

A Schoolwide Approach



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“... the biggest day-to-day repository of constructive power to improve schools is in the hearts, minds and hands of the people who work in them.”

– Kenneth A. Sirotnik, in “Evaluation in the Ecology of Schooling: The Process of School Renewal”

By differentiating instruction in your classroom, you can make a tremendous impact on the learning of your students. By working collaboratively with other teachers through a schoolwide approach, you can have an even greater effect.

Although many teachers are aware of the benefits of differentiated instruction, they may *not* be implementing this approach for a variety of reasons. These include:

- a belief that differentiated instruction will be too difficult or time-consuming
- lack of exposure to differentiated instruction and strategies through preservice training or their own experience as a teacher or student
- lack of understanding of how to implement differentiated instruction in a substantive, planned and proactive way (Tomlinson 2005)
- a belief that they do not have the professional development or administrative support to start to initiate and implement differentiated instructional practices (Carolan and Guinn 2007).

These barriers can be overcome through a thoughtful, clearly articulated and collaborative schoolwide plan for implementing differentiated instruction including shared targets, professional development and indicators of success. Two starting points for building a schoolwide approach are through the complementary models of professional learning communities and action research.

Professional learning communities

Professional learning communities are created when teachers and administrators in a school purposefully share learnings and then act on what they learn. This process of sharing, reflection and improvement benefits students by helping staff enhance effectiveness as professionals.

Professional learning communities are based around seeking collaborative answers to the following three critical questions.

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (DuFour and Eaker 1998)

The third question is a hallmark of what defines professional learning communities. It also is central to a school's commitment to differentiation. If students are not learning through current methodology, educators work together to explore thoughtful alternatives.

Action research

Action research is a form of applied research that draws on a range of designs and methodologies to examine a practical problem or issue and generate solutions to institute a change. Action research has the potential to greatly enhance school improvement initiatives by providing educators with a systematic process to reflect on issues, consider options, implement solutions and evaluate results (Alberta Teachers' Association 2000). Action researchers focus on constructing a detailed, coherent, useful understanding of what was intended, and of what actually happened and why.

For more information on action research:

- Action Research Network in Alberta
www.uleth.ca/edu/research/arnia/

This Web site, developed by David Townsend of the University of Lethbridge, provides an overview of action research in the Alberta context. It includes references to projects undertaken by teacher-researchers in recent years.

- Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)
www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/

This Web site contains an annotated bibliography of print materials that support action research aimed at school improvement.

A combined approach

The remainder of this chapter describes a framework for building and sustaining a schoolwide approach through four overlapping steps, which combine elements of professional learning communities and action research.

1. Identifying goals
2. Working toward change
3. Developing and maintaining staff capacity
4. Assessing results

Throughout these steps, change is planned *with*, rather than planned *for* teachers. Change usually occurs through the work of a small, committed team of teachers and the school administrator, with input from other staff members throughout the process. This cyclical process includes ongoing discussion about teaching and learning and about the school's values, relationships, procedures, current realities and priorities.

1. Identifying goals

Early in the planning process, educators discuss their sense of the current reality of the school related to differentiation, including strengths, concerns and values—what the school stands for and what it would like to be. These preliminary discussions of vision lead to the establishment of specific shared goals for improving differentiated practice. To be most effective, groups should focus on a few specific, achievable goals, such as improving learning through effective flexible groupings and conferencing practice.

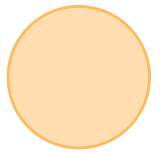
Consider the following questions.

- What are the key elements of differentiated instruction that we want to see in place in the school?
- What are our current goals for differentiating instruction and improving the learning for all students in our school?
- What specific learning outcomes are a priority? How will these be measured?
- What strategies will be implemented to help students achieve the outcomes?
- How will implementation be monitored?
- How will results be shared and with whom?
- What are good sources of information about differentiated instruction?

The following checklist presents desirable programming features related to differentiated instruction. School staff can begin by reviewing the checklist to add, delete and modify criteria to suit their school's needs. Individuals respond to the survey according to their sense of reality in the entire school, not just in their own classrooms. In discussion following individual completion of the survey, team members select goals which they will focus on over the next specified time frame.

Differentiated Instruction Checklist

	Program Strength	Program Need
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We devote time to collegial discussions about our students' learning needs and interests. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We reflect regularly on how our school's program enhances the learning of all students. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly offer students a variety of human, print and media resources for learning. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly offer students a variety of learning activities to learn and to demonstrate learning. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We frequently employ observational and formal assessment information about individual students to plan appropriate instruction for all students. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly challenge students to determine preferred personal strategies to complete learning tasks. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly employ varied instructional formats—full class, small groups, independent learning and peer learning. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We consider individual student interests and background knowledge in the planning of instruction. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We frequently challenge students to self-assess their learning and to set related goals. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We offer choices in projects, resources, learning activities and display of learning. 		





