



THE
Responsive Classroom
Approach in Action: *Three*
Success Stories

RESEARCH-BASED



THE
Responsive Classroom Approach
in Action: *Three Success Stories*

Picture a classroom where children are fully engaged in their learning.

Picture a classroom where children and teachers treat one another with kindness and respect, where children feel positive about school, and where learning is purposeful and joyful.

Picture a *Responsive Classroom*.

Responsive Classroom is a research-based education approach associated with higher-quality teaching, higher student achievement, and improved school climate. *Responsive Classroom* practices help educators build competencies in four key and interrelated domains:

Engaging Academics

Positive Community

Effective Management

Developmental Awareness

Researchers from the University of Virginia have documented the positive impact that the *Responsive Classroom* approach has on teacher effectiveness and student achievement. In addition, educators around the country are sharing their stories of how the approach has transformed their classrooms or schools. Here are a few of those stories.

RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM®

Center for Responsive Schools, Inc., 85 Avenue A, Turners Falls, Massachusetts 01376

www.responsiveclassroom.org ■ 800-360-6332



Big Changes, Big Gains

Improved School Climate Leads to Increased Attendance and Drop in Discipline Referrals

When principal Susan Mele arrived four years ago at Stewartsville Elementary School, the discipline was in chaos. More time was being spent on discipline than instruction; teachers were exhausted from dealing with inappropriate behaviors that negatively impacted instruction; students were rude to each other and didn't seem to care. Susan recalls,

"On most days, I had no time for anything but discipline. I was literally wrapped up with disciplining students from the moment the buses arrived at 7:30 AM until 5:00 PM when I would finish my last phone call to parents."

Something big needed to change

Midway through the first year, she challenged the leadership team, stating,

"We can't go on like this. This isn't education. We're just trying to hold down the fort here and it isn't working."

There were nods of agreement around the room. Several people who were familiar with the *Responsive Classroom* approach suggested that the school consider adopting it as a means to change the school climate.

"I knew if this was going to work, we needed the full support of the staff. The leadership team decided to introduce the idea to the faculty and explain that to make it work we all had to be on-board with the concept of *Responsive Classroom*. I just knew that it was not going to work if we were only willing to go partway."

The staff gave their unanimous support but with one condition: They wanted Susan and Diane, the school counselor, to demonstrate their commitment by

ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Stewartsville Elementary School ■ GOODVIEW, VIRGINIA

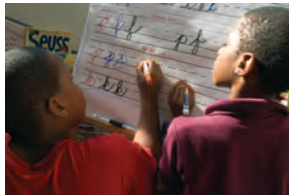
Grades Pre-K-5 ■ 430 students

■ In 3rd year of implementation

being among the first in the school to receive the full week-long training. Not only did they attend the week-long training that summer, they showed their commitment in many other ways, too.

In the first year of implementation, Susan carved out 20 minutes in the schedule for Morning Meeting and established the expectation that all teachers would conduct Morning Meetings daily. She also purchased resource books for every teacher, such as *The Morning Meeting Book*, *The First Six Weeks of School*, and *Doing Math in Morning Meeting*, along with a chime to use as a signal for getting students' attention.

In addition, she devoted time in staff meetings to modeling Morning Meeting components and sharing ideas for activities that connected to the curriculum. Finally, she introduced the approach to parents and built their support through regular communications emphasizing the importance of creating a more positive climate for learning.



A noticeable change in the first few months

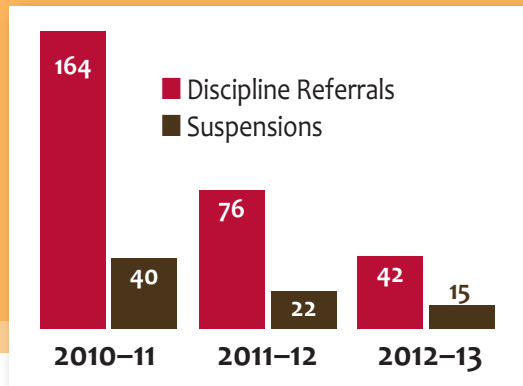
Within six to eight weeks of starting the new school year, teachers began to notice a change. Students seemed more excited about coming to school; parents began reporting that students were upset if they didn't get to school on time because they would miss Morning Meeting; students were starting to greet one another and teachers by name; and older students were seen helping younger students on the bus and in the hallways. Recalls Susan,

"It just completely changed the atmosphere of the school. It was simply amazing to watch. We were transformed into a kinder, gentler community of learners."

