

Same-Grade Solutions for Struggling Learners

Having reached the last chapter of this book, you should now be fully aware of the benefits an additional year of learning and growing time can provide, as well as the many different ways an additional year can be provided. But there still remains the question of how best to help a struggling student in his or her current grade, when effective assistance is needed now.

This may be a student who will receive an additional year to learn and grow next year but cannot just be ignored or abandoned in the meantime. Or this may be a student who is now receiving an additional year and needs a well-structured, individually tailored plan to help put this crucial time to the best possible use.

Additionally, there are and always will be struggling below-grade learners for whom an additional year of learning and growing time is *not* an option—perhaps only at present or possibly forever. Students in these categories might include:

- a student who is already one year older than his or her peers but still needs additional support
- a student trapped in a school that refuses to provide an additional year of learning time under any circumstances
- a student who has a parent adamantly opposed to an additional year of learning and growing time.

Faced with these different possibilities, as well as the many different factors that led these different types of students to become struggling learners, how can you devise a single, easy-to-implement plan that will work for every student?

The answer to this trick question, of course, is that there is no single, easy-to-implement plan that will meet all the needs of the full range of struggling students in today's diverse classrooms. Instead, what you need is a strategy that effectively enables you to use different approaches that meet the different and changing needs of a wide variety of struggling learners. And perhaps not surprisingly, the name now being given to this widely used strategy is *differentiated instruction*.

Making it different makes a big difference

Differentiated instruction is not just a recycled version of previous calls for teachers to “individualize” their curriculum and instruction. That approach, promoted by many of the same people who promised that all students would catch up in third grade and therefore never need an additional year of learning time, did not clearly explain exactly how teachers would meet all their students' individual needs effectively. In contrast, differentiation offers a very clear and effective process for working successfully with students whose work is below grade, at grade level, or above grade level.

The original concept of differentiation was developed by an educator and author named Carol Ann Tomlinson. As the concept has been implemented in schools across America, differentiation itself has been “differentiated” and adapted to meet the needs of diverse educators and students in a wide variety of classroom settings. Following is a brief overview of key steps in the differentiation process that are increasingly being used to help different types and levels of learners in the same classroom:

Assess students first: Rather than waiting until a unit of study is completed, differentiation works best when teachers start assessing students at the *beginning* of a unit, in order to determine the students’ current level of knowledge and skills. The teacher can then use the assessment results to identify the level and type of instruction needed by the full range of students in the class, from those who need additional preparation and support to those who need more advanced and challenging work.

Provide “tiered” activities: Knowing the students’ differing needs and capabilities, a teacher can then provide appropriate types of curriculum and instruction. Advanced students can have their lessons “compacted,” so they do not waste time and grow bored being retaught things they already know. Instead, these students can briefly review a lesson and then move on to more challenging activities that reinforce and extend what they have already learned. Meanwhile, other students who need further preparation and support in order to master a unit can receive materials and instruction geared to their current level, so they make continued progress.

Use flexible grouping: In order to provide students with differing types of materials, instruction, and activities, teachers sometimes need to divide their students into smaller groups based on current capabilities and needs. When used along with whole-class instruction and individual attention, small groups are one more option that allows a teacher to make the most effective use of instructional time. While one group of students works with the teacher to master needed information and skills, other groups can be engaged in tiered activities at the right level for them. And because the groups are temporary and organized around specific subjects or lessons, their makeup can vary and prevent each student from being pigeon-holed as either advanced, average, or below-grade.

Of course, accomplishing all this is far from easy. Educators must first be trained in best practices and then work together to compile and organize their assorted assessments, materials, activities, and techniques. By working together in this way, much of the preparation can be done in advance, making implementation easier and more effective. Then the advantages of this approach quickly become apparent.

First and foremost, by effectively meeting the instructional needs of their full range of students, teachers can spend more time doing what they really want to do — teaching — and less time dealing with all the other problems that arise when students’ needs are not being met. Further, effective instruction leads to improved student performance, no small consideration when teachers are under intense pressure to deliver quantifiable results.

