

T H E

Responsive Classroom® Approach

Good Teaching Changes the Future



Why do teachers teach? It's an age-old question, with an age-old answer: Teachers teach because they want every child to have a rich and productive future. They teach because they want to empower children not just to live in the world but to change it—to make it better, kinder, stronger.

As we move forward into the 21st century, the Common Core State Standards are redefining teaching excellence in this age of rapid technological, environmental, economic, political, and social changes. The need for dedicated, skilled teachers has never been greater.

“Our schools must provide effective teaching that can build students’ academic muscle, grit, resilience, and courageous spirits for the extraordinary times that are ahead,” says Lora Hodges, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Responsive Schools, developer of the *Responsive Classroom* approach.



For the world today needs schools where teachers strive not just to produce competent workers and civic-minded citizens but to cultivate creative thinkers and bold innovators, collaborative team players and breakthrough leaders. We need teachers who can teach children not only how to solve problems, but how to use higher-order thinking skills to discern what problems need solving. We need, in short, teachers who move beyond good teaching to great teaching—transformative teaching.

But to do this kind of transformative teaching, teachers need more than a calling and a vision, more than programs and curricula. They need tools that will enable them to inspire students to do their best work and thrive as contributing citizens in an increasingly complex world. Just as students need a set of skills to equip them to succeed in the 21st century, teachers need a set of tools to be effective teachers of 21st century learners.

One powerful way that schools and districts can help teachers acquire these skills is through the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching.

What Is the Responsive Classroom Approach?

Responsive Classroom is a research-based approach to education that gives teachers the tools they need to be highly effective instructors. For over thirty years, schools and districts using this approach have experienced increased teacher effectiveness, higher student achievement, and improved school climate.

Several studies, including a large-scale randomized, controlled trial recently completed by researchers at the University of Virginia, have found that teachers' use of *Responsive Classroom* practices is associated with growth in student academic achievement and social skills. That recent study also shows the practices to be equally beneficial for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, children who struggle with school show even greater achievement gains than their classmates. (See box.)

Development of the *Responsive Classroom* approach began in 1981 with a group of public school educators. Their goal was to resolve the disconnect between teachers' universal desire to deliver great teaching and what was actually happening in classrooms. They recognized that academic and social learning go hand in hand: that optimal learning happens when teachers teach positive social skills while teaching academics. Drawing upon best practices in education, they began to articulate concrete, highly practical teaching strategies that would integrate academic and social-emotional learning (A+SEL) throughout the school day.

Responsive Classroom developers continually refine not only the teaching practices but also how they deliver professional development to classroom teachers, instructional leaders, and school and district administrators.

Research on the Responsive Classroom Approach

Research by the University of Virginia has found that teachers' use of *Responsive Classroom* practices is associated with:

- Higher quality standards-based instruction
- Greater student achievement in math and reading, regardless of socioeconomic background
- Greater gains for low-achieving students
- Improved social skills in children
- Improved teacher-student interactions
- More positive feelings toward school among children and teachers

Findings are from the Social and Academic Learning Study (2001–2004) or the Responsive Classroom Efficacy Study (2008–2011). For more information, go to www.responsiveclassroom.org/research.

Teachers' Skills: Continuous Learning in Four Key Domains

As a growing body of research shows, teacher effectiveness is one of the most important factors determining how well students do in school. Lora Hodges observes that “although teachers begin their careers with many skills, it’s unlikely that any teacher comes into the classroom with all the practical skills or strategies needed to effectively teach every child. Our world is just changing too rapidly for that.”

Hodges goes on to note that “managing a classroom where children are actively engaged in their learning, participating in lively dialogues, and developing higher-order thinking is vastly different from managing a classroom where children are expected to be compliant completers of worksheets.”



Responsive Classroom professional development focuses on building 21st century teacher skills in four crucial, interrelated domains:

- ✦ **Engaging Academics:** Effective teaching requires that teachers know how to offer academic lessons, assignments, and activities that are active and interactive, appropriately challenging, purposeful, and connected to students’ interests.
- ✦ **Effective Management:** Effective teaching is possible only in well-managed classrooms and schools. In such classrooms, teachers establish and teach behavior expectations, manage the schedule, and organize physical spaces in ways that enable students to work with autonomy and focus.
- ✦ **Positive Community:** Effective teaching requires a classroom and school where every child feels safe, valued, and fully included in the learning community; where teacher and students share a common purpose along with regular routines and traditions that form a comforting underpinning for their days; and where a sense of joy envelops hard work.
- ✦ **Developmental Awareness:** Effective teaching results when teachers have knowledge of child development and use that knowledge, along with regular observations of students, to create a developmentally appropriate environment for learning.

These four key domains enable and enrich each other; no one of them reaches its maximum power without the others. To teach effectively, teachers need specific skills in all four areas. The following table summarizes the skills associated with each of the domains.

The Four Domains of Responsive Classroom

Engaging Academics	Effective Management	Positive Community	Developmental Awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Designing instruction that is active and interactive ■ Giving clear directions ■ Asking open-ended questions ■ Pacing lessons and activities to keep students engaged ■ Offering meaningful learning choices ■ Giving high-quality feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Developing meaningful rules that connect to children's learning goals ■ Explicitly teaching behavioral expectations ■ Establishing efficient routines that allow for a high degree of autonomy ■ Intervening before behavior goes off track ■ Providing clear, respectful, and immediate feedback when behavior does go off track ■ Keeping the class's learning momentum going while calmly handling disruptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Building a sense of community and shared purpose during the first weeks of school ■ Providing structures that allow students and teachers to get to know one another and appreciate differences ■ Devising routines that provide a sense of safety and predictability ■ Creating community traditions that nurture a sense of belonging, significance, and fun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creating an organized physical environment that matches developmental needs ■ Structuring appropriately challenging lessons ■ Connecting learning to children's strengths and interests

Skills to Use Throughout the School Day

The *Responsive Classroom* approach is not an add-on, a package of lessons to deliver once or twice a week, or a series of books to read and discuss with students. Instead, it's a set of practices that teachers can use to help students acquire academic and social-emotional skills throughout the day, every day—not only while teaching math, science, reading, and other subjects, but also while guiding students through morning arrival, recess, lunch, specials, and all other parts of the school day.

