



# Decreasing Test Anxiety: A View from a Special Education School

## SUMMARY

Test anxiety is sometimes an unintended consequence influencing our current school climate as states and districts rely more and more on the use of testing data to drive decision making. These authors discuss the atmosphere of testing and its impact on students' emotional well-being. They also suggest some practical ways to help students and teachers cope with anxiety that results from the pressures of mandated annual testing.

*A special school in* upper Manhattan serves a distinct population of high-need atypical learners, including students who present on the autistic spectrum and those who exhibit any of the array of conditions classified under the diagnosis of emotional disturbance (ED). At the heart of this diagnosis are behaviors and social deficits that make test-taking even under ideal conditions difficult (Roughan & Hadwin, 2011), to say nothing of test situations that require these students to sit and focus for the two to three hours a day necessary to complete many of these instruments. When this difficult time demand is further compounded by tests that must be administered over several days, or even weeks, the potential for acting out and/or shutting down behaviors on the part of ED students is greatly increased.

An additional challenge for administrators, staff and students is that the anxiety produced in this testing environment

doesn't simply evaporate once the tests are done. The lingering effect of anxiety spills over into other classroom work and further inhibits effective learning for a population of students already encountering obstacles to their educational development, such as an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. Under normal circumstances these students have an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers and demonstrate inappropriate types of behavior or feelings. Many of these same students are characterized as having a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression that tends to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. On test days, incidents of students ripping up tests, attempting to run out of their classrooms, or just putting their heads down and completely giving up, are commonplace and on the rise as tests now reflect the new, more demanding Common Core Learning Standards.

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Confronted with this pronounced test taking anxiety, and the classroom disruptions created by inappropriate behaviors, it was time to put our heads together and figure out how we could support our students and staff through this incredibly challenging process and create a learning environment that provides, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), including instruction in self-management of challenging behaviors, positive behavior supports, and social skills development.

**Emotional Disturbance and the Challenge of Meeting Students' Social, Emotional and Academic Needs**

Mattison (2011) observed that approximately 40 percent of American students classified with ED (roughly 200,000 nationwide) are taught in self-contained classrooms or specialized schools; many ED students experience both school settings over the course of their educational careers. While greater investigation of the strengths and differences of these educational settings is indicated, Mattison reported that ED students in specialized schools, despite having more intensive emotional and

social needs, demonstrated greater general and specific improvement than did their ED peers served in self-contained classrooms in the general education environment. Mattison attributed this “stability” to the “comprehensive and intensive levels of both educational and mental health interventions” characteristic of the self-contained school (Mattison, 2011, p. 31).

This self-contained school environment places the psychological and physical well-being of the students at the center of all planning and curriculum efforts. In keeping with much of the current research on effective educational delivery to ED populations, the emphasis is on creating a context for social and emotional learning. As Adams (2013) noted, the discourse around definitions of SEL “can sometimes seem frivolous,” but in fact there are “real implications with regards to creating a shared understanding and framework around a student’s growth” (p. 107), particularly when that student has special learning needs.

Our staff and administration have adopted an SEL framework similar to that used in school districts in Alaska,

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Illinois, and Minnesota, that prioritizes active listening and feedback across all school constituencies (Adams, 2013). Consistent with a focus on social and emotional learning, administrators and staff have been working to incorporate elements of the RULER program: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating, developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. RULER identifies four “Anchors of Emotional Intelligence”: Charter, Mood Meter, Meta-Moment and Blueprint. These anchors are the fundamental RULER tools that enhance individuals’ ability to understand and regulate their own emotions and to consider and empathize with how others are feeling. The anchors also foster the kind of healthy emotional climate essential to personal growth.

