Differentiated Instruction

Taylor Ranch School’s Journey Towards Excellence

Professional Development Handbook
Differentiated Instruction: Taylor Ranch School’s Journey Towards Excellence

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Acknowledgements

As we were surfing the internet looking for information we could use in the development of this handbook, we came across this quote at a site entitled Wireside Chatroom: “As classroom teachers struggle daily to design learning experiences that serve students' unique abilities, backgrounds, learning styles, and interests, a very practical approach promises to assist them in their quest - differentiated instruction. Billed as more than another educational "buzzword," this method involves tailoring assignments to suit students' needs. If differentiated instruction has a single "voice," it may be that of Carol Tomlinson, professor of educational leadership, foundations and policy at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.” education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat107.shtml

Dr. Tomlinson was one of the most influential and important consultants in our differentiated instruction journey. This handbook has been developed with the intention of promoting the importance of differentiation in the classroom and assisting educators with the simple “do's and don'ts” related to differentiated instruction. This differentiated instruction handbook is not a complete work; in fact, as we continue to evolve in our differentiated instruction practices, this handbook will also continue to evolve.

As you read through the content of this handbook, you will discover certain facets of differentiated instruction completely in line with your current philosophy and educational approach. You will also discover some new ideas and even a few “ah-ha’s” along the way. Hopefully, you will realize that this handbook is a tool to be used to guide instruction and planning and help you engage in reflective practice. There have been
many people involved in this evolutionary process of discovery. We would like to be sure to thank everyone.

The very first person we have to remember and thank is an individual still close in our hearts and thoughts, Mr. Robert Earley, former Associate Superintendent and Chief Financial Officer for Sarasota County Public Schools. At the beginning of our Differentiated Instruction learning process, Mr. Earley was Principal of Taylor Ranch School. Through his encouragement, Mrs. Kelly Ellington, along with key staff members, pursued the largest grant ever awarded to Taylor Ranch School. The rest, as they say, is history. Taylor Ranch School was awarded a five-year grant to explore differentiation in the classroom. Through Mr. Earley’s vision for Taylor Ranch, “…a school unlike any other,” this grant became a reality.

Of course, the opportunity wouldn’t have been possible if not for the grant funded by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice (GCCFV). Two individuals in particular lent us aide and guidance throughout the process. First, Mr. Mike Bigner, was a catalyst for the Strategic Grantmaking in Education Initiative. His interest and encouragement gave us the confidence necessary to see our dreams realized. The other guide was Ms. Robin Nowling. Ms. Nowling’s gentle support and encouragement helped us put into words and actions the ideas that were beforehand elusive. Through the five-year grant funds, the teachers at Taylor Ranch School have embarked on an exciting journey of exploration and reflection related to best practices for promoting higher student achievement.

Without the assistance and involvement of the teachers at Taylor Ranch School, this handbook, differentiated instruction in the classroom, and the increased collegiality and heightened collaborative efforts would be virtually nonexistent. Thankfully, the teachers have made a strong commitment to the development of differentiated practices in the classroom.

In fact, during the second year of our journey a leadership team for Differentiated Instruction began emerging. The team has evolved and grown. All of these teachers, Amy Beechy, Tracey Cardenas, Lisa Cline, Jackie Detert, Sallie Dillon, Candy Duff, Lisa Figueroa, Michelle Giddens, Laura Jordan, Sharon Lindstrom, and Marilyn Meub, have demonstrated a tireless dedication towards promoting the importance of differentiation at Taylor Ranch School as well as networking with other schools within the community. To date, many of these teachers have hosted and presented two summer institutes for Sarasota County teachers on differentiated
instruction. There are other exemplary personnel involved in these institutes who we would like to thank: Bernadette Bennett, Patti Brustad, Donna Marquix-Cox, Dr. Suzanne Naiman, and Dr. Stephen Rushton.

Dr. Carol Tomlinson’s vision for differentiated instruction made such a significant impact on our journey towards differentiated instruction, she deserves additional mention and our appreciation. Dr. Tomlinson is really the foremost proponent of differentiated instruction and the author of many articles, books, and videos on this topic.

Another important advisor during the Taylor Ranch discovery process has been Dr. Catherine Brighton, a colleague of Tomlinson, whose thoughtful guidance enabled teachers to take risks and reach beyond the confines of the classroom and make connections between old instructional approaches and differentiated instruction. Her mentorship and coaching has proved invaluable.

We can never forget the support we have received from Sarasota County district personnel, who truly support differentiation in the classroom. Superintendent Dr. Norris’s NeXt Generation Learning so closely aligns with the components necessary for differentiation. Ms. Lori White, the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, was present even at the evolutionary stages of the differentiated instruction training taking place at Taylor Ranch School. Ms. White gave us the initial spark for the idea to consider a model of differentiation and continues to be involved and provide support. We also would like to thank Jennifer G. Smith and Pam Houfek for having lent full support to our program of differentiated instruction.

Finally, before you begin reading this handbook carefully constructed from our hearts, we would like to thank you. All educators who ensure that instruction fits the needs of the students deserve special recognition. Teaching is an art and a science. Making sure that instruction is carefully tailored to meet the needs of all students is the responsibility of everyone. Thank you for taking a moment to truly reflect on the significant positive impact you can make in student achievement.
Introduction to Differentiated Instruction

“All students can learn.” This statement has been a maxim of educators for many years. Differentiated instruction requires a clarification of this firmly held adage:

All students can learn when teachers plan instruction to address student readiness, interests, learning profiles and even affective needs.

