

# ***Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> and PBIS**

## **Can Schools Use Them Together?**



**P**ositive behavior is requisite to school success. And positive behavior can and must be taught, just as math, reading, science, and art are taught. As educators and policy makers at the national, state, and local levels come to recognize the truth of these two statements, schools and districts are increasingly turning to two growing educational movements—*Responsive Classroom* and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)—to learn strategies for teaching positive student behavior. Some schools and districts see value in both approaches. They often ask, “Are *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS compatible with each other? Can our school use both?”



The short answer to these questions is yes, although there are some key differences between how the two approaches recommend reinforcing children’s positive behavior. The following explains the areas of compatibility and difference and articulates how *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS can work together to create an optimal learning environment for students.

## **What Is *Responsive Classroom*? What Is PBIS?**

### **Responsive Classroom**

*Responsive Classroom* is a research-based teaching approach that gives teachers concrete practices for ensuring a high-quality education for every child every day. Although the approach offers practices for improving student behavior through effective management, it goes beyond that to also offer strategies for promoting academic engagement, building a positive community, and teaching in a developmentally appropriate way.

The *Responsive Classroom* approach rests on the foundational idea that these four areas of teaching—engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness—are interrelated and are all crucial to student success. The approach gives teachers practical tools and strategies for raising their competence in all four areas. The result is that teachers are not just improving student behavior, but constantly creating an optimal learning environment that promotes students’ overall school success (Center for Responsive Schools, n.d., About *Responsive Classroom*).

Since 1981, more than 120,000 teachers have participated in *Responsive Classroom* professional development, and *Responsive Classroom* practices impact an estimated one million students each year (Center for Responsive Schools, 2013, *The Responsive Classroom Approach*, p. 2; Center for Responsive Schools, 2013, *Teacher Skill Drives Common Core Success*, p. 2).

## PBIS

PBIS is a framework for providing behavioral supports and interventions that enhance students' academic and social outcomes.

As a guide to system building, the PBIS framework does not provide or require schools to use specific practices. Instead, it names essential features of an effective behavior support system. These include:

- ✦ the use of respectful, nonpunitive, prevention-oriented practices
- ✦ a focus on skill teaching
- ✦ the use of evidence-based practices
- ✦ the availability of a continuum of interventions that meet the needs of all students
- ✦ ongoing assessment of students' needs
- ✦ data-based decision making

Districts and schools then employ specific practices that have these features and that fit their particular needs and culture (Horner, 2014; PBIS OSEP Technical Assistance Center, n.d., PBIS FAQs).

Although the PBIS framework itself does not stipulate specific practices, PBIS trainers working at the district or school level may guide schools toward specific behavior practices or social-emotional learning programs (PBIS OSEP Technical Assistance Center, n.d., SWPBIS for Beginners).

## How *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS Align

As the preceding descriptions indicate, schools adopting *Responsive Classroom* can use the PBIS framework to ensure systematic decision making, and schools adopting PBIS can use *Responsive Classroom* practices to meet the PBIS goal of supporting positive behavior in all students.

The table at right shows how key *Responsive Classroom* practices match the components PBIS identifies as essential to a comprehensive schoolwide discipline system.

## MYTH:

*Responsive Classroom* and PBIS cannot be used together because they come from two fundamentally opposed schools of educational thought.

## FACT:

*Responsive Classroom* and PBIS are not in opposition. Although the *Responsive Classroom* approach draws heavily from constructivist theory, it also uses best practices from various other schools of thought and the experiences of practicing educators. *Responsive Classroom* believes that this open-minded and eclectic approach best meets the wide range of student needs in our schools. (To learn more, visit [www.responsiveclassroom.org/principles-and-practices-responsive-classroom](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/principles-and-practices-responsive-classroom).)

Meanwhile, although PBIS has roots in behavior science, the PBIS framework today is open to diverse evidence-based strategies. Its goal is for schools to provide a positive, comprehensive, data-driven system of behavior interventions rather than to adhere to any particular educational approach.

