

“Just what is responsive classroom?”

The Responsive Classroom® is a set of classroom management and teaching strategies used in the Lower School at Harrisburg Academy to help us fulfill our mission of encouraging every student to reach his or her full potential. *The Responsive Classroom®* approach is based upon seven basic beliefs or principles. The following is taken in part from “The First Six Weeks of School” by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete (NEFC, 2000), both of whom are associated with the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC), designer of *The Responsive Classroom®*.

The Seven Principles of *Responsive Classroom®*

- 1. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.** Social and academic learning are inextricably connected, and each is equally important. The balanced integration of the two is essential to children’s growth. A long-held belief for early childhood settings, it is becoming more and more evident that this balance is essential throughout a student’s education.
- 2. How children learn is as important as what children learn.** Children learn best when they have the opportunity to make choices about what they’re learning and to make their own discoveries through trial and error. Ideally, there should be a balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated experiences. In early education and lower elementary classrooms, teachers often model “guided discoveries” to aid children in exploring the world around them. You see this in the classroom when new activity or learning centers are introduced. You see this on the playground when children use new games or equipment. One example on the playground is all students are initially introduced to each of the different areas of the “play gyms” and appropriate use is modeled and practiced before students use them independently. Once children begin to use things independently, teachers continue to monitor that use but provide the opportunity for students to play to continue to explore independently. This minimizes the risk of injury, but does not prevent it.
- 3. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.** While children certainly do learn when they are working alone – reading a book, taking a test, completing a worksheet – children learn the most when they are engaged in meaningful ways with others. Peers often help in clarifying concepts in different ways than teachers do, but often just as effectively.
- 4. There is a set of social skills that children need to be successful academically and socially.** These skills form the simple acronym **CARES** – cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control – and should be taught in an integrated fashion throughout the school day. From acquisition of these social skills, we see the emergence of independent learners who “own” not only their learning, but the environment in which they learn. These skills are the foundation for classroom and playground rules. This forms the basis for statements you hear from even our youngest students, when they say: “He didn’t make a good choice”; “I didn’t like that”; or “You hurt my feelings.”
- 5. Knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach.** The more known children feel at school, the more likely it is that they will succeed. Teachers come to know children individually, culturally, and developmentally by taking the time to observe and interact with students and by understanding the stages of child development. The science of child development is the most important discipline for teachers. The professional development offered by the Academy for teachers is based on brain research and “best practices” in areas that directly relate to child development and its implication for teaching and learning.
- 6. Knowing the parents of the children we teach is as important as knowing the children.** Parent involvement is essential to children’s education. The greatest gains are made when educators work with

parents as partners. The Academy clearly articulates ways for developing and maintaining partnerships with parents to our teachers. We also try to provide effective ways of communication and opportunities for that communication to take place. We are fortunate to have parents that accept their role in such partnerships and work with us to enhance the students' educational experience.

7. Teachers and administrators must model the social and academic skills they wish to teach their children. These skills must be lived daily in educators' interactions with each other, with children, and with parents. Meaningful and lasting change for the better in our schools requires good working relationships among the adult community. Children are always watching. I would include parents in the modeling of social skills. As parents, you are often the final arbiter of social behavior for your children.

All of our teachers in the Lower School use *The Responsive Classroom*®. The Academy provides training for faculty both on campus and at seminars offered by NEFC. Currently, Robyn Cutchall, one of our first grade teachers, is a certified trainer through NEFC as part of an effort to enhance the Academy's ability to provide not only training, but ongoing support for our faculty. The Middle School is using *Developmental Designs*®, a related program developed for the middle school student.

If you are interested in learning more about *The Responsive Classroom*®, please contact:

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