Most teachers already believe they are responding to student differences. They’re right. As one teacher stated during a differentiated instruction training session, “This is the way I already teach! I am responding to student needs. When students don’t perform well, I provide remediation. Aren’t I already differentiating instruction?” The simple answer is “Yes, and No.” Teachers often provide remediation, or re-teaching of content areas when students don’t learn. In fact, some teachers even use data to determine which students need remediation. In some ways, providing remediation after a lesson is differentiation. On the other hand, truly responsive teaching involves careful proactive and often collaborative planning of meaningful and important learning opportunities. In other words, differentiated instruction is more anticipatory than reactive in nature. So really teachers should ask, “Am I planning for student differences or am I simply reacting to student failures?”

Differentiated instruction is responsive teaching. When planning for effective differentiated instruction, teachers use a backward lesson design approach, with careful analysis of student needs. While all students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do the same concepts or ideas, the students may “get there” a little differently. This type of approach requires pre-planning and pre-assessment.
Differentiated instruction happens when teachers collaboratively analyze student data, discuss options for learning and translate this information into classroom instruction. There is no manual to follow for providing differentiated instruction and this is not a “one size fits all” approach. In fact, differentiated instruction requires ongoing reflective practice and collaborative efforts in order to truly be implemented successfully. In addition, educators must develop a heightened awareness of the fact that students differ as learners and have varying academic needs. Differentiated instruction provides for these needs: challenge, success, connection, and fit.

There is more to the idea that “all students can learn” than just the obvious. There is no doubt that students vary greatly in readiness and learning styles. Further, we know students come from many different backgrounds and have unique interests. Educators need to learn to consciously prepare for these differences and give students opportunities to learn the first time around. This attention to student differences must be rooted in a solid curriculum and an environment of mutual respect, safety, and emphasis on individual growth as well as shared responsibility for learning.

In this handbook, we have provided information on curriculum and instructional components of differentiation. In the “Nuts and Bolts” section you will find information on: lesson design, diversity, literacy, strategies, assessment and collaborative planning.

We have also included our story, Taylor Ranch School’s six-year exploration of differentiated instruction. This section will be of particular interest to school leaders interested in implementing a program of differentiated instruction. Finally, this handbook is designed to promote reflection on the part of the reader. Please take time to reflect at the end of each section. You will notice that we left some open-ended sentences and places for notes in order to help guide your reflective process. As you engage in this reflection, please remember, differentiated instruction is not a “cookie cutter” approach to teaching. Differentiated instruction involves the artistry of reflective practice as related to the following ideas put forth by Tracey Hall, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, NCAC:

Not all students are alike. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning so that students have multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. The model of differentiated instruction requires
teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjusting the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum. Classroom teaching is a blend of whole-class, group and individual instruction. Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms.

Dr. Hall also states, “To differentiate instruction is to recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, and interests, and to react responsively. Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process.”

We believe in the positive impact of a strong differentiated instruction program. This kind of a program works to improve all students' chances for success. We hope you believe it too. Differentiated instruction is the promise of stronger bridges for students to cross over to success in school.

Notes:
Principles & Philosophy of Differentiated Instruction

There’s a simple logic to differentiated instruction. Students differ. Hence instruction must differ. The teacher must gauge how much or how little to differentiate instruction based on student readiness, interest and learning profiles. In order to illustrate this most fundamental principle, we have included several examples so that you can reflect on how differentiation makes such a significant impact on student learning potential and maximizes academic achievement for all students.

There is little doubt that differentiation provides students with the full benefit of individual learning potential. In fact, a teacher able to recognize the unique needs of the students is better equipped to properly plan and implement a quality instructional program. One of the most important and easily recognized areas in which teachers should differentiate is readiness. The following is an example from a first grade classroom:

The teacher is planning for a unit of instruction on “time.” After conducting a pre-assessment to gauge prior knowledge, she realizes that none of the students have the faintest idea of how to tell time, much less recognize a clock. At the beginning of this unit, the teacher does not differentiate the lesson at all and plans for whole group class instruction. As she begins to implement the unit, she continually conducts formative assessments in order to determine mastery. As the unit unfolds, the teacher examines the formative evaluation data and revises and changes instruction to meet the needs of students at various readiness levels. Some students grasped quickly the concept of time to the hour and are already working on time to the half hour, while others need to continue to focus on time to the hour, and a few still need to identify where the hands are located on the clock.
The teacher must not only revise instruction, but also systematically plan for instruction, based on the ongoing assessment collected at the beginning, during and at the end of instruction. Learning occurs when the instruction is geared at the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). In simpler terms, instructional materials and content need to be just a bit above an individual’s readiness level in order to maximize growth. The fact is, students not challenged sufficiently will be bored, whereas students overwhelmed with the level of difficulty will be frustrated. Either way, these students will shut down both mentally and even in some cases, physically. Is there any stronger way of illustrating the need for differentiated instruction than these simple facts related to student readiness?

