A Physical Environment Conducive to Maximum Motivation and Achievement

Most people would agree that in order for both the teacher and the students to function effectively, a clean, well-lit classroom with enough tables, chairs, and other needed equipment is necessary. PEAK teachers, however, using the filter of the Six Keys, establish a physical classroom environment that is much more than that. A teacher’s commitment to addressing even the most basic needs of their students underlines what lengths they are willing to go to help the student achieve. In addition, the physical environment is at the foundation of building positive relationships in the classroom. A positive physical environment is a strong nonverbal statement that says “I care about you as a learner,” and, “Learning is the most important thing here.”

In general, the classroom shows significant use and application of knowledge of natural lighting, nutrition, hydration, aromas, sounds, organization, neatness, repair, colors, access to materials and supplies, and sensitivity to human needs.

Aesthetics

Maintain the classroom in a neat and organized way. Be sure to make any needed repairs and clean graffiti immediately. Try to keep at least two large wastebaskets available for ease in keeping the room neat and clean at all times.
times. Some teachers even place coffee cans or baskets on each table or group of students’ desks for students to use as mini wastebaskets to eliminate the need for students to leave their desks to toss their trash. The subliminal messages conveyed by a clean room are powerful.

Plants, pictures or other decorative touches make the room aesthetically pleasing and create an atmosphere where students feel welcome. It is important to keep these areas well-maintained.

Two areas often overlooked are the room temperature and the smells that fill the classroom. Teachers keep one or two small throw blankets in the room for students to borrow if they are cold. Subtle room fresheners, open windows, potpourri, etc. can be used as needed while taking care not to aggravate those who have allergies. Because we often talk in close proximity to students, consider having breath fresheners as needed throughout the day!

Colors can be used to enhance the physical environment as well as convey content patterns. For visual learners we need to be aware of color patterns and keep them carefully coordinated. Choose two dark colors (blue, black, purple, brown and green) to use only with your content information. (We use blue and green.) This establishes a visual pattern to help visual preference learners detect patterns that will help them succeed. Visual preference learners will detect patterns whether we intend them or not, so if we are not consistent in our color use, they may become confused and frustrated without knowing why. Choose a third dark color to use with assignments, objectives and agendas—stuff about content. (We use purple.) This helps students quickly separate information that must be learned from information to be used. Choose one more dark color to always use with general school information. (We use black.) This will further work to keep your visual preference learners successful and not confused and frustrated.

Content on the Walls

For a more detailed description of content posters as a powerful learning tool, please see Chapter 11. In general, however, a few points are worth mentioning here as part of the physical arrangement of the room. Content posters and other visual tools are used to convey/represent past, current and future important concepts and procedures. These posters meet criteria for effective visuals. (Again, see Chapter 11 for further details.) All posters and other items need to be displayed neatly and symmetrically. Being meticulous in this is not overkill – your visual preference learners and ADHD students will be distracted by crooked posters even if you are not! Keep a close eye on your posters over time. If corners start to sag or colors begin to fade, repair or replace your posters.

Be sure to plan space for important concept posters to be displayed on the wall for easy viewing. You will also want space for student pictures, sayings, drawings, inspirational cards or expert cards in appropriate, well-labeled areas. If you plan to use a knowledge wall instead of knowledge folders, make room for that area as well. Knowledge wall descriptions are part of Chapter 10. Finally, display your commitments to the students. For more on commitments see Chapter 7.
Lighting

Natural light improves achievement. Window shades that are kept in good working order are a must. Keep the lighting as bright, natural and balanced as possible. This means leaving shades open and lights on unless direct sunlight shines in someone’s eyes. Once the sunlight shifts, open the shades again.

Storage Space

Establish a place where students’ belongings are safe at all times. Make a "parking lot" for backpacks where students can place their "stuff" at the beginning of class. Part of the procedures each day might include getting ready with notebooks, pens, pencils, texts and other needed supplies before class begins. The backpacks are then located in an area away from students. This clears the aisles and eliminates the backpacks being a hiding spot for misbehavior like cell phones or food in class. Under the guise of safety and keeping aisles clear, we have again managed context and stopped potential management problems before they start.

Teacher Workspace

Your work area makes a difference as well. Have your supplies and materials ready each day for immediate access as needed – do not even accidentally have dead time or delays while you access materials or obtain things. It’s during those pauses that misbehavior starts or escalates. Something so simple as being fully prepared can cut down on your classroom management issues.

Support Stations (For Context)

Water Station

What it is: In one area of the classroom, provide drinkable water and cups for students to use when they need a drink of water.

Rationales: Many studies have suggested positive impacts that come from people being adequately hydrated. Some would argue that a good indicator of adequate hydration is provided by urges to relieve ourselves approximately once every one to two hours.

