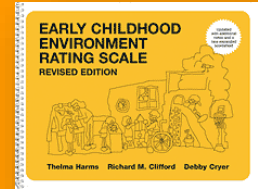




# ECERS-R Assessment

## Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools



### North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project

#### **History of using the ECERS-R during the Assessment Process in North Carolina**

In North Carolina, the ECERS-R has been used to conduct assessments related to the Star Rated License since 1999. Many ECERS-R assessments have been completed for preschool classrooms in public school settings over the years. In addition to those that have occurred for licensure purposes, assessments have also occurred for NC Pre-K classrooms (formerly More At Four). Historically, the large majority of public school preschool classrooms earn high scores of at least 5.0 on the ECERS-R. As the ECERS-R was developed to assess many types of early childhood settings and is not specific to one type of philosophy or program location, it is appropriate for use in public school settings. The ECERS-R provides an overview of various aspects of the early childhood environment that are known to lead to positive outcomes for young children as they enter school; however, it is not a curriculum or a “prescription” for one specific type of classroom or programming. All children, regardless of program type, benefit from being in safe, healthy, and stimulating preschool environments.

The structure of the ECERS-R recognizes that different types of philosophies, priorities, and characteristics (e.g., teaching strategies, interactions, and various content areas) can lead to positive outcomes for children. When using the rating scales, each item is scored independently based on whether requirements of the various indicators are met and then the overall score is calculated based on the average of all item scores. It is this overall average score that is associated with positive child outcomes, rather than the score on any one item by itself. All programs should expect to have both higher scores and some lower scores; as long as many items earn high scores an overall average score of 5.0 can still be earned.

Ultimately, it is the program’s decision as to how the children’s school day will be structured and programs always have the option to make choices regarding the implementation of various content areas within the rating scales based on their individual needs, philosophy, and circumstances. Discussions between classroom staff and administration are helpful in determining whether any classroom modifications should be prioritized based on ECERS-R requirements and your program’s license.

#### **Overall Average Score Defines Quality on the ECERS-R**

While most preschool classrooms in public schools earn a score of 5.0 or higher on the ECERS-R, there are some areas that have consistently been described as being challenging or that warrant special consideration for the public preschool setting. When thinking about the ECERS-R score, it is helpful to remember that it is an overall score of 5.0 that earns the highest possible assessment-related program standards points for licensure; additionally, 5.0 is the score required for NC Pre-K classrooms. Most importantly, it should be recognized that an overall score of 5.0 provides an indication of the developmental appropriateness of the preschool environment.



**The following questions and answers have been submitted by public school staff over the years:**

# Questions and Answers about the ECERS-R from Public School Programs

## Questions related to the preschool daily schedule

### Substantial Portion of the Day

**Question:** Many items require access to materials for a substantial portion of the day. What does this mean?

**Response:** A substantial portion of the day is 1/3 of a program's operating hours (e.g., the program is open for 6 hours and 45 minutes so a substantial portion of the day is 2 hours and 15 minutes). This is an important consideration for the ECERS-R as this requirement is found in 11 different items related to specific and varied types of materials and play. More information can be found on page 7 of the ECERS-R.

### Operating Hours

**Question:** What times of the day are considered to be part of my program's operating hours – is it just the NC Pre-K or Head Start day?

**Response:** Operating hours begin when children are allowed to arrive in the morning and end when children are required to depart from the program in the afternoon or evening. Basically any times that program staff provide care for children are considered as part of a program's operating hours, and this includes times when children are in different classrooms or may be cared for by staff other than their primary classroom teacher(s). Operating hours are not limited only to the NC Pre-K or Head Start curriculum day. For example:

- Car riders are allowed to arrive as early as 7:20 and go to a multi-purpose room with one of the assistant teachers, rather than the usual classroom, until 7:45. Most children ride the buses that arrive by 7:45 and upon arrival these children, along with the early arrivers, then go into their usual preschool classroom. As 7:20 is when children are allowed to arrive, this is considered the beginning of the operating hours and the 25 minute period in the morning room must be considered. Assessors ask program staff questions to determine what types of activities occur during this time.
- The NC Pre-K day is 8:00-2:45. Children can arrive as early as 7:45 and children are required to be picked up by 3:00. The program's operating hours are 7:45-3:00.

