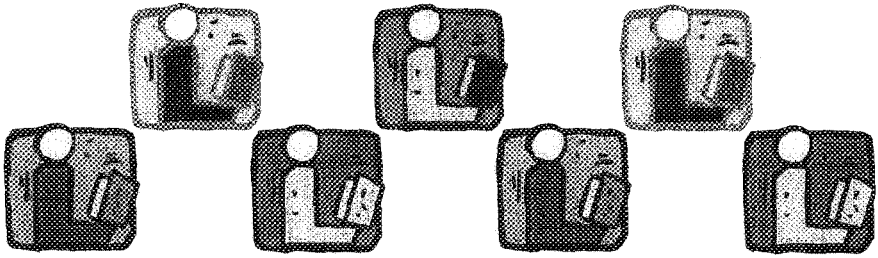

Differentiated Instruction: Can It Work?

By Carol Ann Tomlinson
From *The School Administrator*

IN differentiated instruction, classroom teachers make vigorous attempts to meet students where they are in the learning process and move them along as quickly and as far as possible in the context of a mixed-ability classroom. It promotes high-level and powerful curriculum for all students, but varies the level of teacher support, task complexity, pacing, and avenues to learning based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile.

Differentiation seems a common-sense approach to addressing the needs of a wide variety of learners, promoting equity and excellence and focusing on best-practice instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. This makes more sense than the timeworn method of aiming for students in

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the middle and hoping for the best for those on the upper and lower extremes.

For all its promise, however, effective differentiation is complex to use and thus difficult to promote in schools. Moving toward differentiation is a long-term change process which can be prepared for by drawing on insights from research about change as well as the experiences of others who have provided effective differentiated learning for students of varying abilities.

The Sheridan Public Schools, in Englewood, Colorado, began its journey toward differentiation by ensuring that the five-member board of education and central-office administrators and principals first understood the key concepts before moving on to teaching the staff. While not all district-level leaders need be experts on differentiation, they mustn't ask teachers to undertake a significant change about which they themselves are vague or ill-prepared. Here are several areas of preparation that make good sense:

• Develop informed district leadership.

Leaders must have a solid rationale for why differentiated learning makes sense for the district, understanding key definitions and principles of effective differentiation and appreciating what will be asked of teachers as they move toward more academically responsive classrooms. A central-office team that is expert, or becoming expert, in the theory and practices of differentiation can create an environment of focus, support, and persistence needed for complex change. Vision and management are rooted in district leadership that's well informed.

• Provide committed building-level leadership.

One can't overstate the significant role of building-level leadership in promoting differentiation. Principals and their assistants are catalysts for ongoing conversations about differentiation. They prompt long-term sharing of successes and problem solving related to failures, insist on transfer of understanding into classroom practice, and link teacher practice with assessment of teacher effectiveness. Ideally, in each school that plans to differentiate instruction, the principal or assistant principal should be ready to serve as the on-site source of support.

• Nurture teacher models and coaches.

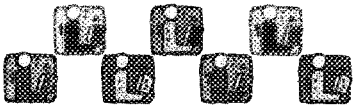
One efficient way to start differentiation is to cultivate and support small cadres of teachers who pioneer differentiation in their classrooms. Providing early and generous training, time, materials, affirmation, and collaboration for a few teachers who have the skill and will to differentiate instruction will es-

tablish laboratories for progress, classrooms that can later be models, and teachers who become credible staff developers down the road.

In differentiated classrooms, teachers are leaders who establish learning goals for their learners. Always, however, because they understand their students' individuality and trust their insights, they invite learners to participate in shaping classroom procedures, making choices that work best for them and thinking of ways to make the classroom more effective.

One thing is non-negotiable: Each learner works toward essential understandings and skills. How they do so is often highly negotiable.

In a district promoting differentiation, leaders have an opportunity to model the practices of differentiation they commend to teachers. That teachers move toward the goal of developing responsive classrooms ought to be non-negotiable. Understanding the individuality of teachers and trusting their insights, however, leaders should work with teachers to develop increasingly effective and varied ways to accomplish the goals of differentiation. It is unwise for educational leaders to ask schools and teachers to be vigorously sensitive to individual student differences while leaders function as though all schools or all teachers are alike.



