



Fact Sheet #10 - Performance Standard 8: Academically Challenging Environment

ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

The teacher creates a student-centered, academic environment in which teaching and learning occur at high levels and students are self-directed learners.

The nature of classroom climate is a function of numerous variables, for instance, the implicit rules of the group structure, the style of leadership of the dominant members of the group, norms, cultural traditions, expectancies, affective history, and demographic composition of the group members.¹ Based on research findings, Evans, Harvey, Buckley, and Yan also concluded that classroom climates described as positive have been found to be related to important educational outcomes such as enhanced academic achievement, constructive learning processes, and reduced emotional problems. Nevertheless, classroom climates can also be negative and toxic and related to undesirable outcomes, such as increased bullying and aggression and social and emotional maladjustment.²

Learning can be viewed as a cognitive development process in which individuals actively construct systems of meaning and understanding of reality through their interactions and experiences with their environments.³ In this cognitive developmental process, a quality learning environment is crucial to students' learning, and it is the teacher's responsibility to create conditions of active engagement in the classroom. It is not surprising to see that every decision that effective teachers make and every action they take in their classrooms, either instructional or managerial, serve the ultimate purpose of student academic learning and growth.

Various studies have found that students' perceptions of the classroom environment explain a substantial amount of variance in student achievement, after controlling for their background characteristics, across grade levels, and across subject areas.⁴ Classroom learning

environment is associated with students' academic behaviors and academic achievement. Students are more engaged with their learning when they receive high expectations, believe that being in school will enable them to do something positive in their lives, have the ability to learn new things, create new challenges, and prepare them for college.⁵ A study by Barth et al. found that negative classroom environments are associated with a lack of academic focus and lower student outcomes.⁶ Various teacher characteristics that are identified as contributing to positive climate relate to teaching methods – both instructional strategies and discipline management skills – for instance, clear and well-structured procedural rules, together with opportunities for active participation and engagement.⁷ To illustrate:

- Effective teachers implement effective 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.⁸
- Classroom activities have an academic focus. The teacher protects instruction from disruption and makes the most out of every instructional moment. Additionally, the teacher orchestrates smooth transitions and maintains momentum throughout teaching and learning.⁹
- The teacher assumes responsibility for student learning, sets high (but reasonable) expectations for all students, and supports students in achieving them. The teacher uses effective questioning and challenging, but interesting, activities to increase student engagement in learning and student accountability.¹⁰

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

The following set of attributes of high quality learning environments, drawn from the socio-cultural constructivist perspective, are helpful in describing prominent attributes of an academically robust learning environment:

- *Active engagement*: learners are directly involved in actions that support cognition and intentional learning.
- *Authenticity and relevance*: learners attribute value to the learning task and see the relationship between the knowledge to be gained and their personal life.
- *Collaboration and community*: noncompetitive social interaction of learners with others about the nature of the content and its meaning to themselves and others allowing for the co-construction of knowledge.
- *Learner autonomy*: the learner has some degree of control over or self-selection of the content or methods of learning.
- *Cognitive complexity*: learning tasks are sufficiently representative of reality, with a myriad of web-like interacting forces that must be organized and made sense of.
- *Generativity*: learner engagement in disciplined inquiry that involves using existing knowledge to discover or formulate new ideas, concepts, or information.
- *Multiple perspectives*: experiences allow learners to see the same information in different ways, from different points of view or use it for different purposes.
- *Pluralism*: learners develop a flexible view of reality, rather than a fixation on one single view of reality as correct.
- *Reflectivity and metacognitive awareness*: learners think about their own learning processes, are involved in identifying strategies to increase their learning, and self-monitor progress.
- *Self-regulation and ownership*: learners are asked to assume personal responsibility for their own learning.

