

# Like a game of poker, school programs' success can hinge on principals going 'all in'

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When principals go "all in" in terms of supporting school programs, teachers stand a better chance of successfully implementing change, according to new research published by the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Virginia (UVA).

The researchers report in *Prevention Science* that if school principals lack enthusiasm or show little support, they are actually viewed as a hindrance by teachers, posing "major challenges" to the success of school programs like the Responsive Classroom<sup>®</sup>, an approach boasting social-emotional learning. Additionally, apprehensive teachers fearing change are more willing to try new approaches in their classrooms if they know they have administrators' support.

"Implementation matters," said lead author Shannon Wanless, Pitt assistant professor of psychology in education. "When implementation is weak, school programs are not able to have as strong of an effect as they could. This spurred us to figure out why this integration is weak."

Together with Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, principal investigator and UVA associate professor of education, Wanless focused on implementing the Responsive Classroom approach, a program developed by the Massachusetts-based Northeast Foundation for Children, into third- and fourth-grade classrooms. In this model, a sense of community is stressed wherein students use skills like cooperation, assertiveness, and [empathy](#) to better achieve their [academic goals](#). Such emotional connectivity is proven to promote a deeper style of learning.

For the study, the Northeast Foundation for Children provided coaches trained in the Responsive Classroom approach who worked alongside teachers and were able to answer questions when needed. Teachers viewed these coaches as important assets for helping them to understand the strategies and making sure the strategies were integrated.

"We're going through a period when schools have become bombarded with new initiatives and programs," said Rimm-Kaufman. "Sorting through those and creating priorities has become an increasingly challenging task for our teachers. This work calls attention to the importance of school coaches—and school leadership—in better understanding and implementing those priorities."

All teachers involved in the study were trained in the Responsive Classroom approach and monitored over two consecutive years. In the first year, the researchers sought to determine the biggest roadblocks to successful implementations. In the subsequent year, the researchers evaluated how school personnel rated one of their own potential roadblocks: principal support.

## **Year One: High Fidelity**

During the first year of the study, the team collected data from only third-grade teachers. Participants in the study hailed from the mid-Atlantic United States, and the number of participating teachers ranged from two to eight in 13 different schools across one district.

The research team looked specifically at the fidelity of implementation—how well the teachers introduced practices in the manner in which they were intended. After the first year of teaching with Responsive Classroom, teachers were asked to reflect on barriers and gateways.

"We found that some teachers were afraid to shift out of what felt tried and true—afraid of the chaos that comes with initially trying new programs," said Wanless. "However, when they felt a sense of empowerment or support from their administrators, they were more likely to successfully implement the program."

Wanless said teachers noted that they could tell when the principal was "behind something"—specifically through their motivation, consistency in use of related practices, and the accommodations they provided to teachers. At the same time, a lack of support also was noticeable and viewed as a barrier.

## **Year Two: Put Me In, Coach**

In a subsequent study, the research team decided to take a different look at the rating system. They again focused on principal support, this time studying how the perceptions of this level of support varied amongst those in different roles. There were four raters: principals, teachers, intervention coaches for teachers, and an intervention coach for principals.

All 48 fourth-grade teachers in 13 schools participated during their second year of teaching with the Responsive Classroom approach. Teachers rated their principals' level of support based on why they thought the principals wanted them to be trained. Coaches rated principals based on indicators such as how often principals initiated contact with them. Principals rated their own involvement with the approach, and principal coaches rated how invested the principals seemed.

The intervention coaches for teachers and principals provided a unique perspective unseen by the teachers or administrators. They could most accurately rate the level of administrator support—or lack thereof.

"The coaches' ratings were the most predictive of actual implementation of the program," said Wanless. "This indicates a need to consider changing the way we gather data in schools, including an external person to collect this type of information."

"The study points to the critical role that school leaders and coaches play in predicting the implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach," said Rimm-Kaufman. "The work calls attention to the importance of school leadership in producing school change. As with any intervention, this approach only relates to positive outcomes if [teachers](#) are actually using the practices in their classrooms. The work helps shed light on what [school](#) leaders can do to set the stage for success of new interventions."

**More information:** The paper, "Setting-Level Influences on Implementation of the Responsive Classroom Approach," was published Oct. 14 by *Prevention Science*.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh

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