

Teacher Skill Drives Common Core Success

How Responsive Classroom® Helps



Effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards calls for essential changes to teacher practice. Mapping curriculum content to the standards is just half of the work of implementing the Common Core. The second crucial half is providing teachers with the high-quality, sustained professional development that enables them to shift their instructional practices as needed so that students learn in the ways intended by the Common Core.



“Without dispute, the single most important factor in achieving the standards is teachers with instructional prowess,” says Lora Hodges, executive director of Center for Responsive Schools, developer of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching.

“We need teachers who engage all students, lift them to high levels of content mastery, provoke critical thinking and deep analysis, and coach students into becoming strong communicators and collaborators.”

Among U.S. teachers, there is no shortage of passion for helping every child succeed. The Common Core makes it clear, Hodges notes, that there must also be no shortage of professional development in helping teachers translate this passion into practice. “What a teacher believes, knows, and does has a major influence on how students learn,” she says. “Teachers are at their best when they have not just passionate beliefs but also knowledge of how students learn best, and a body of evidence-based practices that enable them to deliver high-quality instruction.”

Since 1981, teachers have been turning to the *Responsive Classroom* approach to increase their knowledge of teaching and their capacity to deliver high-quality instruction. Teachers’ use of this approach is associated with students making academic gains while building vital social and emotional competencies—competencies such as a calm focus that enables deep thinking, interpersonal skills for collaborating with diverse classmates, and a stick-to-itiveness that helps them persist in the face of difficulty. These are among the crucial skills students need to achieve the rigor inherent in the Common Core and to successfully navigate our increasingly complex world.

What Is the Responsive Classroom Approach?

Responsive Classroom is a research-based approach to education that gives teachers highly practical strategies for developing competencies in four crucial domains:

- ✦ **Engaging Academics:** Teachers offer lessons and assignments that are active and interactive, appropriately challenging, purposeful, and connected to students' interests so that students reach higher levels of motivation, skill mastery, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving.
- ✦ **Effective Management:** Teachers establish and teach behavior expectations, handle behavior mistakes, manage the schedule, and organize physical spaces in ways that enable students to work with autonomy and focus.
- ✦ **Positive Community:** Teachers create an environment in which every child feels safe and fully included, teacher and students share a common purpose, and a sense of joy envelops hard work, which together enable children to take the risks necessary for learning.
- ✦ **Developmental Awareness:** Teachers have knowledge of child development and use that knowledge, along with regular observations of students, to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment.



As schools and districts increasingly recognize that academic and social-emotional learning go hand in hand—that social-emotional competencies improve academic outcomes and academic competencies improve social-emotional outcomes—they are providing *Responsive Classroom* professional development for their teachers.

As a result, an estimated one million students each year are impacted by *Responsive Classroom* practices. School leaders report that after staff receive *Responsive Classroom* training, their school sees increased teacher effectiveness, higher student achievement, and an improved school climate.

RESEARCH: Higher Quality Standards-Based Instruction

Through a 2013 study by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, researchers found that teachers' use of *Responsive Classroom* practices was associated with more skillful standards-based mathematics instruction. For example, teachers demonstrated the following:

- ✿ Higher levels of mathematical discourse
- ✿ More skill in representing mathematical concepts and problems
- ✿ Greater cognitive depth within lessons
- ✿ Greater coherence and accuracy of mathematical content

For details, see the research brief "*The Responsive Classroom Approach Increases the Use of Standards-Based Mathematics Teaching Practices*" by Erin R. Ottmar, Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, Robert Q. Berry, and Ross A. Larsen. http://bit.ly/rc_math

For other research on the Responsive Classroom approach, visit www.responsiveclassroom.org/research.

A CLOSER LOOK: How Responsive Classroom Aligns With the Common Core

All *Responsive Classroom* practices help teachers create the conditions that enable students to do the higher-order learning called for by the Common Core. Especially important are the *Responsive Classroom* solutions that address the following Common Core challenges:

Common Core Challenge: **A Climate of Learning All Day, Every Day**

All the Common Core-aligned tools and techniques being offered to teachers will go only so far without one linchpin: the use of positive and effective teacher language.



Language—word choice, tone of voice, and pacing—is perhaps the most powerful tool available to teachers. It permeates every aspect of teaching. Teachers can't give a lesson, welcome a student into the room, coach students on a math assignment, or guide a language arts project without using language.

