

EDUCATION WEEK

SPOTLIGHT

On Differentiated Instruction



Brian Widdis for Education Week

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School Restructures Student Grouping

By Stephen Sawchuk

Detroit's troubled school system remains in emergency management, its enrollment dwindling and its labor-management relations contentious. Yet in spite of

those challenges, a school there is making a bid to innovate with many of the formal structures that have long guided not just teachers' roles, but also how students are organized in classes.

At Palmer Park Preparatory Academy, teachers are gradually

assuming administrative duties to become the city's first teacher-led school. An extended day, part of the district's reform policy, gives the staff time every afternoon to compare teaching strategies. And finally, a new, pilot schedule for 7th and 8th graders lets teachers

Heather McCowan, center right, a 7th grade English teacher at Palmer Park Preparatory Academy in Detroit, hands a "pom," or token, to Monique Whittaker, left, and Dezhane Norton work on a grammar lesson.

Editor's Note: Differentiating instruction and adapting teaching strategies for diverse learners is no easy task. In this Spotlight, explore how teacher-led schools are approaching differentiation and grouping, learn how blended learning can support instruction, and hear expert strategies for assessing student learning.

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regroup the middle school students in different English/language arts and math classes frequently, based on the students' performance and how quickly they are learning new material.

The changes are the K-8 school's attempt to get concrete about the much-touted but often vague concept of "differentiated instruction" for students, especially for those who have struggled to grasp key concepts and risk falling further behind.

They are also the product of a partnership among teachers, the local teachers' union, the central administration, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, the educational publisher hired in fall 2009 to revamp Detroit's curriculum.

In a sense, the 650-student school is also an incubator of several ideas that in recent months have caught renewed attention from education reformers around the country, including: the notion of the teacher-led school; extended school hours, a concept favored by the Obama administration; and on-the-job professional development based on data analysis. While still in its infancy, the school is being praised by district leaders as an example of organic reform.

"I think the teacher-led concept was so new it gave us the opportunity to think out of the box" on classroom scheduling, said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the chief academic and accountability auditor for the Detroit district. "We worked all summer to have this school up and running, and if we had not spent that kind of energy, had not pushed and challenged ourselves, this new idea would not have generated itself."

Organic Reform

The genesis of the changes occurred last summer, after a group of teachers at Palmer Park approached the district with the proposal to convert to a teacher-led arrangement, in which the school's teachers take on the budgeting and management duties generally carried out by an administrator.

Though not a new concept, teacher-led schools have gained fresh attention in the past year, with new examples under way in California, Colorado, Minnesota, and New York, among other places, and a spate of recent articles in a number of publications, including *The New York Times*.

Ms. Byrd-Bennett and the Detroit Federation of Teachers agreed to the arrangement with some conditions. Based on prior experiences with similar schools while she was the chief executive officer of the Cleveland schools, Ms. Byrd-Bennett insisted on formal training for teachers and a graduation transition. An executive administrator, Bessie K. Harris, is training the school's four lead

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teachers on the governance process, such as how to run budget meetings.

Discussions among those teachers homed in on how to boost attendance, keep students more engaged in their work, and minimize their frustration when they were struggling with lessons, said Ann K. Crowley, one of the lead teachers who will assume most administrative duties in the school.

In consultation with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt officials, the teachers arrived at the idea of personalized schedules for all the students, varying on whether they need more-intensive instruction on basic concepts or are ready for more in-depth instruction. Using a data-analysis tool, the publishing group culled information from state, local, and classroom tests. Then the school placed students in one of three classrooms each in math and English/language arts with peers at the same level of performance.

Crucially, teachers are expected to target the same standards, but their lessons explore them in different levels of breadth and depth depending on the performance level. The extended learning time—a change that's being tried across the district—helped usher in the final piece of the plan: professional development to help monitor students' progress.

Teachers have common planning at the end of every school day, in addition to their regular prep periods. At those meetings, they're able to discuss the results from their lessons and go over data generated from quarterly "benchmark" assessments. Then, they can decide whether a student needs to be moved to one of the other classes—something that can occur on a weekly or, potentially, even daily basis as necessary.

"It's so much easier to move the kids and challenge them and address them when they need more attention," Ms. Crowley said.

The seemingly simple idea of differentiated scheduling is one that, historically, has been difficult to execute. For one thing, such schedules essentially require teachers to take charge of far more students than is usual in

lock-step class schedules.