However, I believe that differentiating curriculum and instruction is not enough when working with struggling learners whose performance is below grade level. Student support must also be differentiated, and by that I mean not just the provision of support services, but also the use of a student’s time before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer. For with or without a full additional year of school, the amount and use of additional learning time remain key variables that can make a huge difference in a student’s performance when they, too, are differentiated.

Time differentiation, when combined with differentiated instruction, results in what I call *differentiation plus*. And to organize all this differentiation effectively for a specific struggling learner, I recommend creating a Differentiation Plus Plan. Like the Individual Education Plan (IEP) required for students who are classified as needing a special education, a Differentiation Plus Plan (DPP) outlines the goals for a specific student as well as the curriculum modifications, instructional accommodations, and additional support designed to help the student achieve those goals. (See Appendix for models.) Also like an IEP, a DPP should be reviewed periodically to determine how the student is progressing and whether any additional changes are warranted.

A DPP can be created by an individual teacher, but preferably a team approach would be used to create and implement the plan. In today's high-stakes, accountability-driven environment, if a student has been struggling and doing below-grade work for an extended period of time, I recommend alerting the school's principal and requesting assistance in creating an "ad hoc" child-study team. Members of the team could include the principal or an assistant principal, as well as the school psychologist, any relevant specialists, and the current teacher. A previous teacher and a guidance counselor or social worker might also be valuable members. Moreover, a parent's input and participation in the process should always be sought.

The team's first step would be to evaluate the student and review the relevant school records. If additional screening for learning disabilities seems warranted, that should be done right away. Then the plan for modifying the student's curriculum, instruction, and support should be drafted, reviewed, approved, and implemented, with team members continuing to meet periodically to discuss the progress being made and any further modifications that might prove necessary.

Underlying this entire process is a single proposition that educators are increasingly being forced to accept in an era of slogans such as "no excuses" and "leave no child behind." This idea is that if the education we provide does not enable a student to learn well, then we need to provide the type of education that does enable the student to learn well. The next section of this chapter explains in more detail how to do this.

Differentiation Plus Plan (DPP)

Student _____ Date of Birth _____

Present Grade Placement _____ Date _____

Placement Recommendation (grade level/program) _____

School _____ Phone _____

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) _____

Mailing Address _____ Phone _____

Classroom Teacher(s) _____

Notes:

Differentiation Plus Plan (DPP)

Student _____ Date _____

Curriculum Modifications

<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Modifications: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>
<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Modifications: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>
<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Modifications: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>

Differentiation Plus Plan (DPP)

Student _____ Date _____

Instructional Accommodations

<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Accommodations: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>
<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Accommodations: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>
<p>Goal: _____ _____</p> <p>Accommodations: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Progress Review</p> <p>Date: _____</p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____</p>

Quarter Past September

Jim Grant

When it's quarter past September
It's a magic time of life.

The school world of our children
Should be free of strife.

Our little people have waited and waited...
And waited for this day, only to
Learn that school is not
A place for play.

The teacher welcomes one and all
And asks them to sit still,
Most of the children are quick to comply,
Except for overplaced Bill.

The children were given their phonics
Lesson and asked to complete the job,
Everyone finished all their work,
Except for overplaced Bob.

The painters were careful with
The paint—the teachers said “Don't spill.”
And all the painters got the message,
Except for overplaced Jill.

At recess time a reminder
Came not to run and race:
No one forget this simple rule,
Except for overplaced Grace.

At the Halloween party, the
Teacher cautioned, “Please don't
Spill your juice,” and everyone was
Careful, except overplaced Bruce.

They love their big new pencils,
They love the color red.
Everyone knows the correct way to hold
Them, except for overplaced Ed.

The list of children overplaced is
All a too familiar case.

Shouldn't we watch for signals
And signs that children give
Off when they need more time.

Parent pressure—state law, too,
Send us youngsters before they're due.

High content curriculum we must abide,
But children keep falling by the wayside.

One hundred years from today,
What difference does age make, we'll say.

St. Peter won't stop you at the pearly gate
To ask your age when you graduate.

So many children in their prime
Desperately need additional time.

Let's make school a place to succeed
And give our children the time they need.