The school’s evolving SEL program has effectively incorporated the charter and mood meter anchors, in our classrooms. Each classroom creates its own charter, a collaborative document that helps establish a supportive and productive learning environment. It is created by members of the community, outlining how they aspire to treat each other. Together, the community describes how they want to feel at school, the behaviors that foster those feelings, and pro-social guidelines for

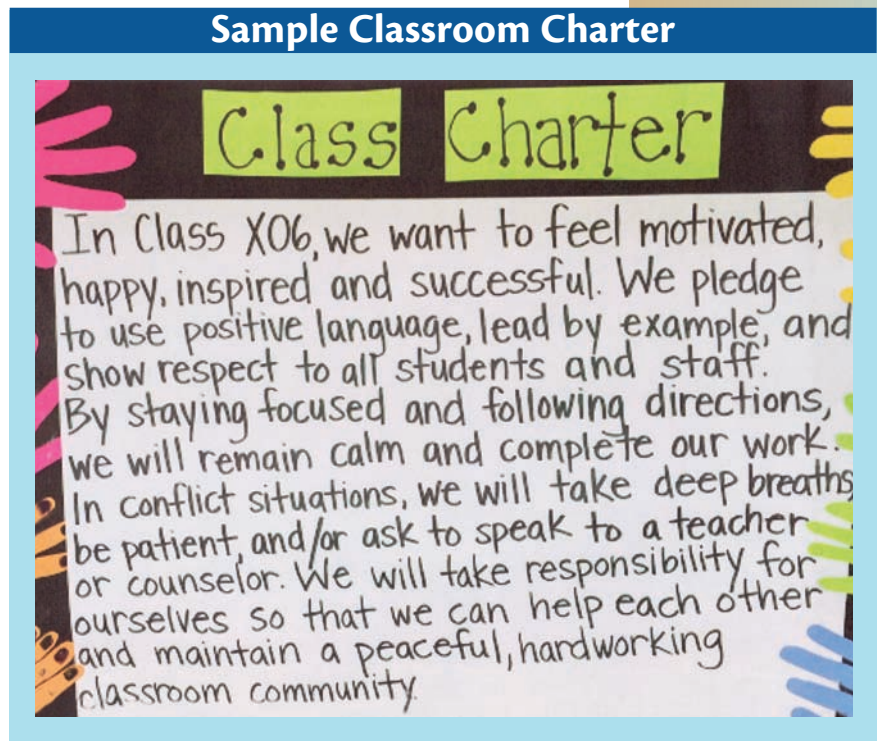
preventing and managing unwanted feelings and conflict. By working together to build the charter, “everyone establishes common goals and holds each other accountable for creating the positive climate they envision” (Yale Center. . . , n.d., para. 2).

The classroom charters are revisited weekly to ensure that all members of the class remain on the proverbial “same page” of expectations and agreement. The RULER program defines mood meter as a practice for identifying and labeling feelings as they’re experienced, as this is a critical step in learning to appropriately regulate those feelings. The teachers have developed and share a practice of daily check-ins with their students, modeling and reinforcing the use of accurate and targeted language. As the RULER website explains: “Learning to identify and label emotions is a critical step toward cultivating emotional intelligence. Using the mood meter, students and educators become more mindful of how their emotions change throughout the day and how their emotions in turn affect their actions. They develop the self-awareness they need to inform their choices. Students learn to expand their emotional vocabulary, replacing basic feeling words with more sophisticated terms. They graduate from using words like ‘ok’ or ‘fine’ to using words like ‘alienated’ and ‘hopeless,’ or ‘tranquil’ and ‘serene.’

By teaching subtle distinctions between similar feelings, the mood meter empowers students and educators to recognize the full scope of their emotional lives and address all feelings more effectively.” (Yale Center . . . , n.d., para. 3).

### Using SEL to Battle Student Test Anxiety

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs established Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to provide concrete guidance to schools and staff serving special needs students. PBIS is a systems approach to establishing the social culture and behavioral supports needed for all children in a school to achieve both social and academic success. PBIS is not a packaged curriculum, but an approach that defines core elements that can be achieved through a variety of strategies. Recognizing we needed to arrive at some supports to help motivate our students to face their social and emotional deficits, and to alleviate our students’ high levels of test anxiety and corresponding negative behaviors, we looked to the school’s own Universal PBIS Team, staffed with a cross section of dedicated teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals. The core of the Universal PBIS Team’s mission involves advocating for our students’ academic success and social emotional well-being, so we knew this was a



natural group to embrace this challenge. We charged the team to work closely with our teachers and leverage our established schoolwide SEL and PBIS initiatives together in devising ways to counter the mounting student test anxiety.