**Question:** Do the preschool operating hours include the afterschool program too? It is a separate program with different teachers from the preschool program?

**Response:** This will depend on how the program is licensed by DCDEE. For public schools where preschool and afterschool programs have separate licenses, the afterschool program will not be considered as part of the preschool operating hours. However, if the programs share a license and preschool children can participate in the afternoon portion of the day then the afterschool program hours will be considered. Assessors will visit the afterschool space and ask the afterschool staff questions about that portion of the day.

**Question:** When I add up breakfast, lunch, rest time, outdoor play, specials, and group times, and also consider transition times, it is impossible for my classroom to meet substantial portion of the day. Group times and instruction are more important than play for these children and I do not believe that following ECERS-R requirements in this area meets the needs of the children that I work with.

**Response:** As substantial portion of the day is 1/3 of the



operating hours, this actually still allows the majority of a program's operating day to be used for the different types of activities mentioned in the question. Over the years we have seen many programs in public schools earn credit for substantial portion of the day while still completing the usual transitions, routine care, group, and curricular

activities. A wide research base clearly indicates that young children learn best from being actively engaged in hands-on experiences which is why this requirement

is included. Learning objectives are met during individual and small group play times as children interact with peers, teachers, and materials. Additionally, each learning center should offer activities that promote age appropriate skill development and lay the groundwork for future learning (e.g., block play supports spatial learning and other pre-math skills as well as eye-hand coordination, problem solving and creativity). Teacher facilitation of children's hands-on experiences is essential in promoting use and awareness of materials they may not have familiarity with, encouraging exploration, answering questions, and sharing information.

**Question:** In our classroom we believe that offering an "open snack" is developmentally appropriate. When a classroom uses "open snack", meaning that children can eat if they want or play in centers rather than eating as a whole group, why isn't this time credited as free choice for substantial portion of the day since it is the children's choice to play during this time?

**Response:** Open snacks/meals are appropriate and allow children to develop skills related to self-help and self-regulation. Additionally, since transitions before and after open snacks occur individually or in small groups this set-up can reduce the amount of time children spend in transitions. However, because all children must be offered meals/snacks, they must also be given adequate time to eat. Children who choose to eat should not have less play and learning time, and this is why time for a meal or snack is deducted from an open snack/center play time period. If not observed, assessors ask how long it typically takes most children to finish their meal or snack. Extending center play for an additional amount of time based on how long it takes children to finish eating will accommodate time for routine care and also hands-on learning.

### Special Resource Classes

**Question:** We go to "specials" a few days each week for music, library, PE, and sometimes computers. Does the schedule still need to meet substantial portion of the day requirements on those days? If so, why is this required since these special topics are good for children?

**Response:** If specials happen on a weekly basis and reduce the amount of time that children have access to various types of materials, then these activities will affect substantial portion of the day calculations. Specials may be implemented in many different formats

(e.g., whole group vs. small group, hands-on learning vs. more passive viewing and listening) so programs should carefully consider the structure and content of the various specials to make sure that these are as enriching as intended for the preschool age group. To earn credit for substantial portion of the day, access to the various types of materials specified in the items must be provided for enough time each day, regardless of what other types of activities occur.



### Strategies for Special Classes

In some counties we have seen the following strategies used to ensure that children still have plenty of time for hands on learning on the days that regularly scheduled special activities occur:

- Having the resource teachers come to the preschool classroom, instead of taking the children to another room, so that the children may choose either to participate in the special or go to centers; thus, all children have access to the specials and also a wide-range of appropriate alternative activities. This strategy also helps reduce time spent in transitions between classrooms.
- Taking certain materials (e.g., using a cart or backpacks) to specials for children to use if they become disinterested. This method can increase access time for at least some of the various required materials, but it would be unlikely to earn credit for access to all types of materials. For example, a selection of books, puzzles, and a few sets of interlocking building toys are kept in a large backpack and carried to music class each week in case some children do not want to participate in the music activity. As long as the children are aware that they have this choice during music class, time is credited for children having access to books and fine motor toys. This is important information to share with an assessor during the teacher interview.