	Program Strength	Program Need
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We provide students with extra time and additional adult or peer support to complete assignments. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We employ resources with a range of challenge (e.g., levelled books) and in a variety of formats (e.g., taped readings) as well as manipulatives (e.g., blocks, sentence strips, sticky notes). 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly model strategies and challenge students to identify strategies that work best for them to complete specific learning tasks. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly make exemplars of student work available to show students what is possible and what is expected. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We modify assessment tools including rubrics for individual students completing tasks. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We inform parents about differentiation strategies and invite parents to be meaningfully involved in their children’s learning. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We consider ongoing assessment of work-in-progress as well as culminating assessments and standardized assessment of student progress to guide our planning. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We regularly offer individual students positive feedback and encouragement as well as focused, specific suggestions for improvement. 		

2. Working toward change

Once you have established clear goals, it is critical to develop a detailed, practical action plan to work toward change. Planning includes consideration about roles, time lines, resources, and how individuals will implement and assess selected strategies. Consider the following ideas.

- Read relevant literature, consult colleagues and talk to experts and others with experience.
- Assign roles and responsibilities related to practical, organizational matters. Who will arrange meetings? How often? Who will be involved?
- Create a reasonable time line, with clear, specific milestones.
- Plan for assessment. How will we know if we have achieved our goals?
- Determine how the core team and additional teachers will work to achieve goals. Will they work alone or in teams or groups? How will they assess progress; e.g., individually or collegially? How will they report results? How will colleagues celebrate and publicize? Are mentorship and peer feedback appropriate for the project? Will teams work together on projects, perhaps to differentiate resources, activities and assessment techniques? Will they collaborate to plan learning activities and assessments? Will individuals engage in a research project, perhaps exploring two or three instructional strategies to assess which works best with individual students? What professional development and other support will teachers need along the way?
- Dedicate time for ongoing discussion and planning, often focused on what to do about students who are not learning to their potential.
- Ensure the necessary resources are committed to the initiative. Many Alberta schools and districts have employed Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) funding to support projects.
- Identify obstacles and plan strategies to overcome these. Regularly invite all stakeholders to voice concerns related to goals and plans. As concerns are voiced, professional development presentations and discussions should address these concerns honestly and directly.
- Maintain open communication throughout the process. In addition to communication among staff members, sharing goals and progress with parents and students can increase understanding and support for differentiated instruction.

3. Developing and maintaining staff capacity

Students are not the only learners in a school. Teachers and administrators also are learners, who need opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge for their own enrichment as well as for the benefit of the school community. Independent professional development opportunities may help you to better understand and implement differentiated instruction in your classroom. Collegial professional development, in which teachers plan and engage in learning together, will further support and align with a schoolwide approach to differentiated instruction. Professional development, like a schoolwide approach in general, is most effective when learning opportunities are spread around and there is distributed teacher leadership at the grass-roots level. In addition to professional development related to instruction, teachers also need opportunities to develop leadership skills in order to support and sustain the initiative.

Staff development that best supports differentiated instruction encourages teachers to:

- develop skills to reflect on, identify and respond to students' individual needs
- stay informed on current best practices for teaching and learning
- use effective classroom management strategies
- explore and choose a range of flexible instructional approaches
- collaborate with other school staff and specialists to create responsive caring classrooms.

When planning professional development opportunities, select from a variety of approaches that best meets the needs of teachers and other staff at your school. Professional development may involve presentations by school staff, outside experts, study groups, or reading and discussion of selected professional literature. In general, teachers who engage in professional development that focuses on effective classroom practices are more likely to use those practices in their classrooms (InPraxis Group Inc. 2006). Some common characteristics of effective differentiated instruction that can be supported through professional development include:

- offering personalized scaffolding
- using flexible means to reach defined ends
- developing subject-area expertise
- creating a caring learning environment in which differences are seen as assets.

Whatever methods are used, professional development should always include follow-up discussion to presentations. How applicable are the contents to our goals and strategies? What follow-up resource might be helpful?

4. Assessing results

The ongoing collection of appropriate assessment data helps to answer two critical questions: Is our approach enhancing student learning? What can we do to enhance the benefit for all students?

Assessing results involves evaluating two separate things—how thoroughly and effectively the initiative is being implemented, and what effect the initiative is having on students and the school community. Practical evaluation strategies for school-based initiatives include:

- pre- and post-tests
- surveys
- interviews
- school records
- observation data.

The assessment of teacher perceptions should certainly be considered. For example, the checklist included in the previous section can be employed throughout the project to document perceptions of progress. However, meaningful and appropriate assessment of student progress is the most important measure of success, since student learning is the central focus of all projects.

Outcomes in Alberta’s programs of study require ongoing observation, pre-specified response, performance assessment and student self-assessment, as represented in the following chart.



	Observation	Pre-specified Response	Performance Assessment	Student Self-assessment
DEFINITION	Informal assessment of students, often rotationally scheduled and focused on specific outcomes.	Assessment which requires students to approximate a predetermined answer.	Formal assessment which demands the use of criteria which are communicated directly to learners and used as guidelines by both students and teachers.	Assessment completed by students about their own work and that of classmates. The assessment is usually observational or a performance assessment.
EXAMPLES	Anecdotal records; observations of students working in groups; checklists.	Multiple choice; short-answer; true-false; matching.	Analytical or holistic marking forms for writing; debate; readers' theatre; representation; rubrics.	Instructional application of criteria to final product; self-assessment of writing; goal-setting activities; portfolios.

The implementation of differentiated instruction is an ongoing process. Analysis of assessment data will help you identify and celebrate successes, refine practices and set new goals to continue to enhance learning for all students.