-evaluation with time for discussion prior to administration of the instrument.
- Master Teachers and PIRT Specialists should visit each assigned classroom early in the school-year.
- The results of the classroom observations serve as the basis for the coaching model known as the reflective cycle, which involves a discussion between the master teacher and/or PIRT Specialist and each classroom teacher shortly following the observation. During this discussion, coaches should provide teachers with written findings from the observation.
- The Master Teacher/PIRT Specialist and classroom teacher collaboratively determine areas of improvement or refinement and use relevant sections from the classroom observation instrument for follow up.
- Results from a coach's use of any structured observation instrument **may not** be used to inform teacher evaluation or personnel decisions; appropriate teacher evaluation tools should be used for those purposes. Individual teacher scores may not be shared with administrators but rather an aggregate or their school or center.

Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Third Edition for Accountability in Preschool Provider Settings

According to *N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-2.3(j)3(i.)*, "The district board of education in consultation with the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and with approval from the Department shall establish a minimum acceptable score for all preschool classrooms in operation in the district." If any classroom falls below the minimum acceptable score, an improvement plan needs to be established. The minimum acceptable score should be close to the average for the district; not too high or too low. The steps to using the ECERS-3 for accountability purposes are described below.

- The master teacher conducts an ECERS-3 in a classroom as part of the individual teacher's coaching and support plan (as indicated above).
- After extensive assistance, if follow-up observations reveal serious concerns, these are discussed with the supervisor, principal or child care center director and teacher to establish goals and a timeframe for making the required changes.

- If improvements are not evident at the end of the timeframe, then a reliable independent observer evaluates the classroom or program. Observations by master teachers may not be used to determine whether to contract with a classroom or provider.
- If it is verified that the classroom/program quality is below the minimum acceptable score in the contract, steps are taken by the district to terminate the Preschool Program Contract between the preschool provider and the district.

Using Structured Observation Instruments for Professional Development Planning

In addition to using structured observation instruments for individual classroom teacher support, the district should also analyze the results of the observations to determine the staff development needs of the district. Differentiated professional development should be part of this plan.

Using Structured Observation Instruments for Program Improvement

Programs should aggregate data from structured observation instruments to help inform program planning and improvement. Data should be aggregated at the item and domain/subscale levels as well as aggregating overall scores. Further, data should be disaggregated based on setting or other relevant characteristics, which will help inform targeted planning and program improvement efforts.

Sharing Scores from Structured Classroom Observation Instruments

The use of any structured observation instrument will produce scores, which may be an indicator of program quality, curriculum implementation, or implementation of a set of practices. When reviewing scores from any of these instruments, the focus must be upon what the scores mean; scores should be used to illuminate practices and reflect how programs are working toward implementing best practices that are responsive to the needs of children enrolled in the program. Scores in and of themselves mean little without a deeper analysis of program goals, program practices, program limitations and program potential. Therefore, it is also critical how scores are articulated and shared; the following are recommendations around sharing instrument scores:

The Division of Early Childhood does not recommend sharing scores with teachers as this often places the focus on a score rather than on practices; in order to work toward implementation of best practices, the focus must always remain on the practices, a continuing cycle of improvement and meeting the needs of each child in the classroom. Since master teachers are generally not reliable in the use of structured observation instruments, even in cases where they have gone through the reliability process, there is still not a strong benefit in sharing scores with teachers.

Aggregated scores from instruments should be shared with building-level and program-level administrators, such as Head Start site supervisors, education managers, directors, as well as contracted private provider directors and building principals. Scores should be shared in such a way that individual classroom scores cannot be discerned, but data should be provided at the subscale and item levels to the greatest extent possible so that administrators can utilize the information for program and professional development planning. Site-level data should be shared within the context of program-wide data so that site administrators have a clearer picture of their site within the larger context of the program or district.