October 2012

Volume 2, Issue 7

Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Student and Family Support Services

Turning mediocrity into gold

School turns to evidence-based differentiated instruction, and sees results

At Moravia Elementary school in south central Iowa, they didn't like what they saw. Proficiencies weren't up to snuff. And there was a growing number of students falling behind in reading.

Teachers were upset. And so were the parents. While there was no consensus as to what caused this, there was consensus on this: Something had to change.

They turned to evidence-based differentiating instruction. And, immediately, they saw positive results.

"Teachers have to look at classrooms in a different way," said Julie Sealine, the school's reading specialist. "We teach based on skill level. So we are really focusing on teacher training."

It isn't something that came naturally to the teachers.

"Teachers were teaching what they were trained to teach," said teacher Kristy Robison. "But we were finding more and more that the students were not ready – they still didn't have all the skills they needed to succeed."

Differentiating instruction was a clear path to resolving proficiency issues.

"You have a diverse classroom and you have to meet all of their needs," said teacher Vicki Caudill. "The ultimate goal is to have all of my students be at a certain place by the end of the semester. In order to reach that goal, you have to teach different students through different methods and begin with skills students are lacking."

Vicki cited that before taking on this new approach, it was common for up to one-third of her students to fumble through a spelling program, receiving poor grades. Once differentiated instruction was deployed, "all of those students are learning and progressing receiving an A."

So what does differentiated instruction look like at Moravia? Each student has 60 minutes core instruction in reading, then another 30 minutes of intervention and enrichment, depending on the individual's needs. This is in addition to other individualized instruction that may be necessary for students on IEPs.

School wide, all students are assigned to groups based on skill level. But it is not tracking. Every three weeks, the groups change based on performance data and advancement of skills. Often, students will progress very quickly.

"We are looking at skills that are missing and focusing on those," Vicki said. "Once they achieve those skills, we see the students achieve grade-level success."

The staff meets every two weeks to monitor data.

“We work as a team,” Julie said. “All students are all of our students. It is a new mindset.”

Teacher Kelli Cox, who has worked in the school for 33 years, is enthusiastic about the changes and challenges.

“This is the first time that we, as a team, have actually all gotten on board,” Kelli said. “We’re all doing the same training, and we are all using a common language. It is wonderful.”

Today, the teachers are happy, the students are happy, and the parents are happy.

“The parents see their children as more confident,” Julie said. “We see that they are reading better. We’re all very pleased.”

By the numbers

60 minutes of daily core reading instruction

30 minutes of daily personalized intervention or enrichment

‘Gap? What gap???’ Readers weigh in

We love to hear from you. Last month, we introduced you to outheast Polk’s Willowbrook Elementary, where they literally erased the education gap between students with IEPs and those without. Here are some of your reactions:

I just read your article about closing the gap. Great article, and they should be very proud.
Gwen Melsha, Lakeview Elementary, Solon
***
I really enjoyed the article about Willowbrook Elementary. It was so inspiring to read as a special education teacher.
Amy Chester, Nashau-Plainfield Elementary
***
I like this newsletter.
Linda Kennedy, New Hampton Community School District
***
Sign me up please ... This is great information!
Cynthia Knight, Bondurant Community School District
***
Thank you!!!!!!!! SO inspiring! This should be front page of the DM Register and other major newspapers!!
Terri Hansen-Blair, AEA 9
***
Thank you for providing this outstanding newsletter as it provides content that motivates all of us to continue to lead systems to improvement and higher levels of functioning for all students! Thank you for your leadership through your communication and it does help support me and empower me to lead this important work! Thank you!
Karla Jones, AEA 11
***
This monthly newsletter has great ideas, thoughts, suggestions and strategies that can be incorporated into classroom instruction and building-wide professional development. It is also an affirmation of research-based practices that are ongoing in the districts.

Gregg Cruickshank, Sidney Community Schools
***
I have heard from former coworkers, friends, and professional peers --- it's been nice!
Principal Robin Norris, Willowbrook Elementary, SE Polk Schools

Differentiating instruction: 1 child at a time

Last month, we explored tailoring your lessons to the way each child thinks. We continue this series, researched and written by Dr. Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin.

By Dr. Sharon Vaughn

When working with students with significant learning difficulties, it is imperative that educators deploy differentiating instructional delivery.

Differentiating instruction revolves around three key components: explicit instruction, systematic instruction, and opportunities for student response and feedback.

Explicit instruction means overtly teaching the steps or processes needed to understand a construct, apply a strategy, and/or complete a task. Explicit instruction includes teacher presentation of new material, teacher modeling, and step-by-step instruction to demonstrate what is expected so that students can accomplish a learning task.

Educators can blend self-regulation strategies with explicit instruction of new content. For example, when introducing the use of graphic organizers to facilitate learning and understanding of content in a social studies text, a teacher will:

- Develop students' background knowledge, such as introducing the vocabulary necessary for understanding the text;
- Discuss the importance of the graphic organizer strategy and how it will help increase what students remember;
- Model how to use the graphic organizer and include self-instruction techniques so that students can talk themselves through the task;
- Help students memorize the steps for completing the graphic organizer and monitoring their completion progress; and
- Support students as they practice using the graphic organizer while applying the self-instruction and self-monitoring techniques.

Systematic instruction means breaking down complex skills into smaller, manageable "chunks" of learning and carefully considering how to best teach these pieces to achieve the overall learning goal. Teachers break down a complex task, like solving a math problem, into multiple steps or processes with manageable learning chunks and teach each chunk to mastery before bringing together the entire process.

Instruction can be made more systematic with:

- Additional modeling with clearer and more detailed explanations;
- More concrete learning opportunities with the use of pictures, graphics, or think-alouds;
- Tasks broken down into smaller steps;
- Instruction broken down into simpler segments;
- Step-by-step strategies; and/or
- Temporary support gradually reduced over time.

And finally, students with learning difficulties need frequent opportunities to respond and practice with teacher feedback throughout lessons to accelerate learning.

Frequent student response can assist the teacher in monitoring student understanding, and teacher feedback during student practice can be a powerful tool for refining and mastering new skills. Feedback prompts students to continue successful attempts during practice or to remedy errors before they become entrenched. Feedback is most effective when it relates to student goals and provides information on how to complete tasks more effectively.

Feedback is more effective when given during or immediately after a task is completed.

Provide feedback immediately for discrete tasks (e.g., solving a mathematics fact, spelling a word) and after a short delay for more complex tasks (e.g., writing a paragraph) to allow students to think through the process first. However, delaying feedback beyond the instructional session is less valuable for students.

Dr. Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin is a nationally recognized special education expert.

Next month: Adequate instructional time.