"Scheduling is not something that, quite frankly, gets a lot of attention," said John J. Winkler, the vice president of enterprise solutions at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "What we're doing is scheduling based on student issues, not adult issues."

It has taken a commitment by teachers to stick with the schedule, but teachers seem to feel that they have more ownership over student success, Ms. Crowley added.

"That kind of scheduling can drive adults crazy," she said, "but kids can really adapt to it."

Concerns Raised

The concept appears to be relatively new to education as a whole. Only a handful of other schools, all in New York, have used data to create personalized student schedules, and none of them is currently teacher-led, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt officials said.

The idea, however, raises the specter of prior methods intended to gear instruction to different student needs, like "ability grouping" and "tracking," that have had many detractors. Much research and academic debate occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when such practices were said to benefit high achievers but widen educational disparities between them and their low-achieving peers, especially when the criteria used to assign students to groups were not related to instructional goals.

Even today, there is little agreement among scholars about the best way to make differentiated groupings work well for all students, according to Adam Gamoran, a professor of sociology and education policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has studied both practices.

He said that figuring out the logistics of constant reviews of data, monitoring student progress, and regrouping students as needed pose constant challenges.

"If you're going to make a move like this, to use some form of differential placement and differentiated instruction, you need to do it in a way that keeps high-quality instruction for low-achieving students," Mr. Gamoran said.

But teachers in Detroit note that the placements aren't static, and students aren't stuck indefinitely at a particular level of instruction. A student who succeeds in algebraic concepts but struggles with geometric ones could be regrouped for those specific lessons, while others whose performance rises steadily could move ahead.

"It is more about needing to know your objectives; it's almost like mastery of skills—have you mastered them, have you demonstrated them," Ms. Crowley said.

"It's like an [individualized education plan] for each child."

Monitoring Progress

Some obstacles have cropped up, teachers and administrators acknowledge.

The flexible scheduling, in fact, was nearly scrapped after the school had trouble attracting middle school teachers who were on board with the changes in the school.

Although the city's collective bargaining pact allows certain schools' staff, including Palmer Park Preparatory Academy, to select the teaching force, a mass retirement of many middle-grades teachers the previous year had reduced the number of eligible candidates. And other teachers were initially concerned about the changes, said Ms. Harris, the school's executive administrator.

But the school's lead teachers have held firm to the concept, believing that it was crucial to better outcomes. Students appear to be more engaged and focused on the task at hand; some have asked of their own volition to move to a different class, Ms. Crowley said.

The changes, especially the school's new schedule, are still so new that there's little hard evidence to suggest they're working, but the district will be monitoring its progress closely.

To gauge the school's success, it will rely on the data from a variety of indicators the district collects, which include several that go beyond standardized-test scores. If they show progress, the district is considering expanding the concept.

"Is attendance up? Are expulsions/suspensions down?" Ms. Byrd-Bennett said. "If at the end of the year, our data and numbers moved in the right direction, then there's no reason why we would not think of this for our scheduling the next year."

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'Flexible' Classrooms: Blended Learning 2.0?

By Benjamin Herold

Look beyond the astonishingly high class sizes and troubled rollout, say Rocketship Education officials, and you'll see that "flexible classrooms" are a blended learning upgrade featuring more differentiated instruction, increased teacher collaboration, and better-integrated technology.

Here's how the charter operator's new instructional model looked in action at Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary in San Jose, Calif. on a recent chilly morning:

On one side of the large, rectangular 4th grade classroom, teacher Juan Mateos leads a lesson on identifying figurative language. He projects a poem about California earthquakes on to a screen: "Palm trees begin to sway all by themselves / Here, the earth likes to dance, cha-cha-cha."

Twenty-two students—grouped together based on their similar academic abilities, which put them in the middle of the classroom pack—are gathered on a carpet, reading along. At Mr. Mateos' instruction, they turn to classmates and debate whether the poem is a metaphor or an example of personification.

Twenty yards away, teacher Jason Colon works with 22 of the school's most-advanced 4th graders, also grouped according to ability. The children sit in pairs, facing each other across their desks, binders upright between them. To keep this ambitious lot engaged in his math lesson about graphing coordinates, Mr. Colon has the children create their own x- and y-axes, plot "battleships," and attempt to sink each other's fleets—a creative twist on the classic board game.