One example of this effort was using the existing mood meter practice, which students and teachers were already familiar with, to explore and acknowledge students’ feelings about taking these standardized tests. They were encouraged to identify their specific concerns and to distinguish anger from fear, frustration from boredom, and so on. The charter component of our SEL programming was also employed by the Universal PBIS

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Team and our teachers to this same end. For instance, the school's themed behavior matrix of a Respectful Responsible and Safe (RRS) environment came in handy for teachers as they made test-related connections and engaged in direct teaching of what it means for students to be respectful and responsible in the classroom, consistent with the agreed upon principles of their classroom charter. This effort was mirrored and supported by our counseling team who began to work with our students to develop their individual social-emotional competencies related to test-taking.

### **Focus Fridays**

The conversations with our Universal PBIS Team members centered on trying to figure out what we could do to reduce the overall anxiety, and subsequent disruptive behaviors, that far too many of our students were exhibiting during the state testing periods. This conversation resulted in the idea of our piloting what we now call Focus Friday. Focus Friday is a test simulation practice that was designed to slowly build up students' test-taking endurance in the months leading up to test day. Students gain familiarity with the test format and question types and learn strategies that help them formulate responses to test questions. The program kick-off entailed an outreach

to parents to inform them that we would be giving students practice exams every Friday morning, in an effort to better support their children through the upcoming state English language arts and math exams. The Focus Friday schedule alternated ELA and math test training so that the first Friday covered 15-20 minutes of multiple choice ELA training, while the next Friday's session provided 15-20 minutes of multiple choice math training.

Over a period of three months, the training increased by 10 to 15 minutes each session for both subjects and incorporated different response structures, such as short answer and extended response, in addition to multiple choice. At the conclusion of the Focus Friday intervention, students were receiving an hour's worth of test practice experience. While this time frame is still shy of what is expected in the actual test situation, it was generally agreed that this was the most time the school could devote to test practice without compromising the critical work of core curriculum delivery.

The administration and staff continue to explore the appropriate balance of test preparation within the context of both SEL practice and differentiated learning delivery to our students. But we are optimistic about the path we are on, and our optimism is borne out

by the yearly increases we've seen in student progress on the NYS ELA and Mathematics exams.

### Testing Supports

During the two weeks of ELA and Math testing, the PBIS team members created a raffle with valuable prizes designed to reinforce the motivation of students who find it difficult to even think about dealing with their emotions and anxiety around testing. This raffle was dubbed *Do Your Best on the Test*, and was designed to mirror the school raffle that is held at monthly school assemblies. These monthly raffles recognize students who received *RRS Just Did It* cards for their practice of RRS behaviors. Given this tie-in, our students are familiar with the raffle process and don't have the expectation that the positive recognition necessarily results in a prize.

The raffle rewards approach has proved quite popular. The exchange featured in the sidebar box was modeled by the PBIS team for teachers to engage in with their students.

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## Testing Supports: Raffle Rewards Approach

**Student:** How can I win this bike?

**Teacher:** You have a chance to win this bike, and more, by earning as many "Do Your Best On The Test" raffle tickets as possible.

**Student:** How do I earn these raffle tickets?

**Teacher:** You can **earn 5 tickets** during the upcoming **ELA test** – if you are quiet, respectful, focused, complete the whole test using all your knowledge, and when done – go back over the test again to recheck it and make any changes you think are needed.

**Student:** Is there a way to earn more tickets?

**Teacher:** Yes, great question. You can **earn 5 more tickets**, if **after you complete the test**, you sit quietly in your seat until all your fellow students are done as well.

**Student:** What about the Math Test?

**Teacher:** Great question again!! All of the above applies to the Math Test as well. In other words — if you behave the same way during both the ELA and Math test — you can **earn up to 20 tickets** toward winning the bike, as well as other prizes.

**Student:** What are some of the other prizes I could possibly win?

**Teacher:** In addition to the bike, we will also raffle off an iPod Shuffle, a Razor Scooter, and a Digital Video Camera.

