

# Responsive Classroom

## OVERVIEW

For too many students and teachers, a nurturing, safe, positive school climate is out of reach. Issues such as adverse childhood experiences, bullying, and chronic absenteeism present daily challenges. Measures to address these challenges have fallen short and are often punitive actions that are disproportionately applied to students of color and those with disabilities.

*Responsive Classroom* is an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) approach to teaching that integrates social and emotional skill development with academic instruction. Research shows SEL programs and initiatives like the *Responsive Classroom* approach are associated with improved academic achievement, school climate, and instructional quality. The cost-benefits are compelling: *Responsive Classroom* has been shown to yield a 9:1 return on investment (ROI).

Policymakers have the opportunity to scale evidence-based SEL programs like *Responsive Classroom* to more schools, districts, and communities. Comprehensive and locally determined policy solutions should be inclusive; offer guidance and supports to teachers and school leaders, such as technical assistance and professional development; and reach students grades pre-K to 12.

## THE CHALLENGE

Teachers, staff, and administrators across the country face daily obstacles that challenge student success and academic achievement. Bullying, chronic absenteeism, teacher burnout, crime, and student disengagement hinder schools from providing safe and supportive environments (National School Climate Center, 2018; Zakrzewski, 2013). In low-income communities and communities of color, these issues are compounded by the consequences of poverty, trauma, homelessness, food insecurity, and community violence (Abramovitz & Albrecht, 2013).

Forty-three percent of teachers report student misbehavior as a major interference with teaching, and another 18 percent of students report lack of respect for teachers as a barrier to learning.

**While public schools are reporting fewer incidences of crime and victimization than ever before, too many students, families, teachers, and communities do not benefit from nurturing, safe, positive school climates where teaching and learning can take place** (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According

to the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 14 percent of 15-year-old students nationwide report disrupted learning as a result of bullying and intimidation, with African American students, female students, and students attending lower-income schools reporting the highest incidences (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Forty-three percent of teachers report student misbehavior as a major interference with teaching, and another 18 percent of students report lack of respect for teachers as a barrier to learning (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018).

Serious disciplinary actions disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities.

A reliance on punitive measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, and zero-tolerance policies to promote a safer school climate have fallen short. Research indicates these policies result in disciplined students being more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the justice system, as well as less likely to graduate on time (Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman, 2015). Serious disciplinary actions also disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities. African American students are more than three times as likely to be suspended or expelled, and while they only comprise 12 percent of the total

U.S. student body, students with disabilities represent almost 20 percent of suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Moreover, a reliance on punitive measures often results in negative school climate.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL CLIMATE?

**A nurturing, safe, and positive school climate is foundational to students' social and emotional development and, ultimately, academic achievement and success in life.** Research shows that positive school climates contribute to increased student achievement and teacher satisfaction, improved attendance rates and high school graduation rates, enhanced school and community safety, as well as reduced violence and disciplinary interventions (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2011; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Weiss, 1999). Such climates offer protective benefits as well. Within a positive school climate, students, teachers, and staff alike are nurtured to possess a sense of personal worth, dignity, and belonging (Freiberg & Stein, 1999).

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The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the legislative successor to the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in 2002—requires states to report on specific indicators that measure academic achievement and school quality or student success (SQSS) (Jordan & Miller, 2017). States have the flexibility to identify at least one measure of SQSS, which can include, but is not limited to, school climate and safety, chronic absenteeism, and college readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). While Delaware did not include school climate as an SQSS indicator, the state has committed to reporting findings from student, teacher, and parent school climate surveys<sup>1</sup> (DDOE, 2017).

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

<sup>1</sup> The statewide Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project (DE-PBS), an initiative of the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) and the University of Delaware Center for Disability Studies (CDS), annually administers the Delaware School Climate Survey (DSCS), with analyses conducted by the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP). Participation in the DSCS is voluntary. The DSCS captures data and trends across a variety of domains including school climate, student engagement, and student social and emotional competencies (University of Delaware Center for Disability Studies, 2017).

Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2018). Student development of social and emotional skills is critical for both academic and life-long success, and SEL is appropriate for students of all ages (Committee for Children, n.d.). A large and growing body of research indicates comprehensive evidence-based SEL programs and initiatives are effective interventions that can positively impact:

- Social and emotional competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making;
- School climate; and
- Student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and school (CASEL, 2015).

Outcomes, such as improved academic performance and higher standardized test scores, are most likely to be achieved when evidence-based SEL interventions are applied comprehensively and reach students at home, school, and in the community (CASEL, 2018).

***Responsive Classroom* is an evidence-based SEL approach that integrates social and emotional skill development with academic instruction to create a classroom environment and school climate where effective teaching and learning can take place** (Center for Responsive Schools, 2018). Developed more than 35 years ago by teachers, *Responsive Classroom* is designed for implementation in grades K-8 and is comprised of essential practices and strategies aimed at addressing the following competencies:

- Cooperation,
- Assertiveness,
- Responsibility,
- Empathy,
- Self-control,
- Academic mindset,
- Perseverance,
- Learning strategies, and
- Academic behaviors (Center for Responsive Schools, 2018).

*Responsive Classroom* is a comprehensive yet flexible approach that prioritizes *how* students are taught and integrates with other SEL efforts (e.g., positive behavior supports, mindfulness, and trauma-informed practices) (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). To date, more than 120,000 educators across the country have been trained in the *Responsive Classroom* approach (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014).