And in the middle of the room, Mateo Sheedy's lowest-performing 4th grade students are split among several learning stations. Twenty-five children sit in front of laptops, while 17 others work independently at small tables.

Michael Yeung, a 25-year-old "individualized learning specialist," who makes roughly \$15 an hour, attempts to oversee it all—while also working from a scripted curriculum to help four students learn letter sounds.

When the children rotate stations, Mr. Mateos adapts his lesson to push the more-advanced students to write their own figurative language,

while Mr. Colon shelves the Battleship activity in favor of reteaching struggling students an earlier lesson on converting fractions to decimals. The middle performers now work on computers.

"The biggest difference," said Mr. Mateos, a 27-year old Teach For America alum, "is how targeted our instruction is."

Under Rocketship's old "station rotation" blended learning model, still used in early grades, class sizes are more traditional, and students of mixed abilities rotate from regular classrooms to stand-alone "learning labs," where they receive computer-assisted instruction. Rocketship officials say that under that model, it's difficult to address the needs of top- and bottom-performing students—a challenge many schools face.

With the new flexible classrooms, the goal is to do a better job of providing personalized instruction to students at all levels. As a result, teachers' duties have changed dramatically.

Mr. Mateos is now a specialist, focused on teaching each reading and language arts lesson in three different ways.

He's also become a salesman, helping persuade worried parents to embrace the idea of a single class with 92 students.

And as the grade-level lead in the school's flexible 4th grade classroom, Mr. Mateos has become a quasi-administrator, helping support the two colleagues with whom he now shares his workday.

"It's intense," he said.

Challenges remain: It's been difficult to regroup the students more frequently than every six weeks, limiting the personalization that can take place. During the recent morning at Mateo Sheedy, one child working in the online learning station neglected to log in to his computer, sitting for 15 minutes before anyone noticed, while another pulled his arms inside his shirt and drifted off.

"Keeping track of what's happening and classroom monitoring has been a struggle," said Mr. Yeung, the classroom aide.

Still, the organization is bullish about its new blended learning model, said Lynn Liao, Rocketship's chief programs officer.

"We think this is a path for thinking more openly about technology, teaching, and instructional time, and the fundamental structure of schooling," Ms. Liao said.

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COMMENTARY

The Rise of the Tech-Powered Teacher

By Salman Khan

Best known for our collection of education videos, Khan Academy covers every subject from algebra to art history for grades K-12. A significant piece of Khan Academy, however, is the interactive exercises that allow students to practice math and get feedback at their own pace, while giving teachers data on student progress. Over the past few years, our team has had the privilege of working directly with some of the teachers who use Khan Academy with their students. As we talk with teachers and observe them in their classrooms, one theme becomes absolutely clear: More than anything, teachers want all of their students to reach their potential. Teachers have high expectations for their students, and they work hard to help them succeed. But teachers are in a tough position.

Each fall, students enter their classrooms with a range of abilities, motivation levels, and incoming knowledge. Each student has different needs. Some are ready for grade-level content, while others have not fully mastered the prerequisites. Still others have already learned the grade-level material and are ready to move on to more advanced concepts.

Ideally, teachers would like to meet all those needs simultaneously, but it is only humanly possible for them to teach one lesson at a time. We've met teachers who have undertaken heroic efforts to meet each student's needs, including one teacher who creates five different homework assignments each night so students can work at their own levels. This is impressive but, without question, taxing.

There is no silver bullet, but we consistently find that when used appropriately, technology can enable teachers to lead differentiated and interactive classrooms. When teachers have real-time data and a clear understanding of every child's needs, they can use their precious classroom time more effectively and flexibly. When students are learning at a pace and level appropriate to their individual needs, they are less likely to disengage or act up.

Since tools like Khan Academy generate unlimited challenges on any topic (with

academic hints and relevant and related videos for students to continue pursuing an issue), teachers do not need to create and grade several different worksheets for their students. Instead, they can use that time to do more meaningful work, like dispelling struggling students' misconceptions or designing engaging explorations for their students. This approach can also serve as a helpful classroom-management tool, providing all students with useful practice while their teacher works closely with selected students. In this way, technology can actually increase the amount of quality teacher-student interaction.

The team here at Khan Academy has been actively working with incredible researchers and teachers—several of whom are staff members—to explore how we can leverage technology to create deeper classroom experiences. The initial results have been promising, but there is still a long way to go. There is no one solution that would be



Technology will never replace teachers; in fact, it will make teachers even more important. ”

appropriate for all contexts.