The benefits of this integrated approach include the following:

Makes the most of teaching time. First, integrated teaching preserves teachers' most precious commodity: time. Dr. Ruth Gilbert-Whitner, superintendent of the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District in Massachusetts, notes that “teachers feel comfortable

with *Responsive Classroom* from the start. They see it not as an add-on but as something that’s easily part of what they do every single day.” Teachers don’t have to carve out extra time during the school day to “do” *Responsive Classroom*. Instead, *Responsive Classroom* techniques become part of what teachers do throughout the day as they conduct their regular lessons and activities.

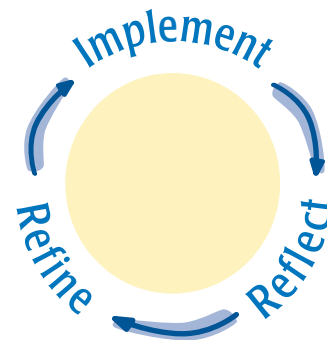
Enables wider learning. Students feel the benefits of *Responsive Classroom* teaching constantly, not just during an isolated part of their day or week. In this way, they realize that the skills they’re developing apply to all aspects of their learning and their lives—inside and outside of school.

Improves school climate. By integrating *Responsive Classroom* teaching practices into everything they do, teachers change their classroom climate. And when all teachers in a school use the *Responsive Classroom* approach, the very culture of the school is transformed into one of caring, respect, rigorous learning, and joyful growth.

Creating the Conditions for Responsive Classroom Success

Research and thirty-plus years of *Responsive Classroom* implementation by schools nationwide have shown that certain conditions must be in place for all teachers in a school to use the *Responsive Classroom* approach consistently and well. Chief among these conditions are strong school leadership and a positive adult community climate. Specifically, teachers are more likely to use *Responsive Classroom* practices when:

- ✦ Their principal shows buy-in to the *Responsive Classroom* approach and prioritizes its adoption.
- ✦ They receive coaching and other follow-up support while trying new *Responsive Classroom* practices.
- ✦ Their school offers validation and social support for trying the *Responsive Classroom* approach.
- ✦ They have time to reflect on their practice, observe colleagues in action, share observations, and discuss experiences.



These conditions enable teachers to experience a simple but powerful learning cycle: implement a new practice, reflect on it, make refinements, and repeat the cycle.

Stages of Responsive Classroom Implementation

Schools or districts that adopt the *Responsive Classroom* approach typically proceed through several stages of implementation, supported at each stage by professional development materials and highly skilled trainers and coaches. Here are the typical implementation stages:

- 1 Building staff understanding and buy-in.** It's critical that school and district leaders strongly demonstrate their commitment to any new initiative. One way that leaders launch *Responsive Classroom* implementation is to introduce it at a staff meeting, using a video and a conversation guide supplied by their consultant.
- 2 Securing professional development for all teachers.** Schools typically begin by providing training for all teachers in the key *Responsive Classroom* practices of Morning Meeting, Academic Choice, rule creation, Interactive Modeling, positive teacher language, and effective responses to misbehavior. Teachers explore these practices in a 28-hour *Responsive Classroom* course that can be completed either in a single week or over several months.
- 3 Providing tailored follow-up support.** Many schools provide teachers with an additional day of professional development to deepen practice in one area, such as using Morning Meeting to reinforce academics. Other schools use the additional day to introduce support staff, special area teachers, or other school adults to the *Responsive Classroom* approach.
- 4 Keeping the momentum going.** With support from their consultant and coaches, school and district leaders actively sustain teachers' use of *Responsive Classroom* practices and make the approach part of the permanent school culture. Resources include webinars, conferences, books, DVDs, and self-study kits, as well as a website and a blog where teachers can share questions and ideas with colleagues around the country and the world.



Let's Change the Future

In the coming years of the 21st century, America's reliance on its schools to prepare children for an increasingly complex, interconnected, and technological world is likely to grow rather than diminish. More and more, we will need our schools to provide every child with that critical blend of top-notch academics and social-emotional learning.

"Effective teaching changes the future," emphasizes Lora Hodges. "Effective teaching responds to the national sense of urgency to ensure that all students, no matter where they live, receive the academically rigorous education that will enable them to live full, positive, and productive lives."

Administrators have a huge role to play in ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education every day. As instructional leaders and guides, administrators can commit to providing high-quality professional development for all teachers throughout their careers. And administrators can promote and support teachers' consistent use of newly learned skills in the journey toward ever-greater teaching excellence. We need to undertake these tasks as if the future depended upon them. Because it does.



Responsive Classroom[®]

Center for Responsive Schools, Inc.
85 Avenue A, P.O. Box 718
Turners Falls, MA 01376-0718

800-360-6332 Fax 877-206-3952
www.responsiveclassroom.org

This white paper is available
on the *Responsive Classroom* website at
<http://bit.ly/rcwhitepaper1>