GROW NJ KIDS RATING PROTOCOL

Center-based Programs

including NJDOE Public Preschool, Head Start, and NAEYC-accredited Programs







About Grow NJ Kids Rating

The **Center for Research and Evaluation on Education and Human Services (CREEHS)** at Montclair State University provides independent and objective program evaluation, applied research, and program planning services to state and municipal agencies, school districts, colleges, and universities, community organizations, and foundations to assist them in meeting their program improvement and accountability needs in the areas of education, public health, and human services.

The GNJK Rating Team at CREEHS manages and oversees the rating process for early care and education (ECE) programs participating in Grow NJ Kids (GNJK). This process includes conducting systematic, unbiased classroom observations, as well as reviewing documentation and training records.

Contact Us:

GNJK Rating Email:
GNJKRating@montclair.edu

GNJK Rating Website:
montclair.edu/GNJK-Rating

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Center for Research and Evaluation on Education and Human Services
College for Education and Engaged Learning

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Preparing for Rating

Technical Assistance

Before submitting for a rating, programs should collaborate with their Technical Assistance Specialist (TAS) to:

- Confirm completion of GNJK Level 1 and Level 2 requirements
- Compile and organize evidence for required GNJK Quality Standards
- Identify optional GNJK Quality Standards for which the program will submit evidence
- Verify that all applicable staff have completed the necessary professional development
- Upload all evidence and training records to the program's File Cabinet in NJCCIS
- Prepare for classroom rating observations using the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3) and/or Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)

Note: GNJK ratings apply to **all classrooms** within the program building, regardless of funding source. All classrooms are subject to inclusion in the random selection process for observation, as outlined below.

GNJK Rating Components

GNJK Star Rating	Star 3	Star 4	Star 5
Curriculum, Teaching & Learning Standards	Program meets requirements for standards **CTL 1, CTL 2, CTL 5 and/or CTL 6**		
GNJK Standards Points*	50 - 90	91 - 131	132+
ECERS-3/ITERS-3 Scores	Average of 3.75 No more than 1 subscale below 3.00	Average of 4.50 No more than 1 subscale below 4.00	Average of 5.00 No more than 1 subscale below 4.25

Programs must receive a minimum of 10 points in each Grow NJ Kids Quality Domain.

Preparing for Rating

Required Standards for Stars 3, 4 & 5

GNJK Star Rating	Star 3*	Star 4*	Star 5*
GNJK Required Standards**	**CTL 1 (1 point)** Admin PD - Lesson Planning & Developmentally Responsive Practices	**CTL 1 (2 points)** Admin PD - Curriculum implementation	**CTL 1 (2 points)** Admin PD - Curriculum implementation
	CTL 2 (2 points) Educator PD - Lesson Planning & Developmentally Responsive Practices	**CTL 2 (6 points)** Educator PD - Curriculum implementation	**CTL 2 (6 points)** Educator PD - Curriculum implementation
	CTL 5 (2 points) Lesson plans are developmentally and culturally appropriate, meet state standards	**CTL 6 (4 points)** Curriculum aligned to state standards adopted/fully implemented	**CTL 6 (4 points)** Curriculum aligned to state standards adopted/fully implemented
	AMP 1 (2 points) Admin PD on ERS tools	**AMP 1 (2 points)** Admin PD on ERS tools	**AMP 1 (2 points)** Admin PD on ERS tools

All foundational standards must be completed and verified by the program's TAS.
****Programs must receive a minimum of 10 points in each Grow NJ Kids Quality Domain.***

Preparing for Rating

Licensing Requirements

Prior to submitting for a GNJK Star Rating, programs must complete all Level 1 and Level 2 requirements, including ensuring the program has a ***Regular*** or ***Temporary License with no outstanding, unabated items***. Programs should review their most recent Office of Licensing (OOL) inspection report to confirm all violations have been abated. Rating submissions from programs with unabated violations may not be accepted until all violations have been addressed.

Professional Development Requirements

- Completed professional development must align with the requirements outlined in the **GNJK Quality Standards for Early Care and Education Programs**.
- Unless otherwise specified within the GNJK Quality Standards, staff professional development may be validated through:
  - Training records or certificates
  - NJ Workforce Registry transcripts
  - College transcripts

Training records and certificates must include:

- Name of the training
- Date of the training
- Number of training hours
- Name of staff member who attended
- Name of training facilitator or organization

- A review of the training facilitator's credentials may be required to ensure they are qualified to deliver the training.
- If the content of the training is not clearly evident from the documentation, a brief description should be provided to explain what was covered and how it meets the relevant GNJK standard.

