



Lively Learning in 6th Grade

Change in Teaching Leads to Change in Student Engagement

Learning is alive and well in Sue French's sixth grade classroom at Sherwood Elementary School in Melbourne, Florida. Sue attributes the vibrant academic picture in her classroom to the positive learning community that the *Responsive Classroom* approach helps her create.

Positive community especially important for 6th grade

Sue recognizes that building a safe and welcoming community is especially important at this grade level, when students are going through rapid physical and emotional changes. She notes,

"It's a turbulent age. Students this age often are self-conscious and feel unsafe with peers. If these children are going to learn, it's really important that they have a safe environment. They need to feel it's okay to ask questions, to speak up and articulate their thoughts, to take risks in learning."

And building a positive community requires thoughtful and effective teacher management. Sue emphasizes the interdependency:

"It's all connected—positive community, classroom management, academic engagement. To have academic engagement and buy-in, you need a safe, positive community; to have a positive community, you need effective management."

Since she began using the *Responsive Classroom* approach, Sue has observed a significant increase in students' engagement in learning—and recent test scores reflect this. In the 2011–2012 school year, principal Cindy Wilson reports that Sue's value-added measure was the highest in the school that year: 32/35 compared to the school score of 29/35.

And in the 2012–2013 results from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, 90% of the students in Sue’s class scored at grade level or above in Reading while 80% of the students scored at grade level or above in Math.

These test scores were almost identical to another sixth grade class, also with a teacher using *Responsive Classroom* practices, and compared favorably to the remaining sixth grade class where *Responsive Classroom* practices were not being used (see graph on following page for details).

Significant shift in approach to discipline

Before learning about the *Responsive Classroom* approach, Sue relied on a teacher-centered and authoritarian approach to discipline. She recalls,

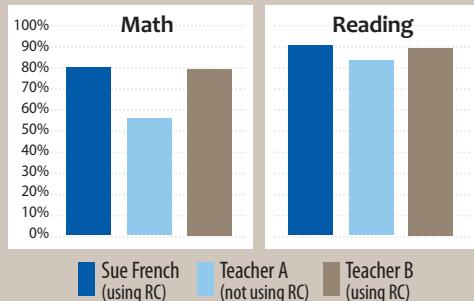
“I made a lot of assumptions about what students should know and do. These students had been coming to school for many years. They should know how to behave, right? It didn’t occur to me that students needed instruction in social skills and behavior expectations, just as they needed instruction in reading and math. I made the rules and the consequences for breaking them had a punitive edge.”



But something didn’t feel right. When Sue began working toward National Board certification, she belonged to a chat room where she heard teachers talking about topics such as setting a positive tone for learning through Morning Meeting and improving parent communication. “What they were describing really piqued my interest,” she remembers. Sue’s contacts online led her to *The Morning Meeting Book*. She and Jean O’Quinn, a colleague at another school, read the book together and gradually began implementing Morning Meeting in their classrooms.

Sherwood Elementary School ■ MELBOURNE, FLORIDA

Percentage of Students That Met Criteria of Level 3 or Above



Not long after that, Sue changed schools. In her new school, an administrator familiar with the *Responsive Classroom* approach supported Sue's interest and helped her gain formal training. In addition to Morning Meeting, Sue began to co-create rules with the students; she used logical consequences in a nonpunitive way; she introduced routines and materials with Interactive Modeling and Guided Discovery; she reached out to parents in new ways; and she structured lessons with Academic Choice. Through all of this, she learned about effective teacher language and gradually changed the way she spoke and listened to students.

One day, when Sue was in the early days of implementation, the administrator stopped by her classroom for a visit. Sue recalls,

"Even though I was just getting started with the *Responsive Classroom* approach, the administrator knew right away that something was different in my teaching, that something significant had shifted. But it wasn't just my teaching that caught the administrator's attention. Unprompted, several students pointed out our class rules and explained the rule creation process. Proudly, one student announced, 'These are our class rules. We made them and they help us learn.'"

Over the years, Sue's belief in the importance of the *Responsive Classroom* approach has deepened as she has seen the positive impact on one class after another. She has remained highly committed to her own continued learning about the approach as well as to teaching other educators. ■