

SEVEN KEYS

TO A POSITIVE
LEARNING
ENVIRONMENT IN
YOUR CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Pyramid of Behavior Interventions, Seven Keys to a Positive Learning Environment (Hierck, Coleman, & Weber, 2011) is a resource that encourages a whole-school initiative to create a positive culture for learning. In fact, the authors conclude the introduction, “Establishing positive learning environments—collaboratively created, systematically sustained—is focused, powerful work that every school should consider” (Hierck et al., 2011, p. 10). Educators frequently ask me about the translation of these seven keys to the classroom level when I present across North America.

While it’s clear that each key is a schoolwide practice (and each is intentionally designed that way), it’s essential that the practices of classroom teachers support and enhance the keys. Addressing the seven keys from the classroom perspective, and in totality in that classroom, only further enhances the connections to the overarching schoolwide approach. Additionally, establishing a positive learning environment from the first day of classes allows teachers to focus their practice on those activities and relationships that maximize each student’s potential and lead to better student outcomes going forward. Looking at the seven keys through a classroom lens and from a start-of-the-school-year perspective is the first step in contributing to a schoolwide approach. Collaborative teacher teams will further enhance the effectiveness and long-term success of this work. As a result, *Seven Keys to a Positive Learning Environment in Your Classroom* aims to provide seven keys for K–12 teachers to implement in their classrooms to help them create a positive learning environment for all students. This positive learning environment, when developed in conjunction with a schoolwide focus on similar principles, will help deliver optimum outcomes for students and teachers alike.

The Seven Keys

The original seven keys Hierck et al. (2011) identify in *Pyramid of Behavior Interventions* target a schoolwide audience of K–12 and higher education administrators, teachers, special educators, intervention specialists, and counselors. The seven schoolwide keys are as follows.

1. **Common expectations:** School rules, codes of conduct, and mission statements are condensed into a few easy-to-remember, positively stated common words or phrases. Behavior expectations link to academic expectations, setting a positive tone.
2. **Targeted instruction:** All staff teach common schoolwide expectations to all students in a myriad of ways and in various specific settings (in class, in the library, during assemblies, on the bus, and so on).
3. **Positive reinforcement:** All adults working with students make a conscious effort to note students' positive behavior or actions. Timely and specific feedback is critical to improved learning.
4. **Support strategies and interventions:** A written, proactive plan provides a series of strategies that staff can follow when dealing with student misbehavior.
5. **Collaborative teams:** A school-based team (or teams) will receive a referral for a student when his or her misbehavior escalates or academics become a significant concern.
6. **Data-driven dialogue:** Systems for data collection are in place to track schoolwide behavior and academic progress.
7. **Schoolwide system approach:** Systems are in place to ensure that all other keys occur consistently throughout the whole school.

I have amended the keys for application by teachers at the classroom level. The seven classroom-based keys are as follows.

1. **Classroom expectations:** Students co-create and condense classroom expectations and codes of conduct into a few easy-to-remember, positively stated words or phrases. Students know the expectations and the adults model them. Behavior expectations link to academic expectations, setting a positive tone. Everyone in the class uses a common language.

2. **Targeted instruction:** All staff directly teach classroom expectations to students in a myriad of ways and in various specific settings (in class, in the library, during assemblies, on the bus, and so on). Students receive opportunities to develop, practice, and demonstrate appropriate social and academic skills. Students learn social skills in the same manner as academic skills: demonstrate, practice, review, and celebrate.
3. **Positive reinforcement:** Students receive timely and specific feedback—both formally and informally—on a regular basis. Celebration, recognition, and reward systems are in place to acknowledge, honor, and thank students for displaying positive social and academic skills.
4. **Data-driven decisions:** Various formative assessments are in place to track behavior and academic progress. The information collected is specific enough to generate general baseline data and patterns of behavior for individual students. Using these data, teachers adjust, modify, or reteach specific skills in proactive ways.
5. **Differentiation and enrichment:** A continuum of strategies, developed and aligned with classroom expectations, exists to support teachers in working to improve students' individual and group behavior. The focus of the strategies is to help students learn to behave and succeed in the classroom. Alternative strategies are in place for escalating levels of misbehavior.
6. **Collaborative teams:** Grade-level teachers (or cross-grade teachers in small schools) engage in authentic collaboration during designated times to ensure positive expectations and outcomes for all students. A school-based team will receive a referral for a student when his or her misbehavior escalates or academics become a significant concern.
7. **Connection to the schoolwide system:** Systems are in place to ensure that all other keys align with schoolwide expectations. The systems are secure enough to withstand staff changes, yet flexible enough to accommodate changes in situations and circumstances as they arise.

