

**THE NEXT-STEP GUIDE TO**

# Enriching Classroom Environments

**RUBRICS AND RESOURCES FOR SELF-EVALUATION AND GOAL SETTING**



**FOR LITERACY COACHES, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHER STUDY GROUPS, K-6**

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# Creating Beautiful and Inviting Classrooms

Walking through a school before I begin my work there gives me incredible insight into its culture and the teachers' understanding of literacy practices. It helps me adjust the workshop I present, decide which activities I introduce, and determine which resources I offer. Here are a few of things I hope not to see:

- ▶ Students' heads bent over worksheets.
- ▶ Teachers lecturing formally in the front of the room, a teacher's guide in hand.
- ▶ (Heaven forbid!) Teachers checking email at their desk.

On the other hand, these are things I love to see:

- ▶ Teachers modeling their own writing on chart paper.
- ▶ Students working on authentic reading and writing projects.
- ▶ Students who can tell me what they are learning.
- ▶ Teachers kneeling alongside small groups of writers.
- ▶ Teachers reading aloud from a recently published picture book.
- ▶ Organized tubs of books.
- ▶ Classroom charts that reflect the minilessons that have taken place.

The former Deputy Chancellor of New York Schools, Carmen Fariña, refers to walkthroughs like this as *glory walks*, a term that connotes celebration rather than evaluation. Therefore, I make sure to validate strong teaching, highlight pockets of excellence, and celebrate some of the solid instructional practices I see.

I hope the classrooms I describe in this chapter are so inviting and literacy rich that they knock your socks off! But they are more than just beautiful; they're also based on research and sound theories about teaching and learning. They aren't like those "coffee-table books" people place strategically in the living room but never read, but more like well-loved paperbacks, filled with sticky notes and frayed covers. They are real classrooms led by real teachers, filled with the hum of student talk. I want you to be able to picture their cozy book areas and bulletin boards showcasing student work. Carrie and I spent three years gathering photographs of classrooms that exemplify the concepts described in this chapter. A few are included in this book, and there are many more on my website ([bonniecampbellhill.com](http://bonniecampbellhill.com)). Our goal is to help you "know what you know" and "know what you don't know" about effective classroom environments and how best to create a community of learners. We hope you are inspired!

Creating your classroom environment is a critical piece of your educational plan. It's the framework on which you build your instruction. Therefore, how can you consciously design your classroom to enhance and support learning? How does your room reflect your beliefs about teaching and learning? Marlynn Clayton and Mary Beth Forton, in *Classroom Spaces That Work* (2001), inspire us with this insight: "A classroom that is not centered on educational beliefs is a room of disconnected details, a room of convenience rather than purpose. It is our focus on our educational beliefs that aligns all the details of the room, blending them together seamlessly to create the whole" (8). You know immediately when you step inside a vibrant, literacy-rich classroom, because learning has been made visible and public.



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## Beliefs About Creating Beautiful and Inviting Classrooms

- ❶ Our classroom environment and design communicate our philosophy, goals, and values.
- ❷ Learning is enhanced when the classroom environment is organized, comfortable, and inviting.
- ❸ Children learn best in a student-centered classroom in which materials, displays, and the room arrangement are intentionally designed to promote both collaboration and independence.
- ❹ Classroom spaces and materials should be designed to accommodate students with special needs.
- ❺ An authentic print-rich environment supports students in their growing independence and literacy.
- ❻ Children feel more ownership in a classroom when they have opportunities to help design and decorate the spaces.
- ❼ Children learn more in classrooms in which student work is continually displayed and changed in order to reflect and celebrate their effort and growth.
- ❽ Collaboratively created anchor charts that reflect units of study and inquiry promote active learning.

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**Figure 1.1**

Everything is authentic, organized, and purposeful. How many of the beliefs listed in Figure 1–1 are reflected in your classroom?

When my son was first learning to play soccer, his coach held practices at a school soccer field. The field was familiar to the boys, and at the beginning of each practice they helped set up the equipment, laying out the soccer balls in an organized space, placing their own personal soccer bags in another designated spot, and posting their team flag in a prominent position on the field, claiming space for the duration of the session. The boys took pride in this regular setup, and because it was so organized, no time was lost looking for balls or misplaced equipment. Their time could be spent learning to play soccer. During the very first practice, the coach outlined strategic spots on the soccer field for individual skill drills, small-group plays, and skirmishes. In two sessions, the boys learned their roles and where they needed to be at certain times. It was inspiring to watch them move from space to space independently, rather than waiting for the coach to tell them what to do next.

The coach didn't have walls or other space on which to display the team's efforts, but he did pass out weekly bulletins to all the parents in which he explained the skills and strategies the boys were learning and celebrated some of the specific achievements of the previous game. Therefore, we knew what our child was learning, even if we couldn't attend all the practices or games. Many parents found they could talk about soccer with their sons more easily and understood the game better because of this extra information. Nowadays, coaches of my friends' kids set up websites where they post the skills they're working on, as well as video clips and photos from their games. But even more important than the organization and communication my son's coach provided was the way he modeled strong sportsmanlike conduct for his players and their parents in his interactions before, during, and after each game.

The type of physical environment and structure that works on the soccer field applies equally in our classrooms. Strong teachers set up comfortable environments in which materials are clearly organized. The routines and rituals they set in place create a sense of structure and predictability that promotes independence. They display student work, celebrate growth, communicate with parents, and model effective reading and writing strategies. When effective learning environments are not intentionally designed, student motivation wanes, materials are lost, behavioral issues arise, time is wasted, instruction becomes diluted, and parents become concerned. Nor is it just about making physical changes; it's important to understand *why* these changes are necessary and *how* they better support student engagement, collaboration, and independence.

What impressions do visitors get when they walk into your classroom? As Michael Gladwell points out in *Blink* (2005), a lot of information is processed as part of a first impression and it's often fairly accurate. Do they trip over lunchboxes and coats that cascade onto the floor? Is your desk the first thing they see? Or do they see a low table with cushions, a cozy meeting area, or an inviting couch for reading next to bookshelves filled with neat rows of book tubs? Does the bulletin board have thirty tulips that all look alike, or does student work reflect each child's uniqueness?

Shelley Harwayne, the principal of the Manhattan New School, suggests that a school should be the most beautiful building in a neighborhood. She writes, "Our classrooms look different because we value beautiful and interesting spaces over bland rooms filled with row after row of desks. We have high standards not only for our work, but for our surroundings as well" (1999, 42). Schools and classrooms *should* be welcoming places in which teachers and students enjoy spending time together. Some of the classrooms I've visited are so friendly and comfortable that I want to linger longer. The physical environment is appealing. There are inviting areas where the whole class can meet, cozy book nooks that maybe include a couch or rocking chair. These teachers have worked hard to clear the clutter; they have organized