## A Side-by-Side Look

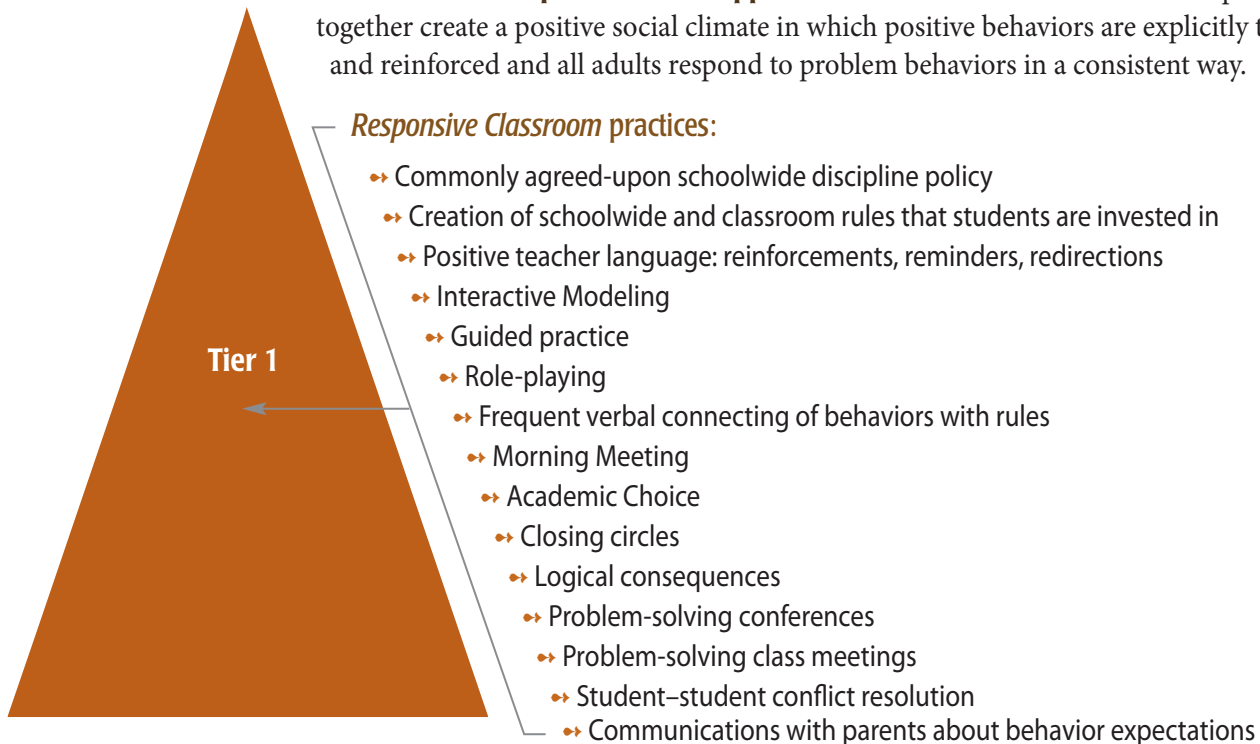
<b>Responsive Classroom Practices</b>	<b>Components of PBIS Schoolwide Discipline</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Leadership actions for establishing a school discipline policy that staff and parents support</li> </ul>	<p>An agreed-upon and common approach to discipline</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Stated purpose of <i>Responsive Classroom</i>: To ensure a high-quality education for every child every day.</li> <li>➔ Schools using <i>Responsive Classroom</i> may have their own statement of purpose that is a variation of (and compatible with) <i>Responsive Classroom's</i> stated purpose.</li> </ul>	<p>A positive statement of purpose</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Methods for creating rules that students are invested in:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3–5 positively stated rules in each classroom</li> <li>• 3–5 positively stated rules for the whole school</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>A small number of positively stated behavior expectations for all students and staff</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Practical ways to teach how to translate the rules into action:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive Modeling</li> <li>• Guided practice</li> <li>• Role-playing</li> <li>• Positive teacher language: reminders and specific reinforcing feedback</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Procedures for teaching students the behavior expectations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Strategies for creating an environment that promotes positive behavior:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morning Meeting</li> <li>• Frequent verbal connecting of behaviors with rules</li> <li>• Academic Choice</li> <li>• Positive teacher language: reminders and specific reinforcing feedback</li> <li>• Closing circles</li> <li>• Communications with parents about behavior expectations</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>A continuum of procedures for encouraging students to choose behaviors that meet expectations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Respectful, productive ways to respond to misbehavior:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher proximity and nonverbal cues</li> <li>• Positive teacher language: redirections</li> <li>• Additional modeling and role-playing</li> <li>• Logical consequences</li> <li>• Buddy teacher time-out</li> <li>• Problem-solving conferences</li> <li>• Problem-solving class meetings</li> <li>• Student–student conflict resolution</li> <li>• Individual written agreements</li> <li>• Problem-solving with parents</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>A continuum of procedures for discouraging students from choosing rule-breaking behavior</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ <i>Responsive Classroom</i> assessment tools to measure fidelity of implementation</li> </ul>	<p>Procedures for regularly and frequently monitoring the effectiveness of the discipline system</p>