Documentation Best Practices

- **All photos and videos must be accompanied by a narrative description** explaining what is depicted and how it aligns with the applicable GNJK Standard.
- **When submitting lesson plans, a narrative must be included** describing what information within the lesson plans validates completion of the GNJK Standard.
- **Narrative descriptions must:**
  - Clearly describe the program practices being demonstrated.
  - Explain how these practices meet the requirements of the specific GNJK Standard.
  - Include the corresponding standard number.
- **If the evidence alone does not clearly demonstrate how the standard is met, a narrative description is required** to accompany the submission.
- When using lesson plans as evidence, **programs must submit a sample of the lesson plans from 50% of the classrooms for each age group** served by the program.
  - When submitting lesson plans, include the standard #, evidence type/description, and date (i.e., CTL6 - Lesson plan #1 - Curriculum Implementation - June 2025) in the file name
- In some cases, as noted in the Standards Guidance documents, documentation maintained onsite may be reviewed remotely via Zoom.
- All other documentation should be uploaded to the program's NJCCIS File Cabinet to ensure a complete and accurate review.
- For more details, see the Documentation and Training Review Process on page 5.

Preparing for Rating

Uploading Evidence to NJCCIS

- To ensure a thorough and efficient review of documentation and training records, all evidence the program intends to submit should be uploaded to the program's File Cabinet in NJCCIS.
- If a file is too large or cumbersome to upload, it may be reviewed remotely. In such cases, the program should discuss arrangements for remote review in advance.
- When uploading documentation to the NJCCIS File Cabinet, programs should:
  - Select the appropriate ***Document Type*** (e.g., GNJK Category 2)
  - Include the relevant GNJK Standard ***in the description*** (e.g., Breastfeeding Policy – CW 7)
  - ***Name the file*** to reflect the document and the corresponding standard (e.g., Breastfeeding Policy – CW 7)

Submitting for Rating

To submit for a GNJK Star Rating, programs must complete **all of the following steps**:

1. Complete and submit the **Star Rating Readiness Checklist**
2. Upload the following documentation to the NJCCIS File Cabinet:
   a. Evidence for all required and optional GNJK Quality Standards
   b. Staff list including each staff member's:
      i. Hire date
      ii. NJCCIS ID
      iii. Role
      iv. Full-time or part-time status
   c. List of dates of birth for all children enrolled in **each Infant and Toddler classroom** (format: MM/DD/YY)
   d. Classroom schedules for all classrooms at the program
3. Complete the "File for Rating" process via the Grow NJ Kids panel in NJCCIS*
   a. Submit the **Two-Month Observation Window Request Tool** to request your preferred two-month observation window. You may also access the Two-Month Observation Window Request Tool with the QR code below
4. Notify the GNJK Rating Team by emailing **GNJKRating@montclair.edu**. Include the following in your email:
   a. Total number of **Infant/Toddler and Preschool/Pre-Kindergarten** classrooms in the program building
   b. Indicate whether any classrooms are self-contained

*Program rating submissions will move forward upon receipt of the *Provider Ready for Rating* alert in NJCCIS by the GNJK Rating Team.

Two-Month Observation Window Request Tool QR Code

The Rating Process

Documentation and Training Review

Prior to rating submission, programs should be encouraged to upload as much documentation as possible to the NJCCIS File Cabinet to ensure a thorough and accurate review. After a GNJK Rating submission is accepted, it is assigned to a Portfolio Review Assistant (PRA) who will begin reviewing the program's standards evidence and professional development records.

The PRA will:

- Communicate with the program as needed to support the documentation review process.
- Schedule a **remote review** of any onsite documentation, if applicable.

Once the review of all evidence and training records is complete, the PRA will draft a **Rating Summary Report** outlining their findings. Each program will receive this report, which includes **feedback across all components** of the GNJK rating process. **For more details on the Rating Summary Report process, see the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) Observations and Rating Notification sections below.**

Note: The PRA is not able to answer questions related to classroom observations, as the observations are conducted by a separate team member.

Environment Rating Scale (ERS) Observations

In addition to being assigned a PRA, each program is also assigned one or more Independent Raters to conduct classroom observations using the ITERS-3 and/or ECERS-3 tools.