- *Transformation*: learners are expected to comprehend meaning and to use insights gained to reorganize, synthesize, or transform information into new forms or for some new purposes.
- *Productivity*: learners are expected to do something with knowledge required, or use it in some way that is beneficial to themselves or others.¹¹

Building on the above attributes, practical instructional and managerial strategies that can help establish and maintain an academically robust learning environment include the following:

- Establishing a clear academic focus.
- Developing well-organized and well-planned lessons.
- Making explicit learning objectives.
- Maximizing instructional time.
- Pacing class activities and transitioning between tasks smoothly.
- Keeping students on task.
- Making learning meaningful.
- Identifying and communicating desirable behavior.
- Consistently applying rules and procedures.
- Monitoring student behavior.
- Taking preventive rather than reactive management actions.
- Building cooperation among teachers and students.
- Focusing on common interests and values;
- Pursuing common goals.
- Determining the appropriate level of task difficulty for students.
- Providing an appropriate instructional pace.¹²

An academically challenging learning environment is often reflected in the degree of teachers' expectations for student performance. When children come to school with lower levels of language and cognitive development, or more behavioral and attention problems, teachers

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

frequently expect less from them, rather than providing them with a rich, challenging curriculum and supports for learning. The cycle of low expectations and low performance perpetuates when students who are considered less able are required to read less and asked to recall only simple facts and events, while high performing students are challenged to engage in advanced cognitive learning. Holding high performance expectations has an important impact on teachers' instructional practices. By having reasonable expectations for students' growth, teachers can plan carefully linked experiences and provide the foundation for students to meet high expectations. The beliefs that teachers have about their students and their ability to learn can positively or negatively impact their actual learning. The reality is that "students typically don't exceed their own expectation, particularly with regard to academic work. But students will go beyond what they think they can do under certain conditions, one of which is that their teachers expect, challenge, and support them to do so."¹³

The expectations a teacher holds for students, whether consciously or subconsciously, are demonstrated through his or her interactions with the students during instruction.¹⁴ Student academic performance is influenced by a teacher's expectations and goals for student achievement. In a study of 452 sixth graders, findings revealed that teachers' high expectations served as a significant predictor of student performance both socially and academically.¹⁵ Rubie-Davies found that just by one single school year, the students' self-perceptions of their own abilities in academic areas altered substantially in line with teachers' expectations.¹⁶ To make students experience challenges and success, the teacher provides opportunities to use existing skills and knowledge as well as attain new competencies.¹⁷

Teacher expectations do influence students' learning. The effects of teacher expectations are

stronger among stigmatized groups, such as African American students and students from low income families. Students that are frequently the targets of lower expectations are typically most affected academically.¹⁸ For instance, student perceptions of teachers' expectations are especially important to the academic engagement and efficacy of African American students. Tyler found that the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement and efficacy of African American students were all predicted by their perceptions of teacher expectations.¹⁹ However, it has also been found that teacher expectations for strong academic performance and educational attainment for ethnic minorities or low-income students are generally lower than those for their economically advantaged, European American counterparts.²⁰ Teacher expectations run short where they are needed most. Low teacher expectation of students was identified as one of the five main factors related to the underachievement of African American and Latino students.²¹

There are different ways that teacher expectations influence student achievement. First, teachers are likely to put forth greater effort when they perceive that they are teaching high ability students.²² Secondly, according to Ferguson,²³ teacher perceptions and expectations are expressed (unconsciously) through the type of goals teachers set for students, the skills and resources used during instruction, as well as the types of reinforcement that teachers use in the classroom. Warren found that teachers' low expectations and lack of efficacy often resulted in lowered teaching standards, less teacher effort, and the use of watered-down curriculum for low achieving students, especially in poor urban schools.²⁴ That ultimately impacts students' achievement, academic engagement, and motivation. Through Cotton's review, a multitude of ways in which lowered teacher expectations manifest in the classroom were identified.²⁵ Students who are the target of teachers' low expectations are given fewer

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

opportunities to learn new materials than high expectation students. The wait-time to answer a question is less than what is allotted for high expectation students. Low expectation students are given the answers to questions or the teacher calls on some other students rather than giving them clues or repeating or rephrasing questions, as is done with high expectation students. Students with low teacher expectation receive inappropriate feedback (e.g., more frequent and severe criticism for failure; insincere praise) or reinforcement that is not a result of desired performance. They also tend to receive less friendly and responsive classroom interactions (e.g., less smiling, affirmative head nodding, leaning forward, and eye contact). They are provided briefer and less informative feedback, less stimulating and more lower-cognitive level questions, as well as less frequent use of effective and time-consuming instructional practices.