The ongoing assessment piece of differentiation is not confined to readiness. The teacher must tap into student interest if the teacher wants to motivate students. Interests must be tapped. Motivation is an interesting aspect of the human condition. Teachers have witnessed amazing results through the years when student interests have been tapped. Time and again, we hear examples of students from a low socio-economic background barely surviving an inner-city school of questionable merit, only to be inspired by the right teacher who motivates the students to reach beyond the confines of the school walls. These examples have everything to do with the fact that these teachers have found a way to tap into student interests in order to further maximize student learning potential. Here is another example:

A second grade teacher notices one of her students reading a book, two or three levels above the students’ readiness level. The student is determined to read the book because the content is so interesting. The student perseveres and is finally able to get through the text and achieve comprehension.

On the other hand, have you ever been asked to read an instructional manual on some piece of equipment only to toss the manual aside in frustration or anger or sheer inability to focus on the directions? More than likely, the manual was written two or three levels below your actual reading level, but your interest level was just not strong enough to support sticking with the manual. Interest plays a significant role in student achievement and must be planned for accordingly. This is not to say that teachers should avoid topics students are not interested in completely and only present the material in a way that matches student interest.
Interest areas include, but are not limited to: what students want to learn, what students like to do, and ways students prefer to demonstrate knowledge.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher constantly gathers information about the students through a variety of assessment tools. This assessment data may have to do with readiness or interest. In addition, the teacher will determine learning profile in order to understand student preference on how to work towards learning goals and objectives. All of these forms of assessment are ongoing and formative. The teacher uses this data to reflectively plan engaging activities aligned with the state and district standards and based on student needs.

This reflective approach to planning highlights one of the differences between a “traditional” classroom and a classroom in which the teacher differentiates instruction. A traditional classroom may also have engaging activities aligned with the standards, but a differentiated classroom gives students options on how to access the material and demonstrate mastery.

Another important aspect regarding the rationale for differentiating instruction involves efficiency. How much time does a student have to master a particular skill or concept in the classroom today? The school day is packed with curriculum to be taught. If every student must master the goals as outlined by the state and the district and every student is at different places in terms of readiness, interest and learning profile, then the teacher must allow students to work at a pace that works to ensure higher academic achievement. The following is a dramatic example of how differentiation supports student achievement.

A fourth grade student speaks little to no English. The teacher is requiring students to demonstrate knowledge on a topic covered extensively in class. The student learned a great deal through some of the activities and filmstrips and seems fairly confident about the topic. In fact, the teacher provided the student with related materials in the students’ primary language. The teacher has selected essay questions as way of evaluating student mastery. Upon reflection, the teacher realizes that in order to match this students’ learning profile, this student should be allowed to demonstrate knowledge through pictures, drama or even written response in the primary language.
This type of flexibility does not need to be the choice for every lesson, but if efficiency in learning is the goal, differentiating by learning profile makes sense.

Simply put, differentiating instruction means being responsive. To be more accurate, it means planning to be responsive. As educators, we pay attention to “who” it is we teach. This means we take into account learner’s readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. Educators think about how to motivate students to learn. We recognize these differences and because we have a desire to respond to them, we differentiate instruction.

Notes:
What IS and ISN'T Differentiated Instruction

Simply stated differentiated instruction IS responsive teaching. It involves the recognition and articulation of student differences as well as the commitment to plan for these differences (Tomlinson, 2000). In other words, to differentiate instruction requires that educators believe and accept that students have a range of needs and interests, that they learn in various ways, and that they come from many different backgrounds. Secondly, if educators are to differentiate instruction effectively, they must articulate and collaborate with other professionals about these differences and find researched best practices that will provide a response to these differences. Finally, and very importantly, differentiating instruction includes proactively planning for these differences; NOT waiting for them and then reacting.

There is nothing so strange and new about admitting that the 20 or so students in front of us on any given day are different. However, teachers purposefully planning to do something specific about student differences, in order to make learning invitational for all learners and to maximize growth for all learners, may be quite new to some educators. The goal of differentiation should be to provide instruction that will match as many learners as possible and as often as possible in order to maximize student growth, academically, mentally, socially, and emotionally.

Differentiation is NOT individualized instruction. With differentiation, teachers look for patterns, offer options, and maintain flexible grouping arrangements in order to tailor instruction. Providing 20, 25, or 30 individual plans for all subjects each day is an impossible feat. In fact, in exceptional student education, the classroom teacher is often required to individualize instruction for each student in the classroom. This is why self-contained special education classes are kept small (or should be). The special education teacher and aide are required to individualize instruction based on their students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s).
On the other hand, in any given classroom, differentiating instruction is an educator’s response to the various types of learners in the classroom. There will be some students who learn better alone, others with a partner, and still others on a team. A teacher who differentiates instruction will provide a variety of settings in the learning environment. Further, a teacher who differentiates will recognize that some students prefer showing what they know in a creative way, while others prefer a more straightforward way, and still others an analytical way. In these classrooms, the teacher will allow students to choose from a variety of projects to show their mastery of a concept.

However, differentiated instruction is **NOT** only providing choices. In an effective differentiated classroom, the teacher will occasionally allow students to choose while at other times she will make the choice for students. In fact, truly effective teachers will sometimes require the student to do an assignment that would have been the child’s last choice! This all depends on the purpose for learning.