- Recognizing that if specials occur as a large group activity, the usual circle time can be shortened or perhaps even skipped on the days that specials occur so that children still have comparable amounts of hands-on learning time vs. an additional large group activity.
- Making sure that the length of the specials is suited to the preschool age group; these activities may need to be shorter for younger children, as compared to elementary-age children. Awareness of the length of time spent transitioning to and from a different room is also important because this affects the amount of play time children actually have.
- Adding various types of learning materials to the outdoor learning environment. Consider ways to make the storage or transport of materials from the classroom to outside convenient, so that these materials are provided daily. The goal is not to replicate the classroom materials, but offer materials that stimulate the specific types of skills or content areas in an environment where greater movement and activity is possible, as compared to the typical indoor environment. For example, cars, small people, and a garage, along with some work hats and bags, are used in the sand play area outside. There is also a play house with pretend food, dishes, and shopping carts. A table is set up with paper, pencils, and some puzzles and large chalk pieces and water color paints are used on the sidewalk. Ribbons and strings are used for tying and lacing on the chain link fence. These materials are used outdoors each day; therefore, the time spent outdoors will be considered as providing access to dramatic play, fine motor, and art materials. When adding materials to the outdoor environment remember to pay attention to the specific requirements mentioned in each activity item.

We recognize that specials are enriching and valued aspects of many preschool programs statewide. From our perspective it seems that intentional communication between the classroom and the resource teachers helps ensure that the needs of this age group are met. Greater awareness of ongoing classroom themes, projects, or areas of focus can allow the resource teachers to incorporate ideas into their activities and create helpful learning connections.

### Transitions:

**Question:** My daily schedule shows that we meet substantial portion of the day exactly to the minute, but what happens if a transition takes longer than expected during an assessment?

**Response:** If less play time is observed because of a lengthy transition this will reduce the amount of time credited towards substantial portion of the day, regardless of what the written schedule shows. Making sure that the daily schedule reflects reasonable amounts of time for transitions between activities is important when considering how much time children can actually use materials. Also, because the unexpected is to be expected when working with young children, allowing for additional time to use materials is not only developmentally appropriate, but also makes it more likely that an unusual event, such as a long transition, will not negatively impact scores. Another tip related to the written schedule for public schools is to make sure that a copy is posted in the classroom and not only in the hallway.



**Question:** My classroom is in a mobile unit. Walking from the classroom to the cafeteria, playground, and specials takes a long time, but there is nothing I can do about the location of my classroom, so do the same time requirements still apply for transition times and also the amount of play time that is needed?

**Response:** Classroom location is not something that classroom staff typically can control; however, it is a consideration that affects children's experiences and administrators need to be aware that long distances may create some challenges for this age group in terms of the daily schedule and also expectations for behavior, attention span, etc. For classroom staff, being aware of how much time it takes to move from one location to the next is helpful when planning the daily schedule to ensure that there will be enough play and learning time

with access to various materials. Having materials ready to go in advance of transitions may reduce wait times. When there are longer distances, knowing that children will spend some amount of time walking between locations each day could make it even more important to minimize the “wait times” before and after transitions. To help with this some programs complete transitions in small groups whenever possible, as compared to the whole group. In schools where talking is allowed in the hallways, we have seen teachers use transition times as group discussions for concepts often covered during circle time such as recall or description of upcoming activities, playing “I Spy” or other word games to address basic concepts and increase children’s awareness of their surroundings as they walk, etc.

**Nap/rest:**

**Question:** In Kindergarten there will not be naptime, so towards the end of the year we stop having nap time in

order to get children ready. How does this affect the ECERS-R nap item?

