

What to Look for in a Classroom

By Alfie Kohn

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

	GOOD SIGNS	POSSIBLE REASONS TO WORRY
FURNITURE	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
ON THE WALLS	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
STUDENTS' FACES	Eager, engaged	Blank, bored
SOUNDS	Frequent hum of activity and ideas being exchanged	Frequent periods of silence The teacher's voice is the loudest or most often heard
LOCATION OF TEACHER	Typically working with students so it takes a few seconds to find her	Typically front and center
TEACHER'S VOICE	Respectful, genuine, warm	Controlling and imperious Condescending and saccharine-sweet
STUDENTS' REACTION TO VISITOR	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
CLASS DISCUSSION	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
STUFF	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
TASKS	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
AROUND THE SCHOOL	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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