Early on, I heard from some teachers who were using Khan Academy videos to reframe their classrooms: Students would learn the content at night and practice it the next day during class. Since then, we have often been associated with the idea of the “flipped classroom,” even though the concept was actually conceived by others before Khan Academy existed. Since those early days, we have seen the tools of Khan Academy used in many different ways that, we believe, go beyond this model.

To us, where or when students use the resources is not the most important part of any model. Instead, we want to build tools that enable students to master topics at their own pace and increase interactivity and creativity in physical environments. Of course, we know that reaching that goal will

not happen overnight. Teachers looking to push the envelope are constrained by state mandates and tests that don't give much weight to student or teacher creativity. In addition, many schools and students still have limited access to technology.

But the big picture reveals that the ball is moving forward. And based on the incredible educators we have had the privilege to work with while piloting and designing our tools for their classrooms, I am optimistic that it is moving in the right direction.

In discussions about bringing technology into the classroom, I sometimes hear people say that virtual resources will replace physical instruction. I think this idea is absolutely wrong.

Technology will never replace teachers; in fact, it will make teachers even more important.

Technology will give teachers valuable real-time data to diagnose students' weak points and design appropriate interven-

tions. It will enable teachers to more quickly gauge students' comprehension of new topics so they can adjust their lesson plans on the spot. Virtual tools may have the potential to provide educational materials to children who have access to nothing else—say, in a remote village in India—but they will never be a substitute for rich experiences with fellow students and amazing teachers.

I set up Khan Academy as a nonprofit so that it could be free to act as an institution that puts learners and teachers first, rather than a business that has a fiduciary responsibility to maximize shareholder value. Like most schools, Khan Academy has no owners. I hope that it develops as an institution that leverages its reach with students, parents, and teachers to move the education conversation forward constructively. We do not just want to talk about possibilities, but also to

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COMMENTARY

The Five-by-Five Approach to Differentiation Success

By Katie Hull-Sypnieski and Larry Ferlazzo

“What can I do to move this student forward? Is he processing the concepts? Is her thinking being stretched?” As teachers who differentiate, we try to keep these questions in mind at all times. If we didn’t, then our “sleepy” students would have wasted valuable reading time. For us (and for many teachers), differentiation is a philosophy. We believe that all students can learn and be productive, and we recognize that our job is to build on what each student brings to the classroom.

The following “Five-by-Five” approach to differentiation contains ideas that we have found effective in our classrooms. It is not a road map: It doesn’t offer step-by-step directions. Instead we think of it as a compass: It is a set of strategies that guide our work with students.

Our first five points are about “setting the stage” for effective differentiation, while the other five highlight actions teachers can employ daily.

5 Ways to Set the Stage

- **Assessing:** At the start of the year (and, in fact, throughout the entire year), we want to find out more about where our students’ skills are, a process that informs our differentiation approach. Education researcher Robert Marzano has called formative assessment “one of the more powerful weapons in a teacher’s arsenal.” The word “assessment” comes from the Latin “*assidere*,” which means “to sit beside.” This origin is reflected in the process of formative assessment, as teachers work alongside students, evaluating evidence and making adjustments to teaching and learning.

- **Building Relationships:** Marzano says positive relationships with students are a “keystone of effective teaching.” Plenty of other research concurs, as do we. The knowledge and trust we develop with individual students can make or

break our differentiation efforts. For example, if our students are writing persuasive essays, is it necessary for all students to write about the same topic? Instead, if we know a struggling student is a football fan, why not suggest that she write about why her favorite team is better than another one? Or let’s say we are working with a reluctant reader who loves video games. When assigning reading, why not identify a challenging book on that topic that he will feel self-motivated to push through and enjoy?

- **Keeping Students Moving Forward:** This priority drives everything we do with students—even small moves like inviting sleepy readers to sit on top of desks. Studies of “The Progress Principle” have found that a key to intrinsic motivation is feeling that you are making progress in meaningful work. We can reinforce intrinsic motivation by emphasizing small wins (and using catalysts like the ideas we include in this article).