Effective differentiation means doing whatever it takes to help students gain access to the material to be learned. Some students may need scaffolding or more time, while others need to be probed to go deeper into a concept. Please remember that differentiated instruction is **NOT** about giving less important or lower order work to the struggling students while assigning exciting, interesting, higher order material to the advanced students. A teacher differentiating instruction will provide challenging, respectful work at the readiness level of all students. Therefore, a teacher must really know her students. This happens through ongoing evaluation, classroom community building, and open and honest communication with students, families, and colleagues.

A teacher who implements a quality differentiated instruction program will provide quality curriculum for all students and will have high expectations for all students. Quality differentiation starts with quality curriculum. The teacher must be clear on what she wants students to know, understand, and be able to do for a given unit of study. In addition, the teacher needs to determine and be clear on what mastery of the particular objectives will look like. Knowing the road map of instruction will help the teacher maintain focus and keep students moving forward to the goal. How kids get there can and should be differentiated.

One hallmark of differentiation, in fact a synonym for it, is flexible teaching. A responsive teacher will provide flexible settings, flexible assignments, and flexible grouping arrangements. Differentiated
instruction is NOT ability grouping or tracking within a school or within a classroom. Rather, differentiation is the complete antithesis of ability grouping and tracking.

Differentiation is NOT a recipe, but a way of teaching. There isn’t a neatly arranged notebook that a teacher can follow prescribed lessons on particular days in order to differentiate effectively. Our students’ minds are constantly thinking, changing, learning, and questioning. Therefore, a teacher never arrives at a point where her work of differentiating instruction is finished. Since differentiated instruction is a response to learners and since learners are always changing, instruction must continually be modified based on the information about the students’ changes.

Basically, if an educator believes that all learners differ and it’s important to respond to these differences, one must differentiate. One must respond to these differences allowing each student the opportunities, support, and challenge that will help him or her succeed.

Notes:
INTRODUCTION

When we use the term “nuts and bolts,” we imply that these are the parts that hold together the entire works. In fact, the “nuts and bolts” we have identified in this section are pieces of a larger mechanism that is the essential core purpose of differentiated instruction - high quality curriculum and instruction tailored to meet the needs of every learner.

Sarasota County Public Schools are riding at the forefront of the Education Reform Initiative. Dr. Norris’ NeXt Generation teaching competencies closely align with the principles and philosophy of a differentiated classroom. High quality curriculum and instruction tailored to meet the needs of every learner is more than a catch phrase or a passing fancy. The intent and purpose of each moment of classroom instruction must be carefully considered. This “nuts and bolts” section is intended to give you a peak into a few of the most important components of a differentiated classroom.

This section has been designed to further engrain the idea of purposeful instruction. We set up each subsection by outlining what you should know, understand, and be able to do. This outline will guide your reflective process.

Also remember that although the planning and production of this handbook required many hours, weeks and even months of effort, it is not complete. Our hope is that this handbook serves as a tool for reflection and will continually be revised and utilized by you and everyone who truly cares about the positive impact of a differentiated classroom.
**Lesson Design**

The teacher is responsible for student learning by carefully designing instruction to meet student needs in response to students' readiness, interests and learning profile. Any teacher embarking on the practice of educating students needs to ensure that the classroom instruction has been designed with the “end in mind.” In other words, teachers, acting as reflective practitioners, need to constantly analyze what students need to know, understand, and be able to do. Only after pinpointing what students need to know in order to achieve a broader understanding can a teacher plan what activities students need to do. This “backward design” planning is purposeful, engaging, and requires a great deal of ongoing assessment in order to be meaningful (Tomlinson & McTighe).

There are many ways that backward design planning makes a huge difference in student achievement, and foremost is the idea that teachers should **NOT teach curriculum! WHAT?** That’s right, you heard us correctly! Teachers **teach STUDENTS!** Teachers use the curriculum to develop instruction in response to students. The teacher examines and engages in reflective and collaborative practices based on a myriad of ongoing formative assessment tools in order to plan for instruction.

**Know**

Lesson Design must be:
- Important
- Scaffolded
- Demanding
- Engaging
- Focused

*Carol Tomlinson, Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom, (p59)*

**Understand**

Careful lesson design increases student achievement. Lesson design is key to the provision of quality curriculum and instruction. Lesson design is a reflective process that involves ongoing assessment allowing “students to acquire and integrate knowledge as they practice, review and apply it” (A Handbook for Classroom Instruction That Works, Marzano, et. al., 2001). Once teachers acknowledge the fact that instruction needs to be
designed carefully with a forethought to outcomes, students will reap greater academic benefits.

**Do**

**High Quality Curriculum and Instruction:**
- Focuses on the essential understandings and skills of the discipline that a professional would value
- Engages the learner mentally and affectively
- Provides choices and is clear in expectations
- Allows meaningful collaboration
- Focuses on products (something students make or do) that matter to students
- Connects with students’ lives and world
- Ensures instruction is real (to the student)
- Stretches the student
- Calls on students to use what they learn in interesting and important ways
- Involves the student in setting goals for their learning and assessing progress toward those goals

---Tomlinson ’99

**Reflecting on Practice**

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for lesson design, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
Diversity

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher recognizes and celebrates students' various readiness levels, differing learning profiles, and range of interests as a basis for planning. In addition, the teacher respects cultural and socio-economic differences while developing and implementing instruction.