How the learner works toward essential skills is often highly negotiable.

In Grosse Pointe, Michigan, district administrators initially invited each school to adopt a plan for moving toward differentiation based on a three-tiered proposal generated at the district level. Schools that opted for a tier three (the most comprehensive) commitment agreed to more rapid and multifaceted progress than those with a tier one commitment. While it was clear that all schools were expected to apply and hone skills of responsive instruction, faculties could make important decisions about pace and complexity of progress.

Differentiation can be modeled through: reflecting on the nature and needs of schools and teachers and being responsive to the variance that exists on those levels, just as it does in classrooms; establishing clear goals, but remaining open to varied ways of achieving them; providing support to teachers based on their particular needs; crafting staff development to respond to a wide range of levels

of teacher comfort with differentiation; and basing teacher evaluation, at least largely, on the degree to which individual teachers set and achieve differentiation goals appropriate for their level of professional development.

The Hard Part

It is not as difficult for teachers to understand ideas from staff development opportunities as to translate them into consistent classroom practice. Calling for transfer asks teachers to shed comfortable classroom functioning for less predictable ways of working, while the world moves around them at a rapid pace. It asks for significant change in ways teachers think about learners, classroom organization, their own roles, and curriculum and instruction. Staff development that stops with "telling" teachers what to do will fall drastically short of effective transfer.

In the Amherst County, Virginia, Public Schools, a local staff developer joins individual principals on visits to classrooms where teachers are involved in early stages of differentiating their instruction. Providing teachers course-length staff development on differentiation helps ensure they have sufficient time and guidance to understand its basic elements. The staff development requires teachers to plan differentiated lessons and provides both coaching and feedback throughout the planning. Teachers notify the staff developer when they are ready to implement a differentiated lesson, and it is at this point that both the trainer and the principal go together to the classroom at teacher invitation.

During the lesson, they use an observation format designed around key vocabulary and principles from the staff development sessions. The observation is primarily to ensure that the staff developer and principal understand the ideas behind differentiation in similar ways. Thus, the observations are a means by which everyone involved grows in common understanding—not a teacher evaluation.

Creating staff development for transfer would likely include: providing substantial, ongoing staff development rather than one-shot wonders; ensuring multiple staff development options linked to teacher readiness, interest, and learning profile; making available time and coaching as teachers develop differentiated curriculum and instruction; encouraging peer collaboration among teachers for planning, carrying out, and assessing effectiveness of differentiated instruction; setting expectations for classroom implementation of ideas gained through staff development; ensuring that definitions, terms, principles, and practices of differentiation

are spoken of in common language in all staff development options as well as observations; and establishing teacher-administrator understanding and collaboration for mutual growth through classroom observations.

Partnership Parade

Partnerships for growth are developing at many schools:

- At Madison Middle School, in **Roanoke, Virginia**, the principal encouraged his teachers to keep reflective journals on their students in their differentiated classrooms. He kept one as well. He also worked with district administrators to give teachers professional development and recertification credit for this and other efforts toward differentiation.
- In **Chapel Hill, North Carolina**, the principal of McDougle Middle School secured substitutes so grade-level teams of teachers could have several full days of planning over a two-year period to develop and refine graduated rubrics for their differentiated classrooms. The principal took part in most of the work sessions.
- In the **Fauquier County, Virginia**, schools, the history specialist led teachers in a multitext adoption. This approach seemed much better suited to classrooms with a wide range of reading levels than adoption of a single text.
- In the **Baltimore County, Maryland**, schools, a middle school principal redesigned the school schedule for a year to enable each teacher in core subject areas to have an additional hour of planning every day for a semester to support their planning and implementation of differentiated instruction.
- In **Grosse Pointe, Michigan**, each time curriculum guides are revised, differentiated options are included for content, process, and products for all units. And in **Ann Arbor, Michigan**, a district staff development coordinator provided teacher-friendly books on differentiation or supplementary classroom materials for all teachers who participated in staff development on differentiation.
- In **Hilton, New York**, staff development initiatives are limited and focused so teachers don't feel pulled in many directions. Even the limited initiatives are presented in such a way that the interrelatedness among them is evident.