**Response:** Nap, or at least a clear opportunity and provisions to rest and relax, even for a short time, is required for all preschool children. The ECERS-R assessment considers the children’s age, developmental needs, and environment at the time of the observation rather than plans for their next classroom environment. Therefore, ensuring that the environment meets the developmental needs of children for the current time is important. While some preschool children no longer need to rest, most will benefit from some quiet time even if they do not actually sleep, so offering a real opportunity and appropriate provisions for children to rest is required for preschool children until the start of kindergarten.

### Questions regarding sanitation and safety

**Question:** If we wash hands as much as is required in the ECERS-R we will not have enough time for learning and play, so what is more important?

**Response:** Being healthy by reducing the spread of germs provides a strong base for learning; children who feel well are more ready to be actively engaged and focused in their experiences. Additionally, exposing children to health conscious practices during early childhood makes it likely that healthy practices will continue over the course of an individual’s lifetime. Over the years, we have seen more and more programs successfully incorporate the health and sanitation requirements into daily routines. Although this may seem time-consuming initially, we have noticed that reducing transition times by using smaller groups or individual transitions is common and also effective. Additionally, in classrooms where the importance of hand washing has been addressed with explanations or other activities, it seems that children are more likely to complete the practices independently and naturally. It may take at least a few weeks to establish smooth routines, but once established hand washing becomes a natural part of the school day. Some reminders may still be needed at times, but it is possible to meet health and sanitation requirements, while still offering play and learning activities for a substantial portion of the day.



**Question:** The bathroom that has multiple sinks is down the hall; can we just use hand sanitizer instead?

**Response:** For NC ECERS-R assessments, hand sanitizer does not replace actual hand washing with soap and running water while indoors in most situations. One exception is for situations where there is not a sink in the cafeteria. If children’s hands are properly washed before leaving for the cafeteria and children do not handle other materials or obviously re-contaminate their hands on the way to the cafeteria, then using hand sanitizer prior to entering the cafeteria line negates the need for additional hand washing before eating.

**Question:** On the way to lunch we wash hands at the sinks in the hallway bathroom next to the cafeteria.

Even though the children in my class do not use this bathroom for toileting purposes, other children do throughout the day. Is it OK for us to wash hands at these sinks?

**Response:** Generally sinks that are used for handwashing after toileting and also other types of handwashing need to be disinfected between dual uses. However, in this case if this is the only time that these bathroom sinks are used, making sure that children use paper towels to turn off faucets will be sufficient. The NC Additional Notes for item 12 include more information about sinks and sanitary practices.

**Question:** The cafeteria staff is responsible for preparing the tables before lunch, so why does the process of how they clean and sanitize the tables affect my score? Also, do we need to clean and sanitize the cafeteria tables after lunch when we do not use them again that day or is it OK for the cafeteria staff to do this after we leave?

**Response:** The ECERS-R score is intended to reflect children’s experiences while at the program across the operating day; therefore, the process that occurs during their meals and snacks is considered. Assessors ask who is responsible for cleaning and sanitizing the tables, and find out from those individuals what process is followed. If a preschool group will not be using the cafeteria tables again (before tables are used by another group), then it is only the process of cleaning and sanitizing before the meal or snack that is considered for the assessment process. Because the children do not stay in the cafeteria, this is a different situation than occurs with classroom tables that are in the children’s general space and are used for different activities throughout the day. When a cafeteria is used, conversations between preschool staff and cafeteria staff at the beginning of each school year are helpful in building shared understanding of proper sanitary practices and the responsibilities of various staff.

**Question:** Playground maintenance is an ongoing challenge for my school and others in the same county. The preschool program coordinator has requested additional mulch and a taller fence since the beginning of the school year but no changes have been made. As the teacher, what am I supposed to do about this?

**Response:** As a classroom teacher there are aspects of the program that are outside of your control and we know this. However, to properly score the ECERS-R, the requirements found in various items and indicators

must be applied, regardless of who in the program is responsible for implementing or monitoring these aspects of the program. When discussing the ECERS-R requirements and any areas where attention or change may be needed (based on program goals), making sure that various program staff have the same understanding of both the requirements and also individual responsibilities could be helpful. There are many aspects of the classroom that are directly impacted by the teacher; however, there are other important areas related to budget, resources, and program administration that are directly impacted by other staff. Additionally, a conversation with the program’s DCDEE child care consultant can be helpful in generating ideas or suggestions related to increasing community support or involvement to supplement program resources and address specific needs.