- **Teaching Life-Skills Lessons:** Along with many of our colleagues, we front-load our school year with what we call “Life-Skills Lessons.” These simple, engaging activities can help students see how it is in their interest (in both the short-term and long-term) to try their best at all times. For example, a lesson might highlight how the learning process physically alters the brain. (This particular lesson was eye-opening to a student who had claimed, “We’re born smart or dumb and stay that way.”) Other lessons might focus on self-control (including examining the famous “Marshmallow Test”) or goal-setting. As important as the lessons themselves are the frequent opportunities throughout the year when teachers and students can refer back to the concepts and reflect on their applicability.

- **Creating a Community of Learners:** We do a lesson at the beginning of the year in which students decide if they want to be a “Community Of Learners” or a “Classroom of Students.” Working

take an active role in the building and testing of ideas alongside educators. Of course, Khan Academy remains a work in progress. We are proud of what we have accomplished, but we think we have just begun to scratch the surface of what we want to be.

As I write, we are working with researchers and educators to become more interactive, community-driven, international, and exploration-based. We recently launched our computer science platform, which emphasizes programming as a creative art. We are also leveraging this platform to create interactive virtual labs with simulations of projectiles, pendulums, and the solar system. New interactive features that allow users to ask and answer each other’s questions have also recently increased the sense of online community. We know that providing a way for users to teach one another helps them learn more deeply; after all, the best way to learn something well is to explain it to others.

We are in the midst of a major restructuring of the site’s architecture to better integrate the video and interactive experience. This will include exercises and tools for teachers and students to program interactive simulations. Our goal over the next year is to create a platform on which any educator can create his or her own “academy.”

You will also start to see thousands of pieces of content redone in the world’s major languages so that we can begin to reach those most in need. And all of this is being designed with the intent of supercharging the possibilities in the classroom and empowering teachers to push differentiation and exploration with students to an all-time high.

Because of this social mission and the millions of students and thousands of teachers using the site, we have been blessed with an incredible amount of goodwill from learners and educators alike. That said, we are a very small organization at a very early stage of development. Our mission statement—“a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere”—is an aspiration that we will continue to strive for in the decades to come.

Khan Academy is not a silver bullet; no one solution can tackle a very complex and nuanced problem. But we are optimistic that we can continue to work with amazing educators to help test the boundaries of what is possible.

Salman Khan is the founder of Khan Academy, a nonprofit based in Mountain View, Calif., with the mission of providing free, high-quality education worldwide. His first book, The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined (Twelve), is being published this week.

in side-by-side columns on an overhead or whiteboard, a teacher and students work together to outline the differences between the two options. For example, in a “classroom,” people might laugh when others make mistakes, but in a “community,” people are supported when they take risks. We also discuss the fact that people learn at different speeds, and in different ways, and discuss the meaning of the title of Rick Wormeli’s book, *Fair Isn’t Always Equal*. Time after time, our students have always chosen to be a “Community of Learners,” and we refer back to this decision as we use differentiation strategies throughout the year.

5 Day-to-Day Actions

• **Applying The Zeigarnik Effect:** Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist, identified what came to be called the Zeigarnik Effect: Once we start doing something, we tend to want to finish it. What can this teach us about differentiation? When we know a task will be challenging for some students, we can present a variety of ways to get started: a menu of questions to answer, the option to create a drawing or visual representation of a concept, the option to begin the assignment working with a partner, etc. We can also encourage students to get started by just answering the first question or the easiest one.

• **Differentiating Assignments:** Students can complete the same types of mental tasks while producing different end products. Douglas Reeves describes this as “not uniformity of work, but similarity of proficiency.” The idea is that students can gain proficiency even when completing different types of assignments or a different number of assignments (one big project vs. five smaller assignments). This happens in our classrooms during free reading time, when students practice using similar reading strategies while reading different books. We have some students reading 300-page books while others read a series of much shorter texts. As long as the level of text is challenging and students are using reading strategies to increase comprehension and drive analysis, then the length/genre/topic of the book doesn’t need to be uniform.

• **Using Computers:** Computers can allow students to work at their own pace and ability level, make mistakes in private, and stay engaged and motivated. Of course we’re not suggesting that teachers

plow their students in front of a computer and call it differentiation. However, there are many free sites that allow students to work independently at their skill level and let teachers check on their progress. Some sites, such as the Free Rice game and flash card tools even use “adaptive learning” to adjust future questions based on student progress. A word of caution: automated “teaching” on computers should only supplement high quality curriculum and instruction, not serve as a replacement for it.