In each of these instances just described, district- and building-level administrators are sending an important message to teachers. Their actions say, "It is so important to us that you develop the skills of a responsive teacher that the district will continually be your partner in achieving the skills and practices of differentiation."

Developing positive partner-

ships can occur in many ways, among them: providing time for teacher planning for differentiation and execution of plans; providing ample and suitable materials for academically diverse classrooms; developing and otherwise ensuring teacher access to differentiated curriculum; providing teacher incentives for growth toward differentiation; creating an environment that affirms innovation over the status quo and celebrates both successes and efforts at growth; limiting teacher overload; and making certain that district procedures and policies support differentiation (such as developing report cards that make sense in a differentiated environment, helping teachers distinguish between standards and standardization, and providing long blocks of uninterrupted instructional time).

Recently in **Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**, differentiation study groups were formed, bringing together classroom teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of gifted learners. The study groups were expanded by inviting more representatives of all three groups to participate together in staff development on differentiation.

The planners communicated several important messages. First, students with unique learning needs belong to everyone; they cannot belong to the specialist down the hall who will "fix" them. Second, there is no part-time solution to a full-time need: An hour a day or a half-day a week in a specialized program is not powerful enough to make enough difference in the learning of most students. Third, generalists need the refined skills of specialists to be most effective in the regular classroom.

Teaching is typically an isolating activity. It is not easy to forge effective partnerships among generalists and specialists. Partnerships that work best to meet the needs of diverse learners likely meet these conditions:

- They provide extended periods of time for a single specialist to work with several classroom teachers in a given span (e.g., a semester or a year) so the partners can talk and listen together, get to know the same students well, carve out classroom procedures, and succeed and fail together. This appears crucial in turning the vision of differentiation into classroom reality.
- They avoid ownership of students. That is, while the learning disabilities specialist clearly has important insights to share about differentiating instruction for students with learning disabilities, she is also present to help make learning more effective for high-end learners (who may or may not have learning problems), second-language students, and everyone else in the

room. Both partners have the common goal of maximizing learning for everyone.

- They attend to the need for various specialists to learn from one another as well as to learn from classroom teachers. Again, while specialists in gifted education bring specialized knowledge about high-end learning to their work, they need also to learn about working effectively with emotionally volatile students and students who need reading support. In the end, all specialists should work toward becoming differentiation specialists as well as experts in their own fields.

Differentiated instruction is not a strategy. It is a total way of thinking about learners, teaching, and learning. It is, in essence, growth toward professional expertise. There is probably no such thing as an expert teacher who is insensitive to individual need and ineffective in adapting instruction in response to learner need. To develop a growing number of effectively differentiated classrooms is to foster development of a cadre of expert teachers.

If that is the goal of a district, planning for differentiation is forever. It cannot be the focus of a year—or even of five or 10 years. It must be a central, predominant and lasting goal. Planning for the long haul means district leaders would:

- Develop board, district, and school goals that center on maximizing the learning capacity of each student who comes to school there;
- Develop steady and consistent long-term goals that are used for funding, staff development, hiring, teacher and administrator assessment, and policy making, as well as short-term goals that are revised on a regular basis to reflect growth and support continued attainment of the long-term goals; and
- Study our best understanding of the change process and plan for the various stages of change in regard to differentiation, including initiation, implementation, institutionalization, and renewal phases.

Public education that accepts all comers is a uniquely American vision. Cultivating schools that effectively, vigorously, and consistently address that full range of learning needs in the context of heterogeneity is the goal of differentiation.

It is ambitious in its scope, likely not fully possible, and confounding in its complexity—and yet no more worthwhile goal may exist for school leaders who believe in public education that provides equity of access and growth in individual excellence for all learners. Leaders who are consistent, insistent, and persistent in promoting effective differentiation should find both challenge and reward aplenty. ED