

# What to Look for in a Classroom

By Alfie Kohn

An earlier version of this chart was published in the September 1996 issue of Educational Leadership, and reprinted as the title essay in the anthology [What to Look for in a Classroom...And Other Essays](#).

This revised version appeared as Appendix B of [The Schools Our Children Deserve](#).

	GOOD SIGNS	POSSIBLE REASONS TO WORRY
<b>FURNITURE</b>	Chairs around tables to facilitate interaction  Comfortable areas for learning, including multiple "activity centers"  Open space for gathering	Chairs all facing forward or (even worse) desks in rows
<b>ON THE WALLS</b>	Covered with students' projects  Evidence of student collaboration  Signs, exhibits, or lists obviously created by students rather than by the teacher  Information about, and personal mementos of, the people who spend time together in this classroom	Nothing  Commercial posters  Students' assignments displayed, but they are (a) suspiciously flawless, (b) only from "the best" students, or (c) virtually all alike  List of rules created by an adult and/or list of punitive consequences for misbehavior  Sticker (or star) chart -- or other evidence that students are rewarded or ranked
<b>STUDENTS' FACES</b>	Eager, engaged	Blank, bored
<b>SOUNDS</b>	Frequent hum of activity and ideas being exchanged	Frequent periods of silence  The teacher's voice is the loudest or most often heard
<b>LOCATION OF TEACHER</b>	Typically working with students so it takes a few seconds to find her	Typically front and center
<b>TEACHER'S VOICE</b>	Respectful, genuine, warm	Controlling and imperious  Condescending and saccharine-sweet
<b>STUDENTS' REACTION TO VISITOR</b>	Welcoming; eager to explain or demonstrate what they're doing or to use visitor as a resource	Either unresponsive or hoping to be distracted from what they're doing
<b>CLASS DISCUSSION</b>	Students often address one another directly  Emphasis on thoughtful exploration of complicated issues  Students ask questions at least as often as the teacher does	All exchanges involve (or are directed by) the teacher; students wait to be called on  Emphasis on facts and right answers  Students race to be first to answer teacher's "Who can tell me...?" queries
<b>STUFF</b>	Room overflowing with good books, art supplies, animals and plants, science apparatus; "sense of purposeful clutter"	Textbooks, worksheets, and other packaged instructional materials predominate; sense of enforced orderliness
<b>TASKS</b>	Different activities often take place simultaneously  Activities frequently completed by pairs or groups of students	All students usually doing the same thing  When students aren't listening to the teacher, they're working alone
<b>AROUND THE SCHOOL</b>	Appealing atmosphere: a place where people would want to spend time  Students' projects fill the hallways  Library well-stocked and comfortable  Bathrooms in good condition  Faculty lounge warm and inviting  Office staff welcoming toward visitors and students  Students helping in lunchroom, library, and with other school functions	Stark, institutional feel  Awards, trophies, and prizes displayed, suggesting an emphasis on triumph rather than community

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