# Three Tiers of Support

PBIS calls for schools to provide three tiers of positive behavior support to meet students' differing needs (PBIS OSEP Technical Assistance Center, n.d., Secondary Level). Here are the *Responsive Classroom* practices that align with each tier.

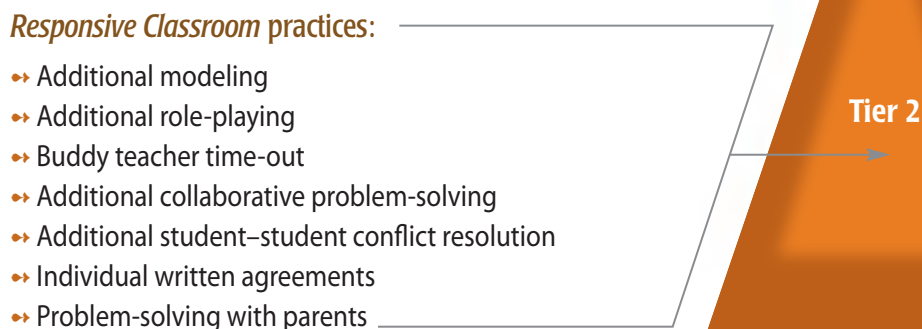
## Tier 1

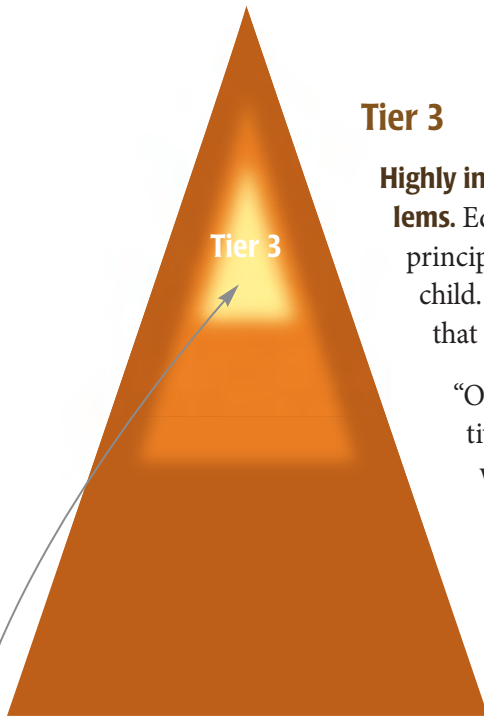
**Classroom and schoolwide practices that support all students in all situations.** These practices together create a positive social climate in which positive behaviors are explicitly taught and reinforced and all adults respond to problem behaviors in a consistent way.



## Tier 2

**Additional supports for times when a student needs an extra boost to remember behavior expectations** but doesn't need the highly individualized interventions of Tier 3.





### Tier 3

**Highly individualized interventions for serious behavior problems.** Educators draw on the range of *Responsive Classroom* principles and practices to craft supports that work for each child. Here is an example from a school in St. Paul, Minnesota, that uses the *Responsive Classroom* approach and PBIS.

“Oliver,” a second grader, has a pattern of unsafe and disruptive behavior, including shouting out during small-group work, being physically aggressive during structured play, and destroying his work in a fit of rage during academic times. After determining Oliver’s unmet social and academic needs, the school’s behavior specialist works with Oliver’s teacher to design interventions that use elements of the following *Responsive Classroom* practices:

- ↔ **Interactive Modeling.** To address his shouting during group work, Oliver’s teacher starts using this modeling practice with him, one-on-one, to show him how to raise a hand as a way to get attention. Oliver’s gym and computer teachers agree that he’ll use the same method during their classes.
- ↔ **Problem-Solving Conference.** To reinforce Oliver’s use of a positive behavior he’s learning (such as playing safely during structured play), his teacher begins having brief conversations with him that borrow from this *Responsive Classroom* practice. She names the specific helpful behaviors she noticed and asks him what he noticed. They talk about how he felt when he chose that behavior and how it helped everyone. They then agree on strategies to help him continue that behavior, including the teacher’s giving him a quick reminder before structured play and checking with him afterward to see how things went.
- ↔ **Academic Choice.** To give Oliver a greater sense of control and accomplishment with his academic work, his teacher begins offering him choices in how to complete assignments, such as which specific topic to learn about, what supplies to use, which books or other resources to look at, and how to show what he learned. The teacher also provides closer supervision of his academic work time until he is able to independently manage his behavior.

