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How 2 Exceptional Illinois Schools Are Propelling Academic Growth for Students

Nordengren: New report identifies 10 strategies for success used by 4 teachers across grade levels and subjects — and how they can work in your school



By Chase Nordengren | November 1, 2023

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The most typical thing about today's classrooms is how atypical

they are. Enter a third-grade class in 2023, and you'll find some students who missed kindergarten and most of first grade due to the pandemic, others who received various levels of remote learning and still others who seem already prepared to move on to fourth grade.

These varied experiences have led to some of the largest academic diversity in decades. Students have always entered school with different levels of academic proficiency, but superintendents now report around half of students started the year below grade level, and other research suggests 10% of students may be two or more grade levels behind.

What should instruction look like when students within a single grade level all have vastly different experiences and needs?

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To answer this question, my new white paper, *The Transformative Ten*, looks closely at the teaching practices of four teachers in two exceptional schools in Schiller Park, Illinois's School District 81. These schools showed academic growth on NWEA's MAP Growth assessment for students across achievement levels six years in a row, a feat achieved by fewer than 0.5% of schools taking that assessment. There are likely many reasons they achieved that growth, but a close look at their instruction reveals something special: a set of purposeful practices that balance what students see and do.

A longstanding and heated debate in instructional circles concerns whether students need grade-level instruction or whether content should be differentiated based on what they are ready for. My work suggests teachers need not choose between differentiation and grade-level instruction. In the 6½ hours of a typical school day and 180 days of a typical school year, teachers have the chance to expose students to all kinds of

learning, and the 10 strategies in my paper show how to make that happen.

These fall into three major categories. First, the teachers in this study optimize instructional time, giving students multiple opportunities to engage with information repeatedly over time. The teachers did this by:

- Providing supplemental learning time, during which all students focus on reinforcing the key skills they need to access grade-level content.
- Mixing whole group, small group and individual activities to tailor content to students' needs in the moment.
- Adjusting student groups in real time, so no student is permanently tracked into lower level instruction.
- Sharing students across grade-level teachers to maximize opportunities to differentiate for their varied needs.

Second, these teachers expose students to more content: They find ways to make sure students receive as much of that year's curriculum as possible, keeping them from falling behind their peers over time. The teachers did that by:

- Differentiating tasks within a unit, giving students access to the same texts and standards while ensuring the work they did was engaging and accessible to each of them.
- Providing targeted practice for foundational skills needed for accessing grade-level content, like a "skill of the week" or a warm-up activity.
- Teaching more than a single topic in math or literacy at the same time, using the structure of the school day to cover multiple academic standards within a subject area and ensure no topics are inadvertently missed before the end of the year.

Finally, the teachers empower students with activities that promote complex ways of thinking. The Common Core and many other standards engage students in complex tasks like analyzing points of view, engaging in collaborative discussions and applying mathematics to real-world problems. The teachers

studied here design activities ensuring that all students can access these higher-order skills even if they started the year well behind grade level. They did this by:

- Creating opportunities for self-directed learning, asking students to take ownership of how quickly they moved through a particular unit of content and providing flexible one-on-one supports based on their progress.
- Having students talk about the subject matter and listening to those carefully as a way to better understand what students know. These activities include having students engage in debates on controversial issues, teach specific content to one another and discuss characters or themes based on their own experiences.
- Dedicating time and attention to academic vocabulary: the key words and phrases students need to know to understand a lesson. Knowledge of these key terms is the essence of the background knowledge necessary for participation in grade-level instruction.

One of the remarkable features of these 10 strategies is their universality: They were used as frequently in first grade as in seventh, and in mathematics as often as in language arts. They work for many kinds of students: 56% of kids in the district I studied are considered low-income, and 55% are non-white. The strategies also don't require extraordinary resources or investment: The district spends around \$2,000 less per student than the state average. These 10 strategies can work for any student today, without the need for purchasing a new curriculum or extensive intervention program.

Schools also don't need to adopt all 10 strategies to find success. There are many ways for teachers to optimize instructional time, expose students to more content and empower students with higher-order thinking skills — including many that don't appear in this study. Through the white paper, videos of each instructional strategy and professional learning, NWEA hopes to provide a toolbox teachers can draw from to get started in balancing grade-level teaching and differentiation effectively.

No one set of strategies or policies is a silver bullet for promoting

student growth. Concerted efforts by administrators, support staff, policymakers and students themselves are all necessary to create great schools. However, the heart of high growth lives in the classroom: Great teachers make it possible for students to do their best work. This study is yet another reminder that the big debates in education policy and practice are ultimately secondary to the experiences teachers and students have learning together.

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