

## Why Differentiating Instruction Should Be at the Top of Your School Improvement Plan

*Differentiated instruction helps this diverse school in its effort to meet the needs of every child.*

Scott J. Nozik

With today's emphasis on high-stakes testing and the ensuing initiatives to improve student learning, it is no wonder that principals and other administrators are feeling overwhelmed. There is no shortage of ideas that hold great promise for increasing student achievement, and if your school district is anything like mine, you are knee-deep in just about all of them. That is why one of my favorite quotes is from the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, who said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." It is a great reminder that while things sometimes seem impossible, if you just focus on taking that first step, you eventually will reach your destination.

Ours is an urban school with a population of approximately 320 students. About 10 percent of our students are identified as having special needs, and one-third of our population is considered economically disadvantaged. Roughly half of our kindergarten students come to us without any kind of preschool, nursery school, or Head Start experience. We have a small population of English-language learners, and nearly two-thirds of our students are minorities. Our class sizes are manageable, but we do not have a reading specialist, math specialist, or any general education paraeducators. We must rely on our creativity in order to service at-risk or gifted students. The impact of our current economic woes also is taking its toll on available resources.

There are probably thousands of schools all across America that are much further along in implementing differentiated instruction and, quite frankly, could serve as better models than our school. While we have not focused all of our energies on differentiated instruction, we have begun to realize just how important this approach to learning is if we are truly committed to making a difference in the lives of our students.

### A Clearly Articulated Curriculum

Many people still think of differentiated instruction solely as the varied activities students participate in rather than the personalized instruction needed to take a student from point A to point B. Don't get me wrong, having students select an assignment from a "menu" or creating learning contracts can be, and are, examples of differentiated instruction. However, as Carol Ann Tomlinson and a host of other experts have pointed out, different tasks are not necessarily differentiated ones. It really comes down to knowing *what* skills you want students *to know* and be able *to do*. And that means, before you do anything, you must have a clearly articulated curriculum.

Use whatever model you wish—Understanding by Design comes immediately to mind—but teachers must know what it is that they expect their students to learn by the end of the unit, semester, or school year. Without this critical first step, you are simply working harder, not smarter.

Once you create the road map and know where it is you want the children to go, you have to find out where they are at the moment. My guess is that a review of your school and district assessments will turn up a variety of instruments that could prove useful to your data analysis process. Our district requires teachers to give Running Records, the Developmental Reading Assessment, an Early Literacy Survey, writing prompts, and several other evaluations that provide a wealth of data on individual student achievement. The challenge is to analyze the data so that they provide meaningful information that can then drive instruction for specific children or groups of children.

Our school has a variety of programs that, by their very design, lead to differentiated instruction. For example, Reader's Work-

shop and Writer’s Workshop provide opportunities for teachers to pull out small groups of students to work on individual weaknesses. Our spelling program, Words Their Way, provides a whole group lesson followed by sorting that allows individual students to work at their own levels.

Last fall, our teachers participated in a study of *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), which outlines Robert Marzano’s research-based strategies. As a way of ensuring that these strategies are being implemented in the classroom, our school uses classroom walkthroughs. During the walkthroughs, a team consisting of teachers and the principal makes sure that teachers have posted learning objectives in student-friendly language, use varied instructional arrangements, use a combination of different learning modalities, have multiple guided reading groups, and encourage students to answer higher-order questions.

The use of data-driven decision-making and data teams allows teachers to analyze student learning and provides avenues for teachers to brainstorm new ways to reach students who are struggling to grasp certain skills and concepts. Because time is one of our most precious commodities, we prioritize common planning time to ensure that teachers meet regularly in grade-level data teams. One faculty meeting each month is designated for vertical data teams to meet and discuss students who need additional interventions in order to be successful.