• **Praising Effort and Learning From Mistakes:** One way to encourage all students to work at their highest level of productivity and intellectual capacity is to praise effort and not intelligence. Carol Dweck has published research on the benefits of praising students’ effort versus their intelligence. She recommends teaching children the difference between a “growth mindset” (the belief that intelligence can be developed through effort and practice) and a “fixed mindset” (the belief that intelligence is innate). One way to develop students’ “growth mindset” is to encourage them to risk making (and learning from) mistakes. Some students are afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed for it. We want to turn that attitude on its head, helping them learn that, as Dweck says, we should instead “celebrate mistakes.”

• **Flexible Grouping:** Some confuse differentiation with the practice of grouping students by ability levels and teaching those small groups. While this is sometimes necessary and valuable, it is also important that students have the opportunity to participate in interest-based groups, mixed ability level groups, student-choice groups, and other variations. As Carol Ann Tomlinson explains, “In a sense, the teacher is continually auditioning kids in different settings—and the students get to see how they can contribute in a variety of contexts.”

We’ve found that keeping this “Five-by-Five” strategy in mind has helped keep our students and us moving in the right direction—forward!

Katie Hull-Sypniewski and Larry Ferlazzo are both teachers at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif. Their book, The ESL Teacher’s Survival Guide, will be published by Jossey-Bass in July 2012. They are members of the Teacher Leaders Network.

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COMMENTARY

Response: Several Ways To Differentiate Instruction

By Larry Ferlazzo

Response From Carol Tomlinson

Carol Tomlinson is an internationally-recognized leader and author in the field of differentiated instruction. She has an excellent website that’s appropriately called “Differentiation Central”

My journey with differentiation began in my middle school classroom when it was quite clear that my one-size-fits-all approach to teaching was, in fact, not fitting many of my students. While the idea of differentiation (teaching with student differences in mind) is quite an old one, there were no books on differentiation at the time, no conferences, and certainly no web sources of help.

So some colleagues and I began to ask ourselves some fairly straightforward, if daunting, questions. Could we provide more than one way to give students access to information? How could we meet with kids in small groups to attend to particular learning needs? Did it sometimes make sense for students to have different homework, and how would we handle that? What would we say to students who asked why people were doing different tasks at a particular time in class? How did we keep from seeing kids as bluebirds, buzzards, and wombats—and how did we keep them from seeing themselves that way?

There were many more questions, of course. Sometimes we landed on viable answers right away. Sometimes we muddled along for a while trying to find a solution that felt right. Here’s the point. We kept going because we could see that our work was making a difference for the kids we taught, even when we were clumsy for a time with our thinking.

My view of differentiation is still much the same. It’s not a mystery formula that only a few can understand. It’s not a series of mandatory

instructional strategies. It's not a recipe. It's problem solving on behalf of kids. One step at a time, all teachers can do that. Working with like-minded colleagues makes the journey smoother and more rewarding.

Here are a few other suggestions:

1) Start small. Begin with whatever steps feel right to you. Differentiation isn't so hard. Change is. Go in a direction that's likely to result in some success. Start with one subject or one class. Start with 10 minutes a day or 15 minutes a week. Just start.

2) Study your students. The more you see them as distinct individuals--the more you understand them as human beings--the clearer your motivation will be.

3) Use formative assessments regularly (ones you develop to be close to your teaching--not standardized ones). As you see where your students are in relation to your learning goals, you'll understand more clearly what you need to do next to help students move ahead from their starting points.

4) Invest time in thinking through classroom routines--giving directions, handling transitions, starting and stopping tasks, using materials effectively. Envision how you want things to work and help your students do the same.

5) Make the students your partners in creating a classroom that works well for everyone. Don't do differentiation to them, do it with them. Explain your thinking and ask for their input. Enlist their help in making sure the classroom runs smoothly. Get their input on which approaches work best for them.

Differentiation just asks of us what we commend for our students: flexible thinking, intellectual risk-taking, problem-solving--and a deepening sense of humanity.

Response From Rick Wormeli

Rick Wormeli is a well-known author, workshop leader and educator. He has written books on the topic of differentiation, and I'd recommend you read another essay he's written titled Differentiated Instruction: Setting the Pedagogy Straight.

There is no one book, video, presenter, or Website that will show everyone how to differentiate instruction. Let's stop looking for it. One size rarely fits all. Our classrooms are too diverse and our communities too important for such simplistic notions.