All the while, the Tier 1 supports that the school provides to all students and the Tier 2 supports it provides to those needing extra help are creating a strong foundation that enables these individualized interventions for Oliver to work at their best.

## Reinforcing Positive Behavior

Both *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS recognize that reinforcing students' positive behaviors is crucial if students are to sustain those behaviors. The two approaches differ, however, in how they recommend giving this reinforcement.

### What *Responsive Classroom* Recommends

The *Responsive Classroom* approach discourages the use of tangible rewards as a general practice for reinforcing children's positive behavior. Instead, for most children, it emphasizes using reinforcing teacher language.

For example, if a student listens carefully to classmates before voicing disagreement during a discussion, his teacher might whisper to him a moment later, "You listened and considered other people's opinions before speaking up. That helps make the discussion more thoughtful."

And if a class efficiently transitions from a whole-group activity to individual work, their teacher might say, "You all got down to work in less than a minute. That's the fastest since the beginning of the year!"

The benefit of using reinforcing language and specifically naming the helpful behavior as in these examples, rather than giving a tangible reward, is that it focuses students' attention on the behavior instead of on the reward. This encourages students to see the behavior itself rather than the earning of a reward as the chief goal. And for many children, a teacher's reinforcing language is all that's needed for them to develop consistency in showing positive behaviors.

The *Responsive Classroom* approach recognizes that some students or classes, in some circumstances, will need further reinforcements such as behavior tracking charts and rewards to change an entrenched negative behavior pattern. In these cases the *Responsive Classroom* approach offers guidelines on the effective use and eventual phase-out of the charts and rewards (Brady et al., 2010; Crowe, 2009).

### MYTH:

*Responsive Classroom* says teachers shouldn't acknowledge individual students' positive behavior.

### FACT:

The *Responsive Classroom* approach strongly recommends acknowledging individual students' positive behavior, believing it is vital to their development and to the creation of a positive school climate. What the approach discourages is naming an individual child as an example for others, such as "See how Ronna's paying attention? Let's see how many others can pay attention like that." Such language comes across as manipulative and can embarrass the child being named while breeding competition in the class. In the *Responsive Classroom* approach, if a teacher wants to acknowledge Ronna's behavior, he does so in private if possible.

If the teacher's goal is to remind the class to pay attention, he does so directly, such as by saying, "Remember, eyes and ears on the speaker." Or, he reinforces the positive behavior of some members of the class without naming individual children, such as "I see that some students are ready to listen with their eyes and ears on the speaker. Let's have everyone do that now so we can get started with our learning."

## What PBIS Recommends

The PBIS framework emphasizes that schools should have methods for acknowledging students' positive behaviors but does not favor one type of acknowledgment over another, as long as the student clearly understands what specific behavior is being acknowledged. The framework states that naming the specific behavior is "extremely important in increasing the reoccurrence of appropriate behavior." The framework also supports, although it does not mandate, simultaneously giving students tokens or points for such behavior (whether or not those are traded in for tangible objects or special privileges) (PBIS OSEP Technical Assistance Center, n.d., Primary Level).

The decision about which specific method to use is left to schools. It's important to know that rather than requiring any specific method, the PBIS framework encourages schools to determine the method most suitable for their school (Horner, 2014).

## Moving to Using Only Teacher Language

Often, teachers who see the benefit of using only reinforcing teacher language nonetheless find it challenging to shift to this method if they are accustomed to using tangible rewards. In many cases, giving tokens is as much a way for busy teachers to keep track of whom they've observed and acknowledged in the course of a day as a way to motivate the students. For some teachers, the token approach is simply what's familiar.