There is no real need to expound ad infinitum on the virtues of understanding the diversity in the classroom. Educators must know that the students in the classroom are as diverse as snowflakes falling to the earth. What educators need to be sure to understand is that this diversity requires a response from the classroom teacher in the form of careful thought and planning on how to meet the needs of diversity in the classroom.

Know

o Readiness level indicates the level at which the student currently performs in any given area.

o The teacher should have a strong knowledge base of the learning profiles of the students. This knowledge can be developed through continuous assessment, anecdotal records, teacher observation, surveys and parent feedback.

o Tapping into student interest plays a key role into identifying best practices or approaches for instruction. Attitudinal surveys and choices for activities are two methods of determining student interest.

o Cultural and socio-economic differences are also factors to be considered. The knowledge of student background is key to planning meaningful and “real” lessons.

Understand

There are many aspects to a differentiated classroom and perhaps the most important is the recognition and acceptance of students' unique needs. The interest, readiness, learning profile, and cultural differences of the students in the classroom factor into planning for what students need to know, understand, and be able to do.
Do The Teacher

- Identifies student learning styles through the use of surveys, anecdotal records, home/school communication, and assessment tools
- Organizes data that reflects student readiness and plans instruction to meet the developmental and academic readiness of the students
- Explores student diversity, such as socio-economic level, cultural background
- Examines student learning styles and gears instructional strategies to promote student achievement by presenting materials and lessons using a multi-modality approach

Reflecting on Practice

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for diversity, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
Literacy

Sarasota County Public Schools and in fact, schools across the state and even the country are heralding the importance of student literacy. Through “No Child Left Behind” there has been a significant increase in the focus on a student’s ability to read and write. In fact, the ninety-minute reading block in Sarasota County School District has become an important part of the school day at the elementary level. Although teachers have always taught reading and writing in the classroom, the redoubled efforts of the county and country to impress the importance of student achievement related to these subject areas is beginning to resound in the classrooms. Teachers are spending more time planning appropriate literacy instruction through the use of guided reading, literacy centers and tiered lesson planning. And this is just to name a few strategies specific to literacy instruction.

Know

- Literacy is a huge instructional block in the course of any given day.
- Literacy instruction involves careful analysis of students’ developmental achievement levels in order to properly plan for instruction.
- Guided reading groups are a way to organize literacy instruction based on student readiness levels. Ongoing guided reading ensures students the opportunities to engage in instruction tailored to fit their stage of reading development.
- Literacy centers focus on specific skills students need to develop into strong readers. These centers are based on the assessment gathered not only during guided reading sessions, but through running records, anecdotal records, standardized tests, and other data collected by the classroom teacher.
- Tiered lesson planning for literacy development provides students with opportunities to engage in learning activities best suited for their particular needs.

Understand

Literacy is perhaps the biggest focus in schools nationwide just now. Students must be able to read and write in order to be successful in
school and in life. A differentiated classroom is the most well equipped to provide quality curriculum and instruction related to literacy.

**Do**

**The Teacher**
- Plans literacy stations based on students’ readiness levels and tiers stations to assist students with reaching highest potential related to literacy goals
- Develops flexible reading groups based on readiness using ongoing assessment to gauge student achievement levels
- Plans engaging instruction and furthers student motivation using student interest and learning styles

**Reflecting on Practice**

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for literacy, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
There are many strategies used by teachers to implement instruction. An effective teacher has a virtual cornucopia of tools to provide enriching, engaging, and dynamic lessons. In fact, differentiating classroom instruction utilizes these strategies to address the unique needs of learners. But a strategy is just that—a tool to enable students to achieve the overall understanding and goals as set forth in the lesson design. Simply utilizing a strategy because it seems new and fresh is just not good enough. A strategy is a means to an end. In a differentiated classroom, instructional strategies are selected based on the readiness, interests, and learning profiles of the students. In addition, these strategies correlate strongly with the ongoing assessment tools being utilized by the teacher. For example, a teacher who recognizes that the students are performing at various readiness levels, will use tiered lessons in order to ensure that all students can reach the same objective. Another example may be an instance in which the students demonstrate various levels of understanding on a particular topic. In this instance the teacher may develop a cooperative group activity to strengthen overall understanding prior to advancing the lesson.

**Know**

- There are multiple approaches to any given lesson. These approaches need to be based on ongoing formative assessment and an overall strong knowledge base of the readiness, interest and learning profiles of students.
- Tiered lesson planning is a particular strategy distinctive in planning for student differences. Tiered lessons involve the identification of certain objectives and then planning different activities in order for students at various readiness levels to reach the same goal.
- There are many strategies taught by Kagan, CRISS, McREL (i.e. cooperative groups, think-pair-share, RAFT, advanced organizers, etc.), and other Sarasota County initiatives that can be utilized in planning differentiated lessons.
- Each strategy must be implemented only after the outcome is clearly identified.
Understand

Strategies such as cooperative groups, think dots, cubing and other techniques are aides for instruction. These strategies are selected and utilized only after the teacher has engaged in careful analysis of students’ needs through ongoing assessment and only after the teacher has determined what students need to know, understand, and be able to do. The teacher who uses a particular instructional strategy for the sake of a “new approach” is missing key elements – the students’ needs tied with the learning objectives.