Additionally, students often recognize teacher bias and conform to teacher expectations. Children, from their years in school, are highly sensitive to differential teacher expectations and behavior. This type of sensitivity cuts across grades, gender, and ability levels. Research has suggested that students perceive low achieving students as typically receiving more vigilance directed towards them, fewer chances, more negative feedback and direction, more negative affect, and more frequent work- and rule-oriented treatment. In contrast, students typically perceive high achievers as being the recipients of higher expectations and academic demands, more emotional supports and special privileges, and increased opportunities to make choices.²⁶ This phenomenon can be particularly troublesome when teachers stereotype whole groups of students based on personal characteristics such as race or gender.²⁷ Teacher expectations are often connected to what is termed self-fulfilling prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a false description of a phenomenon induces a new behavior that leads

to the originally false description coming true.²⁸ Hauser-cram et al. posited that children in stigmatized groups are more likely to have negative or low teacher expectations which likely lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of low academic performance.²⁹

Sample Performance Indicators for the Professional Knowledge of Teachers

- Maximizes instructional time.
- Conveys the message that mistakes should be embraced as a valuable part of learning.
- Encourages productivity by providing students with appropriately challenging and relevant material and assignments.
- Provides transitions that minimize loss of instructional time.
- Communicates high, but reasonable, expectations for student learning.
- Provides academic rigor, encourages critical and creative thinking, and pushes students to achieve goals
- Encourages students to explore new ideas and take academic risks.

Sample Student Evidence that Teacher met the Criteria for Proficiency

- Transition smoothly and without disruption among small and large groups and independent learning.
- Use classroom space and resources efficiently to support their own learning and that of peers.
- Manage time and resources.
- Engage in learning activities for the entire class period.
- Work both independently and cooperatively in purposeful learning activities.
- Keep records of their own progress, behavior, and accomplishments.
- Analyze work against benchmarks and articulate why it meets, exceeds, or does not meet GPS/CCGPS.

Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

- Monitor their behavior with teacher guidance, adjusting behavior when appropriate to support learning.
- Report that they feel successful and respected as learners.

Sample Conference Prompts

- How do you handle situations where students finish instructional tasks at varying rates?
- How do you plan for substitute teachers?
- What strategies do you use to get the class period started without time wasted?
- How have you sought guidance from colleagues or offered to help other teachers maximize instructional time?
- How do you provide feedback to students?
- How do you help students take responsibility for their own learning and behavior?
- How do you convince students to believe in themselves?

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Georgia Department of Education Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

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**Georgia Department of Education
Teacher Keys Effectiveness System**

**Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist
Performance Standard 8: Academically Challenging Environment**

Quality		Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I
Academic Rigor	Focus classroom time on teaching and learning.				
	Maximize instructional time.				
	Limit disruption and interruptions.				
	Maintain momentum within and across lessons.				
	Carefully link learning objectives and activities.				
	Design challenging but achievable tasks that are relevant to students' lives and experiences, or to current events.				
	Develop objectives, questions, and activities that reflect higher- and lower- cognitive skills as appropriate for the content and the students.				
	Ensure the interactions in classroom have a task orientation.				
Student Motivation and Engagement	Link learning to students' real-life experiences.				
	Organize content for effective presentation.				
	Check student understanding and retain student attention by asking questions.				
	Consider student attention span and learning styles when designing lessons.				
	Be supportive and persistent in keeping students on tasks and encourage them to actively integrate new information with prior learning.				
	Let students have some degree of control over the content or methods of learning to encourage their ownership and autonomy of learning.				
High Expectations	Set clearly articulated high expectations for strong academic performance for all students, including the students who are ethnic minorities or from low-income families.				
	Orient the classroom experience toward improvement and growth.				
	Stress student responsibility and accountability.				
	Monitor student learning closely, and make certain that alternative teaching methods are in place.				