

Positive Classroom Management: Creating an Environment for Learning

By Sara Fienup, Behavior Specialist



When I asked a room of 50 educators how many courses in classroom management they took during their teacher training coursework, an overwhelming majority reported taking only one or even none. Yet, all agreed that effective teaching and learning cannot take place in a poorly managed classroom. With the body of research growing around the importance of a strong tier 1 / universal foundation for behavior support, we now know better than ever that establishing a proactive classroom management system is essential to achieving student outcomes.

If you google “classroom management”, you are likely to find a plethora of articles, blogs, and books that promise to transform any classroom into a well-managed one. As a Behavior Specialist with the RSE-TASC, I tend to favor a book steeped in research: *Classwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports* by Brandi Simonsen and Diane Myers.

Simonsen and Myers outline evidence-based practices that, when implemented with fidelity, are likely to increase appropriate social behavior, improve academic behavior and performance, and decrease problem behaviors in students. Let’s take a look.

- **Actively Engage Students During Instruction:** The practice of actively engaging students has become a favorite among teachers that attend our Classroom Management workshops and it is no surprise why: It’s fun! Research supports the use of high rates of Opportunities to Respond (OTRs) to engage students and maximize learning. An OTR is any teacher behavior (e.g. asking a question, making a request, presenting a task) that solicits an observable response from a student (e.g., verbal answer, written responses). So, what are some examples of OTRs? Providing a math problem and directing students to solve the problem on their individual white boards; asking for the definition of a vocabulary word and using popsicle sticks to randomly call on a student; posting a multiple choice question on [Poll Everywhere](#) and asking students to use their cell phones to choose the best answer; directing students to “Think, Pair, Share” about the difference between an expository text and a narrative text.

- **Establish and Teach Positively Stated Expectations:** We often hear the old adage, “Students should just know how to behave”. While that would be nice, it does not address the fact that sometimes students do not know how to behave appropriately because they have never been taught how to. In many schools, students can recite the “rules” (e.g. “No running,” “No yelling,” “No calling out”), but the students do not know which behavior are expected of them. Many challenging behaviors can be prevented if a small number of positively stated expectations are posted and explicitly taught, much like we teach academic skills: through modeling, practice and feedback.
- **Maximize Structure:** Teaching classroom routines is like teaching expected behaviors within a particular context. To identify which routines to teach, teachers can first think about what they want their students to do in the classroom from the moment they walk in to the moment they leave. Some common routines include turning in homework, engaging in cooperative group work, and transitioning from one activity to the next. Once routines are identified, it is imperative to teach students how to complete the routing appropriately.
Arranging the physical environment to promote appropriate behavior is another way teachers can maximize structure. Think carefully about visual displays so that distractions are minimized. If you find that teachers and/or students often refer to the visual display for learning purposes, then keep it. If not, consider taking it down to reduce distractions. While there is not one perfect floor plan or seating arrangement that will address all classroom management issues, choose a layout that will allow adequate supervision of all areas.
- **Reinforce Appropriate Behavior:** Teachers provide feedback to students about their academic performance all the time. That’s just good teaching. Well, behavior is no different. Much like when we tell students they correctly found the area of a rectangle, we can tell students when they correctly engaged in the expected behavior. And what happens when we provide that positive feedback? There is a greater likelihood that they will do it again in the future!

One of the simplest evidence-based strategies for reinforcing appropriate behavior is specific and contingent praise, which allows a teacher to point out exactly what a student did well (e.g., “Tori, thank you for raising your hand.”) Not only does specific and contingent praise increase the likelihood that the student will engage in the behavior again, it also serves as a verbal prompt to any students who are not engaging in the expected behavior.

While specific and contingent praise is a necessary practice in every classroom, it may not be sufficient. A popular and well-researched option is the token economy. In a [token economy](#), tokens are delivered contingent on expected behavior, which can then be exchanged for something of value. First, teachers select the token they will use (e.g., tickets, poker chips, Popsicle sticks, laminated “money”). Next, teachers determine which behaviors will be reinforced, which is a pretty easy task if the expected behaviors have already been identified and taught. Finally, teachers survey the students and create a menu of reinforcers that they can exchange for their tokens.

The next time you or someone you know is faced with challenging behavior in the classroom, pick up Simonsen and Myers’ *Classwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports*. I am sure you will be glad you did.

References

Simonson, Brandi and Diane Meyers. *Classwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports: A Guide to Proactive Classroom Management*. Guilford, 2015.



School Tool: Classroom Management Self-Assessment

Want to check out your own classroom management skills? [This checklist](#) can be used to assess the fidelity of implementation of classroom management practices. Teachers can use it as a self-assessment or they can ask a peer or administrator to complete it during a brief observation.



Bright Spot!

This month's Bright Spot comes from educators in Tuckahoe, Ossining, the Hallen School, SAIL at Ferncliff, Byram Hills, ARC of Putnam preschool and the NYSED Special Education Quality Assurance (SEQA) office, who attended the RSE-TASC training on Evidence-Based Practices for Self-Contained Settings.

What were students with disabilities able to achieve?

Participants in this three-day training implemented multiple evidence-based strategies between sessions and shared that, as a result, their students were able to increase productivity, increase time on task, increase appropriate classroom behaviors (thus reducing loss of instructional time due to removals from class), engage more appropriately at job sites, work more independently, and increase and improve social interactions with peers.

What practices or systems made this possible?

Participants learned about three powerful evidence-based practices:

1. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA): Using multiple types of data to identify student specific goals and monitor progress toward attainment of the goals using Active Engagement Plans.
2. Functional Communication Training: Using data to identify the function of the behavior and then teaching a replacement behavior that includes appropriate communication strategies.
3. Self-Management: Teaching students to develop their own goals and monitor their own progress toward attainment.

What can we learn from this?

In their evaluation, multiple participants identified the value of using PDSA across all aspects of their teaching. When you plan and implement a new instruction strategy (Plan-Do); collect specific data on the impact on students in an on-going manner and use that data to learn whether it is working (Study); and how to improve the strategy (Act), it is a win all the way around!

Do you have questions for the RSE-TASC? You can contact us at 914-248-2289 or rse-tasc@pnwboces.org.