Instead, let's realize what differentiation really is: highly effective teaching, which is complex and interwoven; no one element de-

fining it. Reading multiple books and watching many videos on accomplished teaching as well as listening to presenters speak on effective teaching and augmenting all those insights with perspectives gained from on-line communities, faculty conversation, PLC's, and dedicated Websites prepares teachers best for teaching, i.e. differentiated instruction.

Professor and differentiation expert, Diane Heacox, reminded me a few years ago that differentiation is foremost a mindset. It's only 10% craft and mechanics of pulling it off. If we're attentive to the results of formative assessments, for example, we realize that Michael needs 15 minutes with a mentor to review proper lab write-up procedures, LaShawn needs help with Punnett Squares in the Genetics unit, and Umber is ready to write something more compelling in her studies on political rhetoric. Without the focus on formative assessment and adjusting learning in response to what it reveals, however, these students drift with needs unmet, academic potential dwindling. Are our minds tuned to differentiation possibilities?

In a successful differentiated class, we stop hiding behind the factory model of teaching. We teach in whatever way students best learn, even if that's different student to student, or different from the way we best learn ourselves. Many of us are guilty of that from time to time - teaching the way we best learn, not the way our students best learn, myself included. We can do better. We can embrace the root of differentiation: responsive teaching. As students' learning story is revealed, we adjust our instruction in order to maximize their learning. If a student needs more, less, or a different challenge, we provide it as we can.

Most schools conspire against this, unfortunately. As institutions, they are designed to meet the needs of students who "get it" first or easiest. This curriculum-by-age approach protects the status quo, and it provides a false sense of orderly effectiveness. Since teaching and learning can be messy processes, we seek easy schematics; they make us feel like we know what we're doing and we are in control. As a consequence, we are our own worst enemies when we try to teach so students actually move content and skills into long-term memory. In order to live up to a school's mission, we sometimes have to part way with its protocols.

Accepting differentiation more as a collection of principles about responsive teaching than a collection of quick recipes for someone's diversity cookbook is my first piece of advice, as practical as those recipes may be. Mitigating the negative aspects of the factory model of schooling is my second. In addition to these, I suggest we:

•Build our personal capacity for creative thinking and problem-solving. Dif-

ferentiation requires us to take risks, think divergently, and move out of comfort zones.

•Read and converse professionally. The best differentiation teachers I know read professional journals, books, and/or blogs regularly, and they take the time to discuss their ideas with colleagues in and out of their buildings. They share lesson plans for collegial review. Multiple perspectives help us teach smarter, not harder.

•Lower our professional standards. Yep, I said to lower them. So many of us are trying to do everything wise and wonderful every single day in the classroom while dealing with teacher-bashing media and an impoverished, ever-increasing class-size world. It's too much; we have to conserve what little energy we have left at the end of the day for ourselves and families. Since we can't do it all, we end up not doing any of it. Instead, try one differentiation idea per month for three years. Give yourself time and space to improve. This is healthy and reasonable. And every time you focus on one differentiation idea formally, it'll affect many of the other elements in your teaching. You'll actually continue your high standards and integrity, but you have license to be imperfect as you grow. This is the professional.

•Spend considerable time demonstrating to yourself and others how your assessments - pre-, formative, summative, common - inform your instructional decisions. We don't put students into small groups, for example, because that is what differentiating teachers do. We put them into those groups because of something specific we knew about those students indicated the small group experience would improve their learning over what could be achieved in a whole class experience. To this end, get analytical daily: What impact did our instruction have on students and how do we know?

•Construct a solid understanding of the unique nature of the students you serve. There are universal characteristics about how brains of all ages learn, but there are very specific characteristics of the 12 year-old's brain that we don't find in the brains of 18 year-olds or the brains of 6 year-olds. Let's articulate these differences and respond to them in our lessons.

Finally, I highly recommend teachers see teaching as something they do with students, not to students. It's a collaboration to conduct the enterprise of schooling, and every successful classroom I've ever found embraced a modified democracy and mutual ethos of respect between student and teacher. Honor the

student's experience and aspirations, and the student will honor our suggestions and example. We can live with this; we can even thrive.

Response From Dr. Kimberly Kappler Hewitt & Daniel K. Weckstein

Dr. Kimberly Kappler Hewitt serves as Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at University of North Carolina Greensboro and Daniel K. Weckstein is the Principal of Oakwood Junior High School in Dayton, Ohio. Kim and Dan co-authored Differentiation is an Expectation: A School Leader's Guide to Building a Culture of Differentiation:

Interested in differentiating instruction in your classroom? Here's how to jump-start your process.