Once assigned, the Independent Rater will:

- Review the program's requested two-month observation window and any dates of exclusion.
- Notify the program of the scheduled observation dates.
- Review classroom rosters and randomly select classrooms for observation based on the following criteria:
  - **ITERS-3** is used in classrooms where enrolled children are **35 months or younger**
  - **ECERS-3** is used in classrooms where enrolled children are **36 months and over**
  - If 75% or more of the children in a classroom fall within the age range for one tool (i.e., the ITERS-3 or ECERS-3), that tool will be used
  - If ages in a classroom are evenly split, the program may choose which tool will be used for the observation and should notify **GNJK Rating** of their selection

After all observations are completed, the Independent Rater(s) will submit the observation data to the GNJK Rating Team for review and inclusion in the program's Rating Summary Report. *Note: Independent Raters do not have access to or information about the program's documentation or training review. That portion of the process is managed and facilitated by a separate team member.*

The Rating Process

ERS Observation Protocol

Observation Window and Classroom Selection

Programs are required to:

- Select a two-month observation window during which classroom observations will take place
  - Choose a two-month window that is **no later than six months after the date of rating submission.**
- **Provide up to 10 days of exclusion** within that window when the program is unavailable for observations.

The chart below outlines the number of classrooms that will be observed, based on the total number of classrooms at the program.

- If a program includes both Infant/Toddler and Preschool classrooms, at least one classroom from each age group will be observed.
- For programs with 2–5 classrooms in an age group, if the desired Star Rating is not achieved based on the observation of one classroom, it may be determined that an additional, randomly selected classroom will be observed.

Program size	Classrooms Randomly Selected
1 classroom of an age group	1 classroom observed
2 classrooms of an age group	1 classroom observed
3 - 11 classrooms of an age group	⅓ of classrooms observed, rounding down
12+ classrooms of an age group	¼ of classrooms observed, rounding down



The Rating Process

Rating Notification

After the Independent Rater(s) complete(s) the classroom observations, the GNJK Rating Team compiles the ERS data into the program's Rating Summary Report. Once the PRA and the Rating Team have entered all applicable findings, the report is finalized and submitted to the GNJK administrators at the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS), Division of Family Development (DFD), along with a rating recommendation. DFD reviews the report and recommendation, finalizes the rating in NJCCIS, and notifies the program of its official GNJK Star Rating.

Programs wishing to appeal their rating should follow the procedures outlined in the Rating Review Process document. The program's TAS can provide additional guidance on the appeal process.

Extension Policy

A one-time extension is available for programs that do not initially meet the requirements for a Star Rating 3. If the program already holds a Star Rating, that rating will be extended for six months to allow time for necessary improvements to achieve at least a Star 3 rating. If a new rating is not issued within six months following the extension, the existing rating will expire.

Programs may request new observations or a review of updated training and documentation by submitting the **Documentation Review/Observation Request Form** available on the GNJK Rating website.

To allow adequate time for improvement, a minimum of 60 days must lapse between the issuance of an extension and any subsequent observations. Additionally, programs may be required to resubmit time-sensitive documentation and/or evidence of training when submitting an observation or documentation review request.

Programs that operate on a 10-month/school-year calendar and have an extension that overlaps with summer months should contact DFD and CREEHS for information on next steps.





Rating for NAEYC-accredited Programs

Standards Waivers for NAEYC-accredited Programs

GNJK Quality Standards that align with NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards may be waived for eligible NAEYC-accredited programs. To be considered for this waiver, programs must upload the following documents to the NJCCIS File Cabinet:

- A copy of the current NAEYC Accreditation Certificate
- The most recent NAEYC Accreditation Decision Report
- Completed NAEYC Annual Reports for Years 1–3, or other evidence confirming the program's accreditation is in good standing

Programs should refer to the NAEYC standards in effect during their accreditation year, along with the corresponding aligned GNJK standards, to determine which standards may be waived. The PRA will use the NAEYC standards from the year of accreditation, as evidenced in the submitted documentation, to determine which GNJK standards are eligible for waiver. If a program was accredited based on standards from a different year than its official accreditation date, it must provide documentation to verify this.

Points from GNJK standards that are successfully met through NAEYC documentation will count toward the total points required for the requested Star Rating. **However, GNJK standards aligned with NAEYC standards marked as "unmet" or listed under the Areas for Ongoing Improvement on the Decision Report will not be waived.** NAEYC standards that are not listed as unmet or an Area for Ongoing Improvement on the program's decision report are presumed to have been met by the program, and the corresponding GNJK standards will be waived. Based on the NAEYC report findings, additional documentation may be required to demonstrate that GNJK standards have been met and that point requirements for the requested Star Rating are fulfilled.

ERS Observations for NAEYC-accredited Programs

Programs seeking a GNJK Star Rating of 3 **that have had classroom observations conducted by NAEYC** are not required to undergo ERS (Environment Rating Scale) observations by the GNJK Rating Team.

Note: All other Star 3 requirements for the GNJK Quality Standards must still be met.