Do

The Teacher

- Considers the needs of the learner when choosing an instructional strategy
- Plans strategies after identifying what students need to know and understand
- Uses instructional strategies to motivate, promote learning gains, and inspire student thinking to engagement level, knowledge acquisition, practice, and review

Reflecting on Practice

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for strategies, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
Assessment

Assessment is the key to identifying where to begin planning for instruction, modifying instruction, and enriching instruction. After a teacher identifies what students should know and understand, the responsibility for planning what students must do becomes highly dependent on what students can or can’t already do! There is no sense in planning instruction for a particular body of knowledge if the students have already achieved mastery or worse still, do not have the necessary prerequisite skills. Through the use of ongoing assessment, the teacher is able to identify student readiness and plan for instruction appropriately. In addition the teacher should continually review student learning profiles and areas of interest in order to maximize learning gains and student motivation.

Know
  o Assessment is ongoing.
  o Assessment guides planning for instruction.
  o Assessment needs to be triangulated – includes multiple sources and means of collection.
  o Students can be involved in the selection of some assessment tools.
  o Feedback on assessment needs to be immediate and relevant.

Understand
  Assessment is more than a determination of mastery. Assessment is a key component of lesson design and is the key tool in determining direction for lesson design. Assessment in a differentiated classroom is most often a formative tool used to guide student learning and promote achievement. Without the use of ongoing assessment, lesson design is like a map without the route to the destination clearly marked.

Do
The Teacher
  o Continually plans, implements, and revises instruction based on ongoing assessment of student progress
Uses a variety of tools to gather assessment data
Involves students in choosing various assessment tools
Collects input from students about the success of instructional strategies and lessons
Triangulates the review of data

**Reflecting on Practice**

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for assessment, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
Gone are the days where every teacher is an island with little hope of anyone ever getting close enough to see what is going on. Teachers are encouraged and even expected to engage in ongoing dialogue with peers of how to best meet the needs of the learners in the classroom. In fact, the development of professional learning communities within schools has been a huge leap forward in terms of increasing student achievement (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker).

When teachers have opportunities to enter into open and honest dialogue of how to best meet the needs of the variety of learners in the classroom, students can only benefit. Through this collaborative dialogue, teachers identify what students already know as well as what they need to know, understand, and be able to do.

Further, this collaborative dialogue invests teachers in the idea that teachers must work interdependently to assist students with academic success. During this collaborative process, teachers analyze data, determine learning goals, plan for individual differences and design instruction. There are many ways teachers can engage in this process of identifying learning goals, planning for student differences and designing instruction.

One way for teachers to engage in the collaborative process is through curriculum mapping. Curriculum mapping is an initiative being pursued by Sarasota County Schools that so closely ties with the important reflective practice needed in order to ensure student success. This mapping process forces teachers to examine what has been taught, align what needs to be taught, and think about how to streamline a jam packed curriculum.

Another way for teachers to engage in collaboration is through the lesson design process. Teachers work interdependently to identify the enduring understandings of a particular concept. At this point, what students must know and do in order to achieve an overall understanding becomes clearer.
Teachers can collaborate for many reasons, but ensuring that the collaborative process is meaningful and in the best interests of students is tricky. We can simplify things a bit by stating: True collaborative efforts require a commitment on the part of those parties involved to dedicate the time towards planning for student differences.

**Know**
- Collaborative planning exposes teachers to multiple instructional strategies addressing the needs of a classroom of diverse learners.
- Collaborative planning engages teachers in open and honest dialogue related to best practices for increasing student achievement.
- Collaborative planning means that teachers work together to collect, review, analyze, and synthesize data related to student performance.
- Collaborative planning is key to raising the standards for the development of classroom instruction.

**Understand**
Collaborative planning goes beyond merely identifying upcoming units of study or discussing what field trip should be scheduled. Collaborative planning is purposeful and involves teachers in open and honest dialogue related to ongoing assessment and evaluation of student achievement. Collaboration takes place among teachers on the same grade level team as well as vertically, across grade level teams. Effective collaborative planning involves curriculum mapping and identifying the needs of students across grade levels as related to the curriculum. Collaborative planning is ongoing and tied to student needs.

**Do**

**The Teacher**
- Engages in dialogue with peers regarding student performance and achievement
- Utilizes data to collaboratively plan for student differences
- Works with team members interdependently to determine high quality curriculum and instruction
- Analyzes instructional techniques and strategies and implements best practices based on peer support and input
- Uses curriculum mapping as a tool to develop curriculum and instruction in vertical planning teams
Reflecting on Practice

Based on the know’s, understand’s, and do’s for collaborative planning, please complete the following sentence starters below.

I learned . . .

I still have questions about . . .

I am going to make the following changes in my practice . . .

I need the following support to make these changes . . .
OUR JOURNEY

A journey is often filled with adventure and new discovery. The Five Year Strategic Grant Initiative awarded to Taylor Ranch School, allowed the teachers and staff to discover the dramatic impact of differentiated instruction and led to lasting change within the school. In order to understand how this grant initiative offered by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice made such an impact, let me begin with a little history of my school, Taylor Ranch. My name is Kelly Ellington and I am the principal of the best school in the district. At least, that’s my opinion.