The top priority in our school improvement plan is to develop proficient readers, and we have been working “outside the box” to help our at-risk students. Our two most comprehensive strategies are a four-step process known as Targeted Accelerated Growth (TAG; diagnostic testing to determine deficient subskills, proportional increases in direct instructional time, teaching to the deficient subskill, and retesting to assure that adequate catch-up growth actually occurred), and the use of Benchmark Education Co. resources.

### Targeted Accelerated Growth

During the summer of 2007, I read a book titled *Annual Growth for All Students; Catch-up Growth for Those Who Are Behind* (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007) that highlighted a TAG model used by the Kennewick School District in Washington state. It documents how the district accomplished the goal of having 90 percent of its third-grade students reading on grade level. The case study spans 10 years and includes commentary on the highs and lows of trying to reach such a lofty goal.

The book describes a proven method for developing readers, with step-by-step directions on how a school could implement such a model. While the results were encouraging, I immedi-

ately noticed a major difference between the Kennewick School District and my own—that district’s available resources far surpassed what was available to our school. However, rather than get discouraged, I decided to take its TAG concept and modify it to fit what was possible to accomplish with our existing resources.

During the first year, we started with the primary grades. Using the five key areas of reading instruction defined by the National Reading Panel (CIERA, 2001), our literacy coach identified resources scattered throughout the building and organized them according to the areas in which they could be used by the teachers: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

For possibly the first time, many of our staff looked at our assessments of individual students and realized that these measurements could be used to sort students into small groups according to their specific deficiencies in reading. For example, children who had not acquired the ability to rhyme, or who could not identify all of the letters of the alphabet, or who had trouble with fluency or comprehension were placed in small groups and provided with targeted instruction in just that area for 30 minutes per day, four days per week, for six to eight weeks at a time.

In the first month of school, teachers, tutors, office staff, and special education paraeducators participated in specific and intense training in how to use the materials to deliver instruction to small groups of students. After the six- to eight-week intervention, teachers reassessed the students and changed the groups, based on newly identified targeted instructional areas.

Since TAG was being used successfully in the primary grades, I began looking for ways to differentiate instruction in the upper grades. I had several discussions with grade-level teams to identify their most pressing concerns. A glaring weakness was the opportunity to teach content area skills using books with different readability levels.

Within every classroom in probably every school in America, teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching children who may be reading anywhere from two years below to two years above the expectations for their grade level. Although teachers can provide leveled readers during guided reading, it is much more difficult to provide leveled readers in content areas such as science and social studies. Textbooks, as we know, are written for students in the “middle.” This one-size-fits-all approach makes it difficult for struggling readers to comprehend material on their own and does not sufficiently challenge those more advanced students who may already have mastered the material.

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### The Benchmark Education Study

This year, our third and fourth grades were afforded the opportunity to participate in a research study partnership with Benchmark Education Co., a publisher of fiction and nonfiction standards-aligned texts, and Main Street Academix, an educational consulting firm. The Benchmark materials are leveled books that directly address the key concepts in our science and social studies curriculum. The “big idea” is the same in each book, but readability levels can vary by more than 1.5 years, paving the way for both proficient and advanced readers to be taught at their instructional levels. There are additional books that provide students with special needs, English-language learners, or students reading below basic levels with an opportunity to read and comprehend science and social studies topics at their levels. Content vocabulary terms are explicitly taught in all groups, and expanded to challenge students who are reading above grade level.

As an experimental school, we have received nonfiction guided reading books, audio CDs, vocabulary posters, activity cards, and professional development valued at tens of thousands of dollars. Although we certainly fell into a great situation by receiving free materials and training, it may be possible for your school to use existing nonfiction materials in a similar way.

### Pieces of a Puzzle

With so many districts involved in so many initiatives, it is always beneficial to see how each initiative fits as a piece of the larger puzzle. In our school, using common formative assessments, data-driven decision-making, data teams, classroom walkthroughs, early intervention/child study teams, effective teaching strategies, and positive behavior supports all help us to meet one overarching objective—providing individualized, or differentiated, instruction to meet the needs of every child who walks through our doors.

### References

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