In many schools that use both *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS, teachers successfully make the shift to using only reinforcing language, without tokens or other tangibles, when they take incremental steps and when their school leaders offer ample support and encouragement along the way. Strategies teachers have used successfully include:

- ✿ Posting examples of reinforcing language around the classroom as a self-reminder.
- ✿ Setting up a tracking system visible to themselves but not to students, such as checking off names on their class list when they provide specific reinforcing language.
- ✿ Using a few set reinforcing phrases, such as "I see you followed our rule on \_\_\_\_\_" and "You did \_\_\_\_\_. That helps us all be better learners" until they start coming up with their own reinforcing words naturally.

### MYTH:

The central feature of PBIS is to give children prizes as a reward for showing desired behavior.

### FACT:

Although some teachers use prizes to reward positive behavior, this is their school's or district's choice for how to meet PBIS's goal of acknowledging positive behavior. The PBIS framework does not stipulate this way of meeting that goal. In fact, some PBIS coaches favor using intangible acknowledgments such as positive teacher language when such acknowledgments suffice to encourage a child to continue a positive behavior.



## ***Responsive Classroom* and PBIS Collaboration in Action**

In one large mid-Atlantic school district, *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS work together—literally.

**T**he three people facilitating the district’s use of the two approaches—the *Responsive Classroom* coordinator and two PBIS coordinators—can often be seen walking into a school together to attend a meeting or to co-lead a professional development workshop. In their office, the three educators even sit in adjoining cubicles. Collaborating is often as simple as rolling their chairs out for a quick chat.

Whether working with a school on modeling expected behaviors, giving children brain breaks during work periods, or preventing bullying, the three educators blend strategies from their own and each other’s approaches seamlessly. Labeling strategies as “*Responsive Classroom*” or “PBIS” is not their concern.

“Our focus is always on what a school needs, what the students need, what helps the kids and what doesn’t, not on what’s *Responsive Classroom* and what’s PBIS,” says the *Responsive Classroom* coordinator.



“Although I’m passionate about *Responsive Classroom* and my colleagues are passionate about PBIS, it’s not a tug of war, . . . It’s a tug of peace.”

One of the PBIS coordinators adds that to help teachers bridge a perceived gap between *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS, they use terminology the teachers understand. For example, if they’re teaching the *Responsive Classroom* practice of Interactive Modeling, but the teachers in front of them are used to referring to that kind of practice by using the PBIS term “direct instruction,” they’ll explicitly make the link for the teachers between Interactive Modeling and direct instruction.

When it comes to reinforcing children’s positive behaviors, the PBIS coordinators encourage schools to give reinforcements that highlight the fact that everyone is working together to build a positive community rather than the idea of individuals earning rewards. For example, they recognize that schools may still want to give students tickets for positive behavior, but they encourage schools to count the number of tickets earned as a whole school. Then, when a certain number of tickets are earned, the entire student body does a big group cheer during an assembly or a special group dance during lunch.

The strong *Responsive Classroom*–PBIS collaboration in the district comes from the three educators’ clear understanding

of the compatibility of the two approaches. It also comes from the district’s highest-level decision makers having that same understanding. The district has directed all schools to design a positive behavior approach and promotes using *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS together to do so.

The three staff members don’t do all their professional development work together, of course. The *Responsive Classroom* coordinator still oversees the *Responsive Classroom* workshops taking place throughout the district, and the two PBIS coordinators still provide the PBIS trainings to school teams. But the close contact between *Responsive Classroom* and PBIS in the district means schools benefit from the strengths of both approaches.

And at the end of the day, the three are back to their adjoining cubicles to compare notes, share ideas, and work together to benefit students.

“Although I’m passionate about *Responsive Classroom* and my colleagues are passionate about PBIS, it’s not a tug of war,” says the *Responsive Classroom* coordinator. “It’s a tug of peace. And we’re always looking at how to keep the child at the center of that tug of peace.” ■

## Summary

The *Responsive Classroom* approach and PBIS are compatible for two major reasons:

1. Both hold, as a central tenet, the use of respectful, nonpunitive strategies for teaching students positive behaviors.
2. *Responsive Classroom*'s array of practices for teaching positive behaviors and promoting optimal student learning matches the components identified by PBIS as essential to a comprehensive schoolwide discipline system.

When it comes to reinforcing students' positive behavior, *Responsive Classroom* strongly recommends using positive teacher language and avoiding the use of tangible rewards if such rewards are not needed. The PBIS framework calls for reinforcing students' positive behavior but refrains from stipulating which method to use. This makes it possible for schools using the PBIS framework to follow *Responsive Classroom*'s recommended practice for achieving this important goal.

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