



Evidence-based tools and guidance  
for delivering effective programs

PLANNING & MANAGEMENT

SITE CLIMATE

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STAFFING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

STUDENT RECRUITMENT & ATTENDANCE

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GUIDANCE FOR TOOL:

**CLASSROOM OBSERVATION**

This document provides guidance on how to use the Classroom Observation tool available in the Summer Learning Toolkit. You can also access the tool in the Planning and Management section of the Toolkit.

**What is the CLASSROOM OBSERVATION tool and how can you use it?**

The Classroom Observation Tool was developed by Bellwether Education Partners for a site visit to the Rochester City School District’s Summer Scholars Program. The observation tool addresses the learning environment, student engagement, instructional quality, and curriculum implementation, which were components of the program quality review on which the district requested feedback.

The structure of the tool allows an observer to first do a quick scan of the learning environment to document classroom size and setup, organization of materials, cleanliness, temperature, and presence of student work. The second section of the tool provides the observer with a list of teacher and student behaviors that are specifically associated with higher levels of learning and prompts the observer to mark how often a behavior takes place (e.g., all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, never, or no opportunity to observe). This observation protocol can be used for extended observations (those lasting for 30 minutes or more) and/or for much shorter observations by narrowing the teacher/student behaviors to the most critically important.

## Why is classroom observation important?

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**RAND** recommends that summer programs engage in a continuous improvement process that includes evaluation of a site's culture and climate, use of time, and academic quality in classrooms. RAND also recommends that site leaders periodically observe instruction to understand which teachers or enrichment partners may need additional support. Classroom observation can be a useful way to collect site and classroom information to use in continuous improvement. The teacher and student behaviors included on this template are not an exhaustive list of all possible observable behaviors. Instead, they include some of those most closely aligned to the effective practices research for teachers and are indicative of high levels of student engagement.

## Who can benefit from this resource?

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- District central office managers
- School-based program leaders
- Nonprofit program leaders

## Tips for effective formal observations

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Before creating or selecting a classroom observation tool, rubric, or checklist, it is critical to clarify the purposes of the observations and articulate the desired outcomes and/or purpose of the data gathered. During a regular school year, the rationale for conducting observations is typically tied to teacher/staff performance evaluations. While this may also be a rationale for conducting classroom observations during summer learning programs, there may be other purposes identified (i.e., program quality evaluation, impact of specific teacher training/professional development, subject/content specific goals, etc.) that may require very different observation protocols. It is important for program leadership to determine **why** they want to conduct classroom observations, **what** questions classroom observations can help answer, and to develop or select protocols that will provide **feedback** aligned to those objectives.

It is also important to use an observation tool that is valid (assesses what it says it does) and reliable (produces similar results across observers and instances of use). For those reasons, you may want to consider using an established observation tool that has been tested for validity and reliability. If you choose to create your own observation tool, develop and deliver training for observers on how to use the tool prior to implementation.

When deciding what tool to use, consider the resources available to devote to classroom observation. Observation takes time, and different systems of observation require different time commitments. The amount of observer time available can be an important practical consideration when selecting an observational protocol. Some protocols are designed to be used during extended observations of one hour or more, while others are designed to be quick assessments of the instructional/classroom environment completed in less than 15 minutes.

Additional tips include:

- Consider modifications to this tool based on your program model and goals. For instance, programs that are thinking of summer as an opportunity for professional development and improved instruction should build in ways to more deeply examine instructional elements, such as literacy circles or guided reading.
- Ensure teachers know when they will be observed and have the chance to ask questions in advance.
- After observations are complete, discuss data with teachers in a timely manner through in-person coaching sessions.
- Use the observation data to help teachers set goals for professional development .
- Equip coaches or site leaders to use data to provide ongoing support to teachers. Identify common areas of need to inform in-service PD and pre-program training for the following summer.