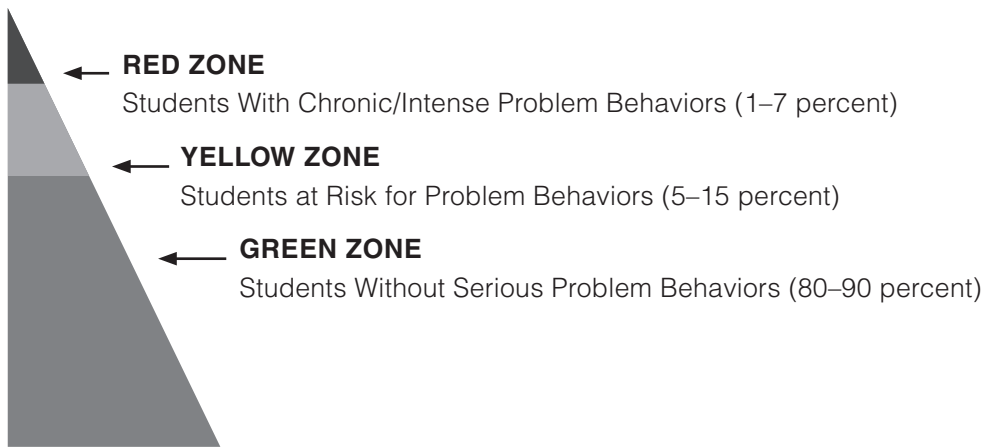
After discussing the precursors necessary for a positive learning environment in chapter 1—specifically focusing on classroom culture and positive teacher-student relationships—chapters 2 through 8 will present each of the classroom-based seven keys in its own chapter. Each key-based chapter will explain the key and

its effect on student outcomes and suggest strategies to help teachers implement the key in their classrooms. At the end of each chapter, one noteworthy strategy will serve as quick reference for teachers. Empirical evidence and teacher anecdotes throughout the book will show readers that the seven keys, when practiced and fully developed at the classroom level, enhance sound instructional design and quality assessment practice, create a positive culture, and improve student outcomes.

The Pyramid of Behavior Interventions and the Three Tiers

Throughout this book, I will refer to the pyramid model from *Pyramid of Behavior Interventions* (Hierck et al., 2011) and its associated vocabulary to illustrate how the seven keys can be implemented at the classroom level. The pyramid, illustrated in figure I.1, provides a broad generalization of student behavior and is useful for classroom teachers when implementing academic and behavioral interventions.

The pyramid consists of three zones—green, yellow, and red. The green zone, which makes up the bulk of the pyramid, is where the majority of students in schools reside. These students are predominantly easy to reach (they form positive relationships quickly and easily with teachers and other students) and easy to teach (they display positive classroom behavior). The yellow zone, closer to the top of the pyramid, is a much smaller area and represents 5 to 10 percent of the student population. Such students may be a challenge to teach but easy to reach, or vice versa. The red zone, or tip of the pyramid, is the smallest area and represents 1 to 7 percent of students. These are the students who are the most challenging to teach and reach. Please note, these delineations are based on the students you presently have and are not fixed definitions of idealized students. Some schools may have more yellow and red zone students than other schools. Inevitably, however, the challenge traces back to what is happening in the green zone where the bulk of students reside. Hierck et al. (2011) believe that, although total eradication of problem behaviors may not be possible for educators due to external influences beyond the control of the school, the pyramid model will help teachers manage those precursors of negative behavior that are under their control, helping to create a more positive environment. Regarding the use of the pyramid in student interventions, Hierck et al. (2011) state, “If we believe educators make a difference for kids, then we must also believe that students can move from red and yellow zone behavior to green zone behavior. Our role is to support and facilitate that transition” (p. 17).



Source: Hierck et al., 2011. Adapted with permission from the OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS.org).

Figure I.1: The pyramid of behavior.

Visit go.lbbe.com.au for a free reproducible version of this figure.

The pyramid of behavior interventions aligns with response to intervention's (RTI) focus on a three-tiered approach to intervention. In RTI, Tier 1 interventions apply to all students (green zone), Tier 2 interventions to a smaller group of high-needs students (yellow zone), and Tier 3 interventions to the smallest group of students in need of the most intensive help (red zone). According to Hierck et al. (2011):

“The support given in the pyramid of behavior model is identical to the academic support associated with RTI. All students, including those with special needs, receive high-quality initial intervention. Tiered supports are then provided to all students . . . based on their specific needs, not based on a general label” (p. 17). They continue, “The challenge for educators is to remember to look at the whole pyramid and avoid the trap of focusing only on the problems at the top” (p. 14).

Seven Keys to a Positive Learning Environment in Your Classroom embraces this approach of interventions for all students. I will utilize vocabulary from both RTI and the pyramid of behavior interventions when discussing classroom approaches to the seven keys.

A Must-Have Attitude

Creating a positive classroom learning environment is messy, uneven, complex, and necessary for all teachers to engage in. At its most rewarding, it provides opportunities for teachers to have rich dialogue with their students as they collectively work to create environments that produce high levels of success for *all* students. At its most challenging, it creates frustration for teachers as they deal with factors related to demographics, home characteristics, and the existing school culture. At both extremes, maintaining a focus on the learning environment is critical. Education consultant and retired teacher Wayne Hulley states, “The solution lies not in changing the students we have coming to our schools, but in changing our approach to working with them” (Hierck et al., 2011, p. xviii). Prior to his passing in 2014, Wayne would regularly remind educators that parents were sending schools the best kids they had. We need to ensure that all students get the best teachers schools have. It is my sincere hope that this book adds another tool to the toolbox of all teachers to allow them to be their personal best.