LOOK AT THE DATA

Stewartsville Elementary School ■ GOODVIEW, VIRGINIA

Discipline Referrals and Suspensions Over Three Years



Discipline referrals dropped significantly that first year as did bus referrals. Daily attendance was up by a point and a half and has stayed there since.

The next summer, more staff attended the week-long training, including classroom teachers, special area teachers, and paraprofessionals. Throughout the year, the staff committed to studying *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Students Learn* and to creating whole-school rules.

After the first day of school in the second year, the staff was in awe about how smoothly the year opened and it continued to get better from there. There was more time available for instruction and teachers were more satisfied with their jobs. In Susan's words,

"It completely changed who we were as a school. Students and teachers knew each other and were motivated to work things out when there was a problem. There was so much more time for learning and students were more available for the learning. And now when I get a discipline referral it's an anomaly. We've come a long way in just a few years."

Susan frequently talks about her school's success at district principal meetings:

"I constantly tell other school leaders, 'If you want the kind of impact we've had at Stewartsville, give teachers the support they need to implement the program well and keep the momentum going year after year. It takes strong commitment from the principal and the entire staff to make it work, but it's worth it!'" ■



IRONIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ■ RANDOLPH, NEW JERSEY

Three-Year Survey of Students

School Sees Gains in Students' Positive Attitudes About School

Principal Dennis Copeland had one goal in mind when he decided to survey a group of 200 students in his school over a three-year period:

"I wanted to show the impact of the *Responsive Classroom* approach on students' attitudes about school. I knew from being a teacher and a principal that the *Responsive Classroom* worked. I knew that it raised students' engagement in school by making them feel more connected and at ease. I also knew that it made them feel safe enough to do the hard work that real learning demands. But I was interested in seeing if we could measure this, both for our own information and to share with other schools in our district that were considering adopting the approach."

Ironia Elementary School in Randolph Township, New Jersey, has been using the *Responsive Classroom* approach since 2006 when Dennis first became principal. The school started slowly, with just a few teachers receiving training in the first year, but by year two the school decided to make the *Responsive Classroom* approach a whole-school initiative. Dennis recalls,

ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Ironia Elementary School

RANDOLPH, NEW JERSEY

Grades K-5 ■ 480 students

■ In 8th year of implementation

LOOK AT THE DATA

Ironia Elementary School RANDOLPH, NEW JERSEY

Percentage Change in Positive Attitudes Toward School

Year	Goal	Actual
2007–08	+5%	+9%
2008–09	+5%	+6%
2009–10	+5%	+8%

“In that second year, and in following years, we had *Responsive Classroom* consultants come to the school not just to work with teachers but also with administrators, guidance counselors, para-professionals, and recess staff. We understood that the approach was not just for classroom teachers but is most effective when used by every adult who comes into contact with students.”

School climate plus AYP gains

After just two years, the school saw significant changes in the school climate as well as improvements in achievement scores. Dennis reports,

“Relationships improved, students were more comfortable asking questions, teachers knew students better, and students were more focused and better able to successfully work through academic problems.

“When I first came to the school, we had not met annual yearly progress (AYP) goals. After implementing the *Responsive Classroom* approach along with several other initiatives, we met AYP in my second year and have met or exceeded the standards set forth by the state and federal government every year after that.”

Going slow to go fast

Dennis emphasizes the importance of taking the time to teach students needed skills during the early weeks of school and enlisting the support of parents in this effort.

“Parents were very aware of the *Responsive Classroom* initiative. We held meetings to share the philosophy and practices with parents and to explain why their children would not be coming home with homework for the first few weeks of school, for instance. It was important to us that we took the time needed in the first six weeks of school to teach children the skills they needed to be independent with homework. Once students had those skills, they could begin taking work home. Teachers and parents noticed a significant increase in students’ ability to work independently and take charge of their learning. This is a skill that transfers when it comes time to take standardized tests or do other tasks that require self-reliance.”

About the survey

To gather data on students’ attitudes about school, which included questions about their ability to do challenging work and meet expectations, Dennis administered the survey at the beginning and end of each school year over a three-year period, 2007–2010. The survey was a modified version of one used by researchers at the University of Virginia during a quasi-experimental study of the *Responsive Classroom* approach titled Social and Academic Learning Study (SALS).

In the fall of 2007, the survey was administered to 100 first and 100 second graders as a benchmark, and again to the same group in June 2008 at the close of the school year. This was repeated for the same group of students through June 2010.