And how a teacher uses language has a huge impact on how students think, feel, and learn. Skillful teacher language creates a climate of joyful, rigorous learning and lights a fire in each child; unskillful teacher language can create a climate of frustration or fear and tear children down. If teachers are going to help students reach the high bar set by the Common Core, they need to pay attention to this most potent item in their teacher toolkit.

Every adult can probably name a time when a mentor’s words inspired them to go for something big, or when an especially encouraging comment kept them going when they were tired or scared. The question is, What exactly was it that made those utterances so inspiring and encouraging? How can teachers become conscious of those elements of language and use them deliberately when they speak to students?

Responsive Classroom solution: Using effective teacher language

Responsive Classroom trainings and resources break successful teacher language down into its building blocks and teach them to educators systematically. For example, teachers learn these four types of language that are especially crucial for helping students reach Common Core standards:

- ✱ **Envisioning language**—language that inspires students to imagine themselves achieving beyond their current reality
- ✱ **Open-ended questions**—questions that encourage inquisitiveness and connection-making by drawing on students’ own thoughts, knowledge, and feelings
- ✱ **High-quality feedback**—feedback that names what students are specifically doing well so they know what to build on as they progress toward learning goals
- ✱ **Reminders and redirections**—brief words and phrases that keep children’s behavior on track while building their autonomy, sense of competence, and self-discipline

For each type of language, teachers learn not only the how’s (which words and what tone of voice have the most impact), but also the when’s (in what situations to use each type of language).

This conscious use of language brings out the best in children, inspiring hard work and enabling profound growth in students’ academic engagement and achievement.

Common Core Challenge: Rich Academic Conversations

The Common Core’s Speaking and Listening standards reflect a vision of students engaged in rich academic conversations and oral presentations that open minds and deepen learning.

“This is a worthy vision because it’s this kind of high-quality communication that allows students to reap the full benefit of school,” says Center for Responsive School’s Hodges.

To succeed in academic conversations and presentations, students need to use a certain language—the language of learning. As Hodges puts it, “The language of learning is much more than ordinary speech. It is a set of concrete skills and strategies for listening, then



thinking; for thinking, then speaking; for translating curiosity into well-thought-out questions and arguments; for building on others' ideas and taking a conversation and train of thought to a higher and higher level.”

Students don't come to school automatically knowing how to speak this language. Nor can we expect them to gradually pick it up by themselves. Instead, we need to deliberately teach the language of learning to students from the earliest grades onward, guiding them in the specific skills, words, and social conventions that make up this language.

But just as students don't automatically know this language, teachers may not automatically know how to teach it. Many may think there's nothing to this language, and so there's nothing to teach. Others might think the opposite—that the language of learning can't be taught, that some people just think and communicate in this way and some just don't. “Both would be dangerous assumptions,” says Hodges. “Speaking, listening, reasoning, and intellectual curiosity are proficiencies that students must have as they work on curriculum that's mapped to the Common Core. When they come to the table without this set of proficiencies, or come with any of these proficiencies underdeveloped, teachers can and must teach them what they need to know.”

Responsive Classroom solution: Teaching the language of learning

The *Responsive Classroom* approach gives teachers ways to explicitly teach the language of learning. It addresses core speaking and listening competencies such as:

- ✧ Listening with respect and to fully understand
- ✧ Speaking clearly, concisely, and confidently
- ✧ Asking purposeful questions and answering others' questions thoughtfully
- ✧ Backing up assertions with sound evidence
- ✧ Agreeing and disagreeing respectfully to advance powerful exchanges of ideas

All *Responsive Classroom* teaching practices help build children's speaking and listening skills, and teachers receiving training in the approach learn how to use these practices in concert to introduce the skills, give students multiple opportunities to practice, offer meaningful feedback, and address common mistakes.

Importantly, teachers learn how to integrate this teaching and practice into activities throughout the school day—during math and language arts and other academic lessons, in Morning Meeting, during recess and lunch, and at dismissal—rather than treating them as an add-on to the teaching of academic content.

When teachers systematically teach the language of learning in this way, classroom discussions and presentations take on new depth and nuance. Not only does this mean meeting the Common Core standards, it also means that students get practice in the speaking and thinking skills they need for navigating life outside of school.

Common Core Challenge: More Complex Content and Skills



The Common Core is asking students to master harder content and skills. To name just a few examples, certain content and skills are being taught a grade earlier than before; students are being asked not only to solve math problems, but also to explain to others how they solved those problems; and in reading and writing, students are expected not only to draw conclusions, but to cite evidence to justify those conclusions.