## Want to find out more?

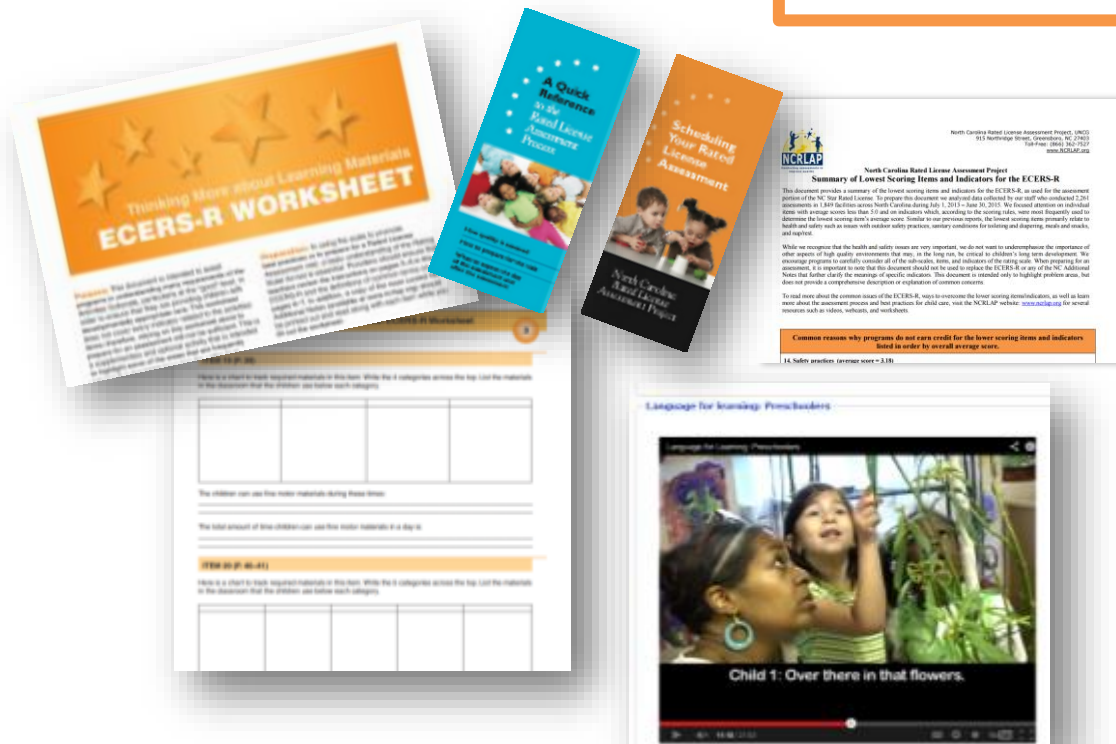
Beyond this information, public school staff are encouraged to review resources found on the [nclap.org](http://nclap.org) website. There are videos, video supplements, worksheets, and other information about the NC assessment process and the Environment Rating Scales.

### Some specific resource suggestions:

- NC Additional Notes: ECERS-R
- Summary of Lowest Scoring Items and Indicators for the ECERS-R
- Language for Learning: Preschoolers
- Handwashing and Basic Health Considerations for the Assessment Process
- Stay and Play Outside All Day, parts 1-4
- Thinking More about Learning Materials
- ECERS-R, Item 22, Blocks, Indicator 5.1

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We greatly appreciate the feedback provided by reviewers from the Alamance-Burlington and Edgecombe County Public Schools, as well as, the Division of Child Development and Early Learning (DCDEE).

Reference: Harms, T., Clifford, R., & Cryer, D. (2005). *Early childhood environment rating scale*. (Revised edition). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.