Below is a summary of how NAEYC accreditation levels affect ERS observation requirements:

- **NAEYC Accreditation without a site visit**: ERS observations are required for Stars 3, 4, and 5.
- **NAEYC Accreditation with a random site visit**: ERS observations are waived for Star 3, but required for Stars 4 and 5.
- **NAEYC Accreditation+ (includes a site visit)**: ERS observations are waived for Star 3, but required for Stars 4 and 5.

Rating for Head Start Programs

Standards Waivers for Head Start Programs

GNJK Quality Standards that align with the Head Start Program Performance Standards or the Head Start Act may be waived for eligible Head Start programs. To be considered for a waiver, programs must upload he most recent Office of Head Start (OHS) Monitoring Reviews to the NJCCIS File Cabinet, including the following:

- Focus Area One and Focus Area Two Reports
- Any follow-up reports detailing corrections to Areas of Noncompliance or Deficiencies
- Any additional reviews conducted by OHS

Programs should identify whether their OHS Monitoring Review was based on the 2016 or 2025 version of the Head Start Program Performance Standards and refer to the aligned GNJK standards to determine which may be eligible for waiver. The PRA will use the applicable version (2016 or 2025) to evaluate which GNJK standards may be waived based on alignment with the Head Start standards. If a program was monitored by OHS on Head Start standards from a different year than is reflected on the OHS reports, it must provide documentation to verify this.

Points are awarded toward the program's total for the requested Star Rating for Head Start standards that are successfully met and aligned with GNJK standards, as evidenced in the OHS Monitoring Review. **However, GNJK standards aligned with Head Start items identified as Areas of Noncompliance or Deficiencies in the OHS reports will not be waived.** To receive points for these standards, programs must submit additional documentation for verification. Head Start standards that are not listed as non-compliant or deficient in the OHS Monitoring Reviews are presumed to have been met by the program, and the corresponding GNJK standards will be waived.

ERS Observations for Head Start Programs

Head Start **programs seeking a GNJK Star Rating of 3 are not required to undergo ERS observations** conducted by the GNJK Rating Team.

Note: All other Star 3 requirements for the GNJK Quality Standards must still be met.

For Star Rating 4, preschool classroom observations are not required if the program's OHS *CLASS* observation average scores meet the following thresholds:

- Emotional Support: 5.50
- Classroom Organization: 5.50
- Instructional Support: 2.65

Preschool classrooms that do not meet these thresholds, as well as all Infant/Toddler classrooms, are required to have ERS observations for Star Rating 4. For Star Rating 5, ERS observations are required for both Infant/Toddler and Preschool classrooms, if applicable, for all Head Start programs.

Rating for NJDOE Public Preschool Programs

Standards Waivers for NJDOE Public Preschool Programs

The GNJK Standards waived for New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) public preschool programs include **AMP 5 , AMP 6,** and **Additional Point Opportunity 2**. NJDOE public preschool programs are awarded points for these standards and must submit evidence for any additional standards for which they wish to earn points.

An NJDOE public preschool program refers to a public school classroom located within a school district. DOE-contracted classrooms located in private center-based programs must follow the requirements for private center-based programs.

Staff Requirements for NJDOE Public Preschool Programs

NJDOE public preschool programs should collaborate with their TAS to identify which staff members meet the qualifications for Administrator/Supervisor, Educator, and Non-Instructional Staff roles, as well as to distinguish between full-time and part-time staff. This ensures the program meets the appropriate GNJK Quality Standard requirements.

Staff roles must be clearly indicated on the staff list submitted with the program's Star Rating Readiness Checklist. All applicable NJDOE public preschool staff, including paraprofessionals or staff employed by third-party staffing agencies, must complete the training hours required for the GNJK Quality Standard(s) the program intends to submit for review. NJDOE public preschool staff may access GNJK training offerings through NJCCIS.

Considerations for Self-Contained Classrooms

Documentation from self-contained classrooms should be included with the evidence submitted for all other classrooms in the program. Training hours for staff in self-contained classrooms must also be submitted.

NJDOE requires that self-contained classrooms implement Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and use a DOE-endorsed curriculum. Classrooms using Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) must use a DOE-endorsed curriculum in addition to an adaptive or supplemental curriculum. Staff in ABA classrooms may submit documentation of formal training hours in either the DOE-endorsed curriculum or the adaptive/supplemental curriculum to meet applicable GNJK Quality Standards.

If a program has six or more preschool classrooms, self-contained classrooms are eligible for random selection for observation. While feedback from these observations will be shared with the program, the scores from self-contained classrooms will **not** be included in the program's average when determining if rating requirements have been met.