“Teachers might feel a bit overwhelmed by these expectations,” says *Responsive Classroom* program developer Mike Anderson. “But by thinking through what skills their students are missing and then teaching students these skills, they’ll make the prospect of reaching these standards manageable for themselves and their students.”

Before every assignment, says Anderson, teachers should think about the prerequisite skills students need. “If students are being asked to explain to each other how they solved a problem, do they know how to take turns talking? Do they know how to respectfully show that they aren’t (or are) following a classmate’s explanation? If they’re to cite evidence to back up a conclusion, do they know how to mark important information in a text so they can find it later? Do they know how to think about whether information is important in the first place?”

By asking such questions and then specifically modeling each missing skill, Anderson notes, teachers will be able to scaffold children toward succeeding at more complex tasks.

Responsive Classroom solution: Interactive Modeling

When teachers receive *Responsive Classroom* training, another practice they learn is Interactive Modeling, a simple yet highly effective technique for teaching these prerequisite skills. In conventional modeling, teachers show students what a procedure, task, or thinking process looks like. Interactive Modeling goes beyond that in three important ways:

- ✱ **Active observation by students**—Teachers using Interactive Modeling do little to no narrating and explaining during their modeling. Instead, they prompt students themselves to notice details about what the teacher demonstrated.
- ✱ **Immediate practice**—Interactive Modeling has built-in steps for students to immediately practice the skill the teacher demonstrated.
- ✱ **Immediate feedback**—Teachers using Interactive Modeling observe students’ practice carefully and take the time to give high-quality feedback in the moment.

“This combination of active noticing, immediate practice, and immediate feedback is so powerful,” Anderson comments. “It gets students to engage more deeply, learn more, and remember more. And that means they build a firmer and more logical staircase of competencies that enables them to tackle harder content and skills.”

Common Core Challenge: Genuine Student Engagement



The cognitive tasks the Common Core is asking students to do—analyze texts and data, evaluate arguments, interpret words from context, integrate information from diverse sources, apply methods learned in one context to another—require mental stamina and will feel like hard work to many children.

To motivate children to keep trying when the work gets hard, teachers need to ensure that the work is engaging. One of the best ways to do that is to give students some choice in their learning.

Teachers have always built choice into their lessons: *Choose six of the following ten questions to answer* or *Choose a partner to work with*. But these sorts of choices aren't motivating enough for students to truly stretch themselves.

So what kind of choice will do the job? And how can teachers structure choice so that students meet important learning goals, their own work stays manageable, and the classroom remains calm and orderly?

Responsive Classroom solution: Academic Choice

The *Responsive Classroom* practice of Academic Choice meets all these criteria. Students are invited to choose, within teacher-set boundaries, what they learn, how they learn, or both.

- ☀ **What to learn**—For example, to meet a particular learning goal, a teacher may allow students to decide which book to read, which animal to study, which community issue to research, and so forth.
- ☀ **How to learn**—For example, after students read a nonfiction text about the American Revolution, a teacher may give them three choices for how to analyze and summarize the text: write an essay, create a graphic representation, or write a song.

Meaningful choices such as these are highly motivating. If a child can choose a topic that sparks her, she'll be more willing to do the difficult text analysis being asked of her. If a student can select a research presentation method that matches his learning style or that he feels competent with, he'll go into the research with more confidence and energy.

In addition to giving meaningful choices, teachers using *Responsive Classroom* Academic Choice lead students through three activity phases:

- ☀ **Planning**—Teachers present available choices for meeting a learning goal and then help students choose and plan their work responsibly.
- ☀ **Working**—Students follow through on their plan. As students work, teachers observe, offer support, and extend students' thinking.

☀ **Reflecting**—Teachers guide children in answering questions such as *What about my work surprised or excited me?* and *How does this work change the way I think about this topic?* Such questions help children assimilate what they've learned.

Giving truly meaningful choices and taking children through these three phases of academic work improves children's thinking and problem-solving skills, decreases problem behaviors, and builds their social interaction skills. These outcomes are vitally important if students are to succeed with the Common Core.



Keeping the Focus on Teacher Skill

“We need common training and common resources,” one teacher tweeted in response to a news commentary asking how our nation is to effectively implement the Common Core. This teacher was exactly right.

If we give teachers the appropriate training and resources, they'll transform their teaching from good to great, enabling children to soar to new heights. *Responsive Classroom* professional development is one way to ensure that teachers have the skills they need to help children meet the Common Core State Standards.



Responsive Classroom®

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This white paper is available
on the *Responsive Classroom* website at
<http://bit.ly/rcwhitepaper2>