Nutrition Station

What it is: A basket or box of healthy, non-perishable snack food that the teacher provides. This should be placed where the teacher can monitor it visually for most if not all of class time. If appropriate, provide a container for students to drop an appropriate amount of money to match the cost of the snack.
**Rationale:** Often times students can benefit greatly from a nutritional “pick-me-up” to help maintain appropriate energy levels.

**Therapy Station**

*What it is:* A discrete area within sight of the teacher for items such as hand lotion, anti-bacterial lotions, breath mints, band-aids, tissue and other items students may need throughout class.

*Rationale:* Many students need hand lotions throughout the day to avoid painful cracking, or a dry ashy appearance to their skin. It is also a very kind gesture, and helpful to us, too, to have antibacterial lotions to help protect against the spread of illness. The other items all have obvious benefits to all of us in the classroom.

**Supply Station**

*What it is:* Within clear sight of the teacher, provide an area where students can obtain any supplies they may need to carry out the classroom activities. Supplies to consider could include:

- Pencils
- Pens
- Paper
- Highlighters
- Rulers
- Scissors
- White-out or correction tape
- Sticky notes

Divide the supply area into two sections—one for supplies to be borrowed and returned, and the other for supplies that will be kept.

Consider taping plastic spoons or silk flowers to the items like pens that are often accidentally taken from the class.

As appropriate, consider putting “cost” tags by each type of item showing what it cost you. This will encourage those students who can to make appropriate contributions to your “donation cup” to facilitate your maintaining adequate stock. Work hard with both the placement of these items and the relationships that are built to reduce the amount of maintenance required.

*Rationale:* As much as we can all wish that all people would anticipate and take care of their own needs in coming prepared to class, work or the store, this does not always happen. By providing access to needed tools for learning, we ensure that learning continues to happen.
CAUTION! Watch your step!

In a perfect world, we won’t see:

- Mess, clutter, lack of easily understood organization of materials and supplies
- Students waiting while the teacher goes to get supplies or materials or while the teacher puts things away
- Disrepair
- Projector images crooked or larger than the screen
- Light turned out and shades closed – even for visibility
- Lights needing replacement when they dim, flicker or buzz
- Sun in students’ eyes
- Projection screens hung from the top of the board, or in general, hung from a point below at least ten feet above the floor – i.e. students can easily see images from wherever they are seated without interference caused by obstructions such as other students in front of them
- Student desks arranged such that students are facing each other and have to turn 90 degrees or more to see the teacher or a projected image
- Fire colors (red, yellow, orange, etc.) used for content or other information
- Students needing to leave the room for tissue, lotion, sanitizer or other supplies
- Students without supplies available
- Walls without current content posters that are easily read and interpreted from every student seat
- Lack of personal space for students
- Lack of decorative touches creating a pleasant environment
- Unpleasant smells
IN A PERFECT WORLD

Physical Environment

In general, the classroom shows significant use and application of knowledge of natural lighting, nutrition, hydration, aromas, sounds, organization, neatness, repair, colors, access to materials and supplies, and sensitivity to human needs.

*What we will see when teachers are effectively maintaining a physical environment conducive to learning in a perfect world:

1. The classroom is clean, neat, organized and in good repair.
2. Content posters and other visual tools are used to convey/represent past, current and future important concepts and procedures. These posters meet criteria for effective visuals.
3. Student "desks/work spaces" are arranged so that student personal space is totally protected.
4. Students have enough room between groups, rows and seats to be able to move without any feelings of discomfort or embarrassment that could arise from concern regarding breath/body odor, size or personal space.
5. Students do not have to squeeze next to each other in order to get into grouped seats.
6. Lighting is as bright, natural and balanced as possible. Shades are open and lights are on and in good working order. Students face bright, well-lit, light colored walls and areas.
7. Nutrition, water and restroom needs are adequately addressed.
8. Human support supplies such as tissues, hand-sanitizer, and lotions are available.
9. Dark colors (blue, black, purple, brown and green) are used in visuals and instruction – and color patterns are established and followed.
10. Sounds and aromas are pleasant.
11. Supplies and materials are available for immediate access as needed – there are no pauses or delays to obtain things.
12. Visual arrangements on screens and walls are orderly, easy to read and interpretable from anywhere in the room. They are high enough to be seen from the back seats with the classroom filled. Text is large. Images are high. Teachers regularly test and adjust for visibility for every student location.
13. A designated place of student ownership – e.g. Inspiration Wall or Great Wall.
14. Welcoming plants, pictures or other decorative touches make the room esthetically pleasing.
15. Organized and clear board work is high enough and large enough to be seen by every student.