Taylor Ranch School was built in 1989-1990. Not only did Bob Earley, a forward thinking principal, open the school 16 years ago, he remained Taylor Ranch School's Principal until February 2004. Mr. Earley always expected collaboration and teaming among the faculty and staff, and consistently encouraged teachers to use student data when making instructional decisions. Because this way of thinking - this culture - was established and maintained, it was no strange thing to consider an innovative program of differentiated instruction.

Enter The Venice Foundation (now called Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice). This organization made a significant change in grant initiatives. This revolutionary approach to grant initiatives caused schools to carefully reflect on how to create sustained systemic change. Gone were the days of identifying something special for the classroom or school (i.e. a digital camera, class set of books, playground equipment, etc.) and composing a grant application to fit this desire. Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice (GCCFV) began its Strategic Grantmaking in Education (SGE) Initiatives requiring schools to think long term. If schools wanted to apply for the possible $30,000 a year for up to five years ($150,000 total), time and effort would have to go into planning and conducting needs assessments.

Principal Earley decided that Taylor Ranch School should participate in this innovative approach to improving instruction within schools. He invited grade level representatives and district personnel to
begin reflecting on a letter of intent for a GCCFV grant. We surveyed staff and analyzed student data to assess the needs of the school. We read current research on differentiated instruction and determined short-term and long-term goals and objectives. In addition, we examined the initiative as presented by Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice. The initiative was broken up into three categories, K-3 Literacy, Career Education, and Capacity Building. Out of these three categories, we selected “capacity building,” or results based professional development. Our aim was to build capacity among our qualified staff resulting in a cadre of teacher leaders. We believed this would guarantee the implemented change would be sustained.

Finally, in fall 2000, we submitted our Letter of Intent to the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice. After reading our preliminary proposal, the foundation invited us to submit a complete grant application. To begin the grant writing process, the principal invited several key personnel to discuss our vision for the next five years. This “Grant Writing Committee” collaborated with district personnel in order to learn about recent researched best practices. After many meetings and discussions about current research, we decided to focus our efforts on a program of differentiated instruction. In fact, we were quite fortunate to have a connection with differentiated instruction’s leading expert, Carol Tomlinson and other ASCD resources. We knew we would utilize her expertise to guide us in our journey.

The work continued. As we prepared this grant proposal, we realized that this initiative was different. We were doing more than just asking for money for “things.” We were rethinking how we do schooling. We recognized that our approximately 900 students come to us from various backgrounds, with different interests, unique learning styles, and particular needs. We also discovered that by collaboratively articulating and planning for these needs, we would be able to help students achieve greater success. The plan was to give teachers time to collaborate and plan for student differences. After many hours of reflective exchange, our group completed and submitted our grant proposal. Of course, as you might have guessed, our yearlong pursuit of a Strategic Grantmaking Initiative paid off. We were awarded $150,000 over a five-year period. Can you imagine the thrill and the excitement? This euphoria lasted and became coupled with the knowledge that we would have to get back to work immediately and pursue our dreams, made possible by this grant!
YEAR ONE

Our first year was a novel experience as we began training teachers in differentiated instruction. Prior to submitting our grant proposal, we had conducted many surveys and needs assessments. Upon reviewing the data, we discovered an amazing and exciting fact. All of the kindergarten and first grade team unanimously agreed to take part in the first year of this initiative! These 12 primary educators became our Year One Target Group. During the summer of the first year of our initiative (2001), this target group of teachers attended summer training for one week before school resumed. During this training, we did many team-building activities and analyzed research on collaboration. We had guest speakers, including Sarasota County teachers, share relative expertise. This target group also designed several interest surveys and learning profiles for the soon to be arriving students.

For the rest of Year One, substitute teachers were hired in order to provide one day a month for this first year’s target group to collaboratively analyze student data and plan differentiated lessons. On these monthly planning days, the target group utilized many resources related to differentiated instruction, including, but not limited to: ASCD videos, articles, books and websites. These Year One teachers collaboratively designed lessons to address the various learners in their classrooms. In order to involve the rest of the faculty, articles from these training days were shared. In addition, professional development was offered to the entire staff periodically throughout the year. One of the key professional development opportunities for the entire faculty was a whole day inservice with differentiated instruction consultant, Dr. Catherine Brighton.

Dr. Brighton, a colleague of Carol Tomlinson’s at the University of Virginia spent an entire day with our instructional staff. She led staff members through various activities and exercises to introduce us to the hallmarks of differentiated instruction. This was the beginning of a continuing partnership with Dr. Catherine Brighton and an exciting breakthrough for embedding the idea, within the Taylor Ranch staff, that differentiated instruction is an integral part of quality teaching.
The grant cycle directed our timeline of events to some degree, so in the spring 2002, our target group for Year Two was selected. In our original proposal we had planned to have teachers from grades two and three get involved in the second year, and then in the third year teachers from grades four and five would become the target group. However, at this point, we realized an adjustment needed to be made. There were many interested teachers from all grades and at the same time some hesitant teachers in grades two and three. So with the foundation’s blessing, we revised our plan and selected ten teachers from various grade levels to participate as the Year Two target group. Advantageously, during the summer 2002, Carol Tomlinson came to Tampa, FL for a weeklong academy on differentiated instruction. Five of the teachers from Year Two target group attended this institute.