- **Recognize that differentiation is an approach to teaching and learning, not a list of strategies.** Differentiation requires commitment to the idea that one size doesn't fit all. Differentiation means that "fairness" isn't everyone getting the same thing but rather everyone getting what she or he needs to maximize potential.

- **Recognize and celebrate what you already do.** It's likely that you are already doing some differentiation in your classroom (e.g., flexible grouping for guided reading). Build on what you are already doing.

- **Assess yourself** to identify your strengths and areas for growth. Use a differentiation self-assessment rubric.

- **Set reasonable goals/expectations** for yourself. Once you identify ways in which you can grow in how you differentiate content, process, and product, identify one or two reachable goals for yourself.

- **Learn!** Model life-long learning by using books, DVDs, and websites about differentiation to grow as a teacher. We recommend *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Carol Ann Tomlinson, ASCD, 1999) and *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* (C. A. Tomlinson, ASCD, 2010), as well as the website Differentiation Central and the DVD series "Differentiated Instruction in Action" (ASCD, 2008).

- **Be candid with your students, administrators, and parents about what you are doing.** Folks tend to be skeptical of what they don't understand. Generally, though, people respond well when they know that a teacher is differentiating instruction to

help students soar. A helpful book for administrators might be our own book, *Differentiation is an Expectation: A School Leader's Guide to Building a Culture of Differentiation*.

- **Find a collaborative group** of colleagues with whom you can learn and dialogue. Are you part of a Professional Learning Community (PLC)? If so, leverage it to support your differentiation efforts. If you don't belong to a PLC, consider starting one with a couple of respected colleagues. PLCs can be an immensely powerful way to learn and grow as an educator. Learn more about PLCs here.

- **Consider the implications for assessment.** Differentiation has all sorts of implications for assessment (e.g., use of formative assessment, including pretesting for flexible grouping and use of performance assessment). The book *Fair Isn't Always Equal* by Rick Wormeli provides a good introduction to these issues.

Response From Megan Allen

Megan Allen is Florida's 2010 State Teacher of the Year, a part of The Center For Teaching Quality's Hillsborough New Millennium Initiative work in Florida, and is currently Educator In Residence at the University of Central Florida. Megan also has just published a post on Education Week Teacher about teacher preparation:

Our search committee asked job candidates a standard question: "How do you differentiate instruction?" Unfortunately, the answers were standard, too. After one interview, my colleague erupted, volcano-style: "Why do we assume differentiated instruction can only happen in guided reading?" Good point, my fiery-tempered friend.

Differentiated instruction can apply to any subject. I contemplated this truth recently while indulging in my latest exercise addiction: yoga. Sprawled across a wood floor in an uncomfortable position, wishing I had the flexibility of an Olympic gymnast, I realized something. My yoga instructor uses the same differentiation strategies in the studio that work in our K-12 classrooms:

Identify students' starting points and interests. My yoga instructor begins every class by asking each student about any injuries and what they hope to accomplish in the session.

Offer ample opportunities for students to engage with concepts, stretch their thinking (or tendons), and reach their goals. I think of it as differentiated "construction" rather than "instruction"—I construct learning experiences using what I've discovered about students' interests, abilities, and learning styles.

Provide students with avenues for growth. For each pose, my instructor demonstrates an easy starting pose, then bumps it up notch-by-

notch. That way, I can start with the beginner's pose and attempt more advanced versions the moment I'm ready.

Gauge students' progress—and know when to push them. My yoga instructor's informal observations help me to move forward and try new poses, even if they're uncomfortable at first.

My yoga instructor's teaching is student-centered—adapted for each student's needs, interests, abilities, and learning styles. Yoga has improved my flexibility, but it's also reminded me of the flexibility of differentiated instruction strategies. They're not just for guided reading. As the yogi of our classrooms, we must use these tools to reach each student.

Education Week Teacher blogger Coach G wrote:

I think we should think of it more as differentiated learning than differentiated instruction. Hand in hand with this is the recognition that real learning doesn't happen when teachers are presenting information, but rather when students are applying that information—and teachers are there to coach them as necessary.

Thanks to Kim, Dan, Megan, and Coach G for sharing their responses!

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