The goal was to increase students’ positive attitudes about school by 5%, but in each year, the increase exceeded this figure as seen in the chart on the facing page. ■





Lively Learning in 6th Grade

Change in Teaching Leads to Change in Student Engagement

Learning is alive and well in Sue French's sixth grade classroom at Sherwood Elementary School in Melbourne, Florida. Sue attributes the vibrant academic picture in her classroom to the positive learning community that the *Responsive Classroom* approach helps her create.

Positive community especially important for 6th grade

Sue recognizes that building a safe and welcoming community is especially important at this grade level, when students are going through rapid physical and emotional changes. She notes,

"It's a turbulent age. Students this age often are self-conscious and feel unsafe with peers. If these children are going to learn, it's really important that they have a safe environment. They need to feel it's okay to ask questions, to speak up and articulate their thoughts, to take risks in learning."

And building a positive community requires thoughtful and effective teacher management. Sue emphasizes the interdependency:

"It's all connected—positive community, classroom management, academic engagement. To have academic engagement and buy-in, you need a safe, positive community; to have a positive community, you need effective management."

Since she began using the *Responsive Classroom* approach, Sue has observed a significant increase in students' engagement in learning—and recent test scores reflect this. In the 2011–2012 school year, principal Cindy Wilson reports that Sue's value-added measure was the highest in the school that year: 32/35 compared to the school score of 29/35.

ABOUT THE TEACHER

Sue French ■ SHERWOOD ELEMENTARY,
MELBOURNE, FLORIDA

Teaches 6th grade ■ Certified *Responsive Classroom* consulting teacher ■ In 10th year of implementing *Responsive Classroom*

And in the 2012–2013 results from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, 90% of the students in Sue’s class scored at grade level or above in Reading while 80% of the students scored at grade level or above in Math.

These test scores were almost identical to another sixth grade class, also with a teacher using *Responsive Classroom* practices, and compared favorably to the remaining sixth grade class where *Responsive Classroom* practices were not being used (see graph on following page for details).

Significant shift in approach to discipline

Before learning about the *Responsive Classroom* approach, Sue relied on a teacher-centered and authoritarian approach to discipline. She recalls,

“I made a lot of assumptions about what students should know and do. These students had been coming to school for many years. They should know how to behave, right? It didn’t occur to me that students needed instruction in social skills and behavior expectations, just as they needed instruction in reading and math. I made the rules and the consequences for breaking them had a punitive edge.”

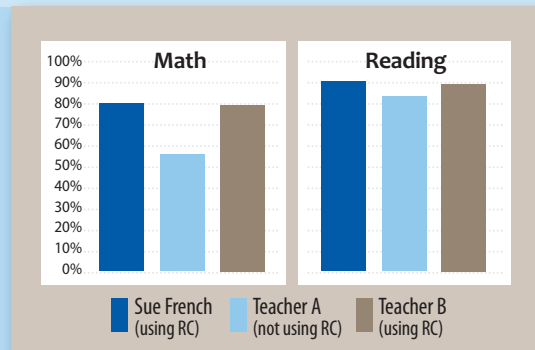


But something didn’t feel right. When Sue began working toward National Board certification, she belonged to a chat room where she heard teachers talking about topics such as setting a positive tone for learning through Morning Meeting and improving parent communication. “What they were describing really piqued my interest,” she remembers. Sue’s contacts online led her to *The Morning Meeting Book*. She and Jean O’Quinn, a colleague at another school, read the book together and gradually began implementing Morning Meeting in their classrooms.

LOOK AT THE DATA

Sherwood Elementary
School ■ MELBOURNE, FLORIDA

Percentage of Students
That Met Criteria of
Level 3 or Above



Not long after that, Sue changed schools. In her new school, an administrator familiar with the *Responsive Classroom* approach supported Sue's interest and helped her gain formal training. In addition to Morning Meeting, Sue began to co-create rules with the students; she used logical consequences in a nonpunitive way; she introduced routines and materials with Interactive Modeling and Guided Discovery; she reached out to parents in new ways; and she structured lessons with Academic Choice. Through all of this, she learned about effective teacher language and gradually changed the way she spoke and listened to students.

One day, when Sue was in the early days of implementation, the administrator stopped by her classroom for a visit. Sue recalls,

"Even though I was just getting started with the *Responsive Classroom* approach, the administrator knew right away that something was different in my teaching, that something significant had shifted. But it wasn't just my teaching that caught the administrator's attention. Unprompted, several students pointed out our class rules and explained the rule creation process. Proudly, one student announced, 'These are our class rules. We made them and they help us learn.'"

Over the years, Sue's belief in the importance of the *Responsive Classroom* approach has deepened as she has seen the positive impact on one class after another. She has remained highly committed to her own continued learning about the approach as well as to teaching other educators. ■