

How to Conduct an Internal Assessment using the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS)

NOTES: Although the DERS can be used for internal assessment, it can also be conducted as an external assessment by a DERS trained and reliable Pennsylvania Key (PA Key) Program Quality Assessor (hereinafter referred to as “Assessor”).

When using the DERS for an internal assessment to meet the expectations for one of the Keystone STARS Standards, please consult the most current version of the [Keystone STARS Performance Standards](#) and the [Keystone STARS Program Manual](#).

“Primary” and “Early Childhood” are used interchangeably with DERS document titles.

How to conduct an objective, authentic classroom assessment

The Keystone Stars Standards expect programs to conduct internal assessments annually and, once every three years, engage their internal assessment team in discussion of their internal assessment results with an Assessor from the PA Key.

- The internal assessment should be an observation; therefore, someone who has knowledge of the selected Program Observation Instrument (POI) and its expectations should plan to observe for the recommended amount of time (for the specific POI), in the classroom.
- Keep in mind, the internal assessment is not something to be given to the classroom teacher to complete as a checklist of things that the teacher feels occur in the classroom. Teachers cannot observe themselves in action and may not provide an objective picture of their classroom. The observer should be able to commit to observing and taking notes and should not have any classroom responsibilities during the observation.
- Family child care providers, working alone, should discuss observation options with the Assessor or Quality Coach.
- The observation should occur when most of the children are present and actively engaged in the classroom so interactions with peers, teachers, and materials can be observed; therefore, no part of the observation should occur during naptime unless naptime is a required component of the POI.
- The internal assessment should be viewed as an integral part of a program’s commitment to continuous quality improvement rather than just another piece of paperwork to be completed to meet an expectation. Information from an objective internal assessment can yield much information about the program’s practices, providing a foundation for the program to celebrate their successes and build upon existing practices.

DERS assessment at-a-glance

- DERS is based on Montessori philosophy but is appropriate for use in Family, Group, and Center-based settings
- For use with classrooms where children ages 3 to 12 years are enrolled
 - Primary (Ages 3 to 6)
 - Elementary (Ages 6 to 12)
- 1-hour timed observation
- Based on observation only, completed when children are engaged in free play

Required materials

- Primary (3 to 5 years), Elementary (6 to 12 years)
- Early Childhood/Primary (3 to 5 years), Elementary (6 to 12 years)
- What’s Going on in This Classroom?
- Corresponding Indicators and Scoring Guidelines (Primary or Elementary) *see DERS Technical Guide below

Supplemental materials:

- Montessori Assessment Playbook (provides some information about the DERS) ISBN: 978-1-7338691-1-9
- DERS Technical Guide

Purchase the POI:

- There may be multiple sources where the supplemental book can be purchased. An online search by resource name or ISBN number may result in several options from which to choose.
- Be sure to allow adequate time for ordering and delivery of the materials.

Conducting the internal assessment with the DERS

1. Learn about the DERS

- The more you learn about the quality practices described in the DERS, the easier it will be for you, as the observer to identify those practices or attributes in the classroom.
- It is recommended that the teaching team from each classroom being assessed, and the internal assessment team becomes familiar with the expectations of the DERS.
- Register for the online self-paced PA Foundations of the Developmental Environment Rating Scale on the [Professional Development \(PD\) Registry](#) (available sometime in 2024/2025).
- Request a [Facilitated Program Observation Instrument Orientation \(FPO\)](#). This one-hour session with an Assessor provides time to learn basic information about the DERS and an opportunity to ask specific questions. The FPO is structured to meet each individual’s or program’s specific needs, and each person attending receives one hour of PQAS credit. **NOTE:** The FPO is not a substitute for the online self-paced PA Foundations the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS) course, but rather provides a basic overview.

2. Prepare to conduct the internal assessment

- Gather all materials you will need to conduct the observation
- Choose the setting(s) you would like to have assessed (early childhood or elementary)
 - Choose an early childhood (ages 3 to 6) or elementary (ages 6 to 12) classroom to be assessed.
- If time has elapsed since your initial review of the DERS, review the “Indicators and Scoring Guidelines” and the age-appropriate Inventory for examples of observable behaviors.
- Use the “What’s going on in this classroom?” form to collect your notes, a blank document on your laptop, or prepare to handwrite your notes. Keep in mind that you will be standing, sitting on the floor, moving around the classroom, and might go outside.
- The classroom observation will take one hour. Set aside enough time to familiarize yourself with the classroom and get set up before starting the DERS assessment.
 - Review the classroom schedule to ensure the time set aside to observe will span an hour of free play/free choice/work time in the classroom.

- If the children are familiar with you, it may be helpful to let the children know you will be visiting the classroom for a special project. You can let them know you are going to watch them play and do their work and you will not be able to play with them while you are observing.

3. When to conduct the internal assessment

- It is best to conduct the assessment when the majority of the children have arrived and are engaged in free play/free choice/work time.
- It may be helpful to tell the children that you (an observer) will be visiting their classroom for a special project. You will watch them play and do their work but will not be able to play with them while doing your work.

4. Conduct the internal assessment

- Approach the observation as an objective observer. Make scoring decisions based on current observation of the classroom, not on information you know from your past experiences with the classroom.
- Position yourself where you can see the children as they engage in activities and hear the conversations in the classroom. Be sure to be able to move around as needed.
- Using the “What’s going on in this classroom?” form to take note of child behaviors, adult behaviors, and environmental attributes.
 - Use the age-appropriate Inventory to support note taking during the observation.
 - The Inventory can also be used to track an individual child’s progress in addition to the whole classroom.
- Take detailed notes on materials and classroom arrangement as they support the needs of children with disabilities (i.e., can the child with the wheelchair access materials independently). Take notes of interactions that occur with each child with an identified disability (This detail is important when determining several, many, majority). Taking notes is extremely helpful for several reasons. First, note taking will help you score accurately. If you are reviewing the assessment to check your scores, looking back at notes will help you. Second, note taking will help you/your teachers create goals based on observed data that was written down. Finally, your notes will assist the Assessor in understanding your program’s practices and will support deeper internal assessment consultation conversations. Remember, providing numerical scores is not enough to support your program’s growth and development.

5. Review the observation, determine the areas of strength and opportunities for growth

- Upon completion of the in-classroom observation, use your notes to reflect on the behaviors and attributes outlined in the “Indicators and Scoring Guidelines.” The worksheets do not provide a place to record a score.
- Conducting a DERS assessment is only the first step of the process toward growth. Review your observation with those people responsible for implementing changes.
 - Review your assessment findings with your Internal Assessment Team, Quality Coach and Assessor. They can celebrate your strengths with you.
 - Identify goals to achieve growth and include them in your Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQI).
- Review the individual indicators and discuss them with your Internal Assessment (IA) team. Be sure to reach out to your Quality Coach and assessor with any questions. Together celebrate the observed strengths and how they can inform your improvement planning. Take the strengths-based approach when discussing observation notes, reflective questions, and next steps.
- Discuss areas where you feel growth could occur and decide which areas are a priority. Be sure to create opportunities for everyone to contribute ideas and ensure everyone knows the next steps towards improvement.

Next steps

- Assure everyone has contributed ideas and ensure everyone knows the next steps to take toward improvement.
- When planning for CQI goals, look toward implementing the next level's indicators.
- Start small. Focus on one indicator at a time.
- Be patient. Growth takes time and some things might be outside of your program's ability to improve. Plan the timeline for your next IA cycle. Reassessing is a key piece of the CQI process and allows you to see if the action steps in your CQI plan are supporting your goals.