*Responsive Classroom* includes 10 signature practices: interactive modeling, morning meeting, guided discovery, engaging academics, classroom organization, teacher language, classroom rules, classroom management, responding to misbehavior, and problem-solving strategies. Each practice includes specific goals and strategies for implementing within the classroom. For instance, *morning meeting* is intended to engage and energize students, as well as build an inclusive

| IMPACT OF SEL                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | EFFICACY OF RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM                                                                                                                                                                                                              | ROI OF RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Research &amp; Study Design</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Meta-analyses reviewing school-based, universal SEL programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>original study examined 213 programs reaching 270,034 K-12 students</li> <li>follow-up study examined 82 programs reaching 97,406 K-12 students</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                    | Randomized control trial of <i>Responsive Classroom</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>n = 24 schools and 2,904 children grades 2-5</li> <li>13 schools assigned to RC treatment</li> <li>11 schools assigned to control</li> </ul> | Cost-benefit analysis of SEL interventions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>n = 6 prominent SEL interventions, including <i>Responsive Classroom</i></li> </ul> |
| <b>Findings</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                        |
| SEL improves social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance—an average 11-point percentile gain—in the short-term.<br><br>SEL impacts are observed over the long-term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved student well-being</li> <li>SEL students score an average 13 percentile points higher than non-SEL peers</li> <li>Lasting improvements in behavior, emotional distress, and drug use</li> </ul> | Higher academic achievement in math and reading regardless of income level*<br><br>Achievements in math were greatest among the lowest-performing students<br><br>Improved school climate<br><br>Higher quality teacher instruction           | \$900: cost of <i>Responsive Classroom</i> per student over 3-year period<br><br>\$8,920: economic value of achievement gains<br><br>9:1 return on investment          |
| Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Belfield et al., 2015                                                                                                                                                  |

\*As defined by participation in free- and reduced-price lunch.

classroom community. During *morning meeting*, students and teachers gather for twenty or thirty minutes to kick-off the day. While teachers have the flexibility to tailor each *morning meeting*, gatherings feature 1) a greeting, 2) time for sharing and listening, 3) a group activity, and 4) a “morning message” (Center for Responsive Schools, 2018).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

*Responsive Classroom* and SEL initiatives and programs have been the subject of a substantial and growing body of independent research examining impact, efficacy, and return on investment (ROI) (Center for Responsive Schools, 2016).

As a result, *Responsive Classroom* is valued as an exemplary evidence-based SEL intervention that meets ESSA standards (Center for Responsive Schools, 2016; CASEL, 2012).

## THE DELAWARE EXPERIENCE

SEL programs and the *Responsive Classroom* approach are regarded and highly accepted in Delaware. Education stakeholders at the Delaware Academy for School Leadership at the University of Delaware and the Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project<sup>2</sup> are instrumental in supporting SEL efforts and disseminating best practices across the state. In partnership with school leaders and teachers, these

organizations also provide technical assistance and conduct research.

In a statewide survey of 220 teachers, the Rodel Foundation of Delaware identified 40 different types of SEL programs being implemented in Delaware, and *Responsive Classroom* was reported as one of the most frequently used among educators (Rodel Foundation of Delaware, 2017). The survey also found that 9 out of 10 teachers agreed that SEL programs and initiatives are effective in improving student achievement, engagement, and behavior; improving school climate; and reducing disciplinary action (Rodel Foundation of Delaware, 2017).

**Nine out of ten teachers agreed that social and emotional learning programs and initiatives are effective in improving student achievement, engagement, and behavior, improving school climate, and reducing disciplinary action.**

Still, teachers, stakeholders, and community members have indicated the need for more focus on SEL—including increased data collection and surveying, training and technical assistance, and the adoption of state guidance (DDOE, 2017; Rodel Foundation of Delaware, 2017). While neither school climate or supports for SEL were included as ESSA accountability indicators in Delaware’s 2017-18 plan, the state

<sup>2</sup> An initiative of the DDOE and the Center for Disability Studies at the University of Delaware.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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did outline supports<sup>3</sup> to improve school climate<sup>4</sup> and promote SEL programs and initiatives (DDOE, 2017). Specifically, the state will launch a “resource hub” and prioritize districts and schools serving lower-income students and schools with demonstrated need for comprehensive and/or targeted supports (DDOE, 2017; Gayl, 2017).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Community members, teachers, and school leaders across the country realize the value of SEL for student success both inside and outside of the classrooms.

The impacts, efficacy, and ROI of *Responsive Classroom* and SEL programs are clear throughout the peer-reviewed and lay research. Community members, teachers, and school leaders across the country also realize the value of SEL for student success both inside and outside of the classrooms. Though too many states fall short in creating and maintaining positive school climates and prioritizing SEL, many stand to capitalize on existing efforts and demonstrate leaderships by bringing SEL and evidence-based interventions like the *Responsive Classroom* approach to more students, teachers, schools, and districts. Opportunities include:

- Identifying and introducing standalone statewide SEL policies and guidance for grades pre-K to 12 that are inclusive, culturally and linguistically appropriate, as well as age-appropriate;
- Incorporating positive school climate and SEL as SQSS indicators in ESSA state plans; and
- Ongoing stakeholder engagement at the school and district level to ensure evidence-based SEL and accompanying supports—such as professional development and technical assistance—are locally determined. ■

For a full list of references, visit [cresp.udel.edu/publication/responsive-classroom](https://cresp.udel.edu/publication/responsive-classroom).

<sup>3</sup> Strategies include, but are not limited to, funding, technical assistance, and professional development.

<sup>4</sup> Achieving improved school climate, as outlined in Delaware’s ESSA plan, is characterized by “reducing incidences of bullying and harassment, the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom, and the use of aversive behavioral interventions that compromise student health and safety” (DDOE, 2017, p. 105).

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