**Teacher:** Remember — the more tickets you earn, the better your chance of winning something!!

**Teacher:** And a bonus — In addition to the "Do Your Best On The Test" raffle, you can also earn entry into the next two student/staff sporting events to be held on each Friday following the ELA and Math test. Entry into these events, will be determined by your teacher, based on your overall behavior during test week.

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Most importantly, as students' test anxiety-driven behaviors decreased, our students' progress on the standardized tests started to increase.

## Summary

Our efforts to leverage our internal SEL and PBIS-related tools and initiatives, combined with the establishment of our Focus Friday program, has resulted in a drastic decline of students ripping up tests, running out of classrooms during test time, or giving up all together. Most importantly, as students' test anxiety-driven behaviors decreased, our students' performance on the standardized tests started to improve.

Although we know we are on the right track, there is still more to do, as our efforts to assist students in managing text anxiety have revealed that we need to establish a common social and emotional awareness and a common language in our school around SEL skills, emotion words, and feelings, in the same way we established and promoted a schoolwide language around behavioral expectations. With this in mind, last year we created the SEL Integration Committee. The mission of this committee is to identify,

## Acknowledging Positive Student Behavior

Universal Behavior Supports	Target Population	Social Emotional Learning Standards	Connection	Data Points
Gotcha Being RRS, a.k.a. Just Did It Cards	Standardized and Alternative Assessment	<p><b>Self-Awareness — 1D</b> Students have a sense of personal responsibility</p> <p><b>Self-Management — 2C</b> Students using effective choice-making and decision-making skills.</p> <p><b>Social-Management — 4B</b> Students develop constructive relationships</p>	<p>Just Did It cards reinforce a sense of personal responsibility by providing consequences for their actions.</p> <p>Just Did It cards reinforce effective choice-making and decision-making skills by providing opportunities for positive consequences for their actions.</p> <p>Just Did It cards teach about and reinforce constructive relationship by creating opportunities (random acts of kindness) for positive interactions between staff and students, thereby strengthening the relationship between both parties.</p>	<p>Decrease in students with 10 or more referrals.</p> <p>Student and staff attendance at monthly RRS Booster assemblies where cards are collected for a prize raffle.</p> <p>Tracking of card distribution across classrooms.</p> <p>Tracking of card purchase and distribution year to year.</p>

implement, integrate, assess and sustain social-emotional learning programming at the school, in order to increase students' engagement and academic and social-emotional functioning and support our students' overall independence.

Since the creation of this committee, we have now aligned all our SEL initiatives within our PBIS framework, encouraging our staff to view everything we do through an SEL lens.

The chart at left is part of the matrix that specifically aligns an extrinsic motivation with the learning of SEL skills.

This year, the SEL Integration Committee members, in collaboration with classroom teachers, are rolling out the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a comprehensive system that supports intervention planning, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluation in the social-emotional domain. It has been designed to help schools meet the emerging social-emotional learning standards. In particular we would expect to see continued growth and development in self-management: a child's success in controlling his or her emotions and behaviors, to complete a task or succeed in a new or challenging situation. This competency may be

expressed by staying calm when faced with a challenge. We also anticipate improved goal-directed behavior which we define as a child's initiation of, and persistence in completing tasks of varying difficulty, the ability to keep trying when unsuccessful, and the determination to seek out additional information needed to achieve ones goals.

In addition to the established SEL competencies, the DESSA measures optimistic thinking: a child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding herself/himself and her/his life situations in the past, present, and future; ability to say good things about herself/himself, look forward to classes or activities at school and express high expectations for himself/herself.

This nationally recognized tool, designed to measure individual student social-emotional competencies, will help classroom teachers better understand the SEL needs of their students and allow our counseling staff to create more targeted group and individual IEP counseling goals.

It is hoped that the results from the DESSA can be used to strengthen our Focus Friday efforts going forward, yielding information that can better enable our teachers in targeting students with extreme text anxiety so that we can step in to

ameliorate those stressors. The goal is to enable our students to approach test taking and assessment with less anxiety so that they can better apply themselves and their learning in their test taking.

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