These five teachers became a cadre of leaders for the following years. During the summer workweek for our Year Two target group, these five teacher leaders shared their newly acquired knowledge and understanding. Substitutes were provided so that the Year Two target group could meet monthly for planning days. Since the Year Two target group included teachers from all grade levels, articulation regarding curriculum and instruction began to really get rolling. Teachers in grades kindergarten through five were beginning to more carefully examine student data and assess needs in order to develop instruction.

As in Year One, Dr. Brighton visited to consult with the faculty. During this visit, schedules were arranged so that grade level teams could work with Dr. Brighton. She served as consultant during these periods of time. Emphasis was put on designing lessons based on what students should know, understand, and be able to do. Student data was analyzed to determine which parts of lessons should be differentiated. The time to collaboratively discuss and plan for student differences was invaluable.

Further, the evolving leadership cadre of teachers began to provide professional development to all instructional staff. Topics included backward lesson design, tiered assignments, assessment, and the importance of identifying and planning for student learning styles. From the very start of the training, efforts were consistently put forth to include and involve the entire staff.
YEAR THREE

At the beginning of Year Three, I had the good fortune to attend an ASCD conference in Chicago featuring Carol Tomlinson. This conference experience broadened my knowledge related to the training approach that had previously taken place. Networking with Carol Tomlinson and meeting with teams of teachers from schools across the nation led to a deeper understanding of how to create and sustain this kind of change in schools.

The target group selected for Year Three, again represented teachers from all grade levels. Participation up to this point was still not compulsory. We had plenty of individuals wanting to be a part of this valuable experience. In fact, the review of participants from the first two years in addition to the third year’s group led to a landmark discovery. Two-thirds of classroom teachers at Taylor Ranch had the opportunity to participate in the differentiated instruction training. Hence, the majority of our faculty was moving steadily along the path to differentiated instruction. As the Year Three target group met on planning days, newer publications from ASCD and Carol Tomlinson were studied and considered. Teachers collaboratively designed lessons based on standards and differentiated the lessons based on student data.

Dr. Catherine Brighton returned during Year Three and visited for three consecutive days. This extended visit allowed Dr. Brighton to better get to know our faculty and school community. She met with grade level teams, our Exceptional Student Education (ESE) team, and our Differentiated Instruction Leadership Team. Important work began on a rubric that would help staff members evaluate performance both individually and as a school. Teachers were asked to reflect on individual instructional practices and identify ways these practices matched up with the continuum of progress presented in our differentiated instruction rubric.

This differentiated instruction rubric helped teachers identify their own areas of strength and concerns so they could then choose specific professional development sessions offered. I carefully reviewed the data acquired from the rubric and discovered that, in essence, our teachers resembled a mixed readiness group of students, all at different places in the learning process. This realization was so powerful that, as a result, the differentiated instruction training occurring at our school underwent a dramatic change. Professional development needed to be differentiated. Teachers needed to begin making more choices regarding which aspect of training would be most beneficial to individual instructional growth.
Other teachers needed more guidance and specific direction on which training to attend. Year Four would include time and opportunity for both individual and whole group discovery and exploration of differentiated instruction techniques, strategies and philosophies. This was a daunting task, and with the help of some key staff members, we formulated ideas for the following year.

**YEAR FOUR**

Year Four begins! Thankfully, there were some district-wide initiatives that occurred that supported our efforts for the past three years. The new Superintendent shared our views regarding the importance of collaboration and built into the teachers' contract an extra thirty hours of training for teachers. This “thirty-hour plan” was instrumental in allowing our vision of “differentiated” training to become a reality. I began to work with key staff members to formulate a plan to ensure that the entire school was on board for the continuation of our journey.

In addition, the summer before school started three members of the faculty had the privilege of attending the weeklong Summer Institute on Academic Diversity (SIAD) at The University of Virginia. Each day of this 40-hour institute began with two to three hours of instruction by Carol Tomlinson. The three faculty members who attended SIAD developed differentiated instruction training for instructional staff during Year Four. This training was specific to the various needs of staff members. The knowledge the teachers attained at the SIAD conference was effectively transferred to staff members through this personalized approach.

Another significant change occurred in Year Four. One fourth of our teachers were new to Taylor Ranch School and to differentiation due to class size reduction and typical attrition. In order to ensure the entire staff was truly committed to the importance of differentiated instruction, all teachers who had not previously been part of a target group along with all new teachers to Taylor Ranch School became the Year Four target group. I made sure that our plan for Year Four also included “A Renewal Day” for the entire faculty. This review or “renewal” of differentiated instruction occurred on the first professional day of the school year and set the stage for Year Four. This was important in demonstrating that differentiated instruction is a way of learning and teaching at Taylor Ranch School.
Planning days looked different during this year because of the large number of teachers being trained. Substitutes were hired to cover classrooms for one half of the school day. Teams of primary teachers learned about differentiated instruction and collaboratively planned for the first three hours of each planning day and intermediate teachers met during the last three hours of the day. This occurred six times during the year. In addition, whole grade level teams, now consisting of Year One, Two, Three and Four teachers met for half day planning sessions four times during the year. The opportunities for whole faculty training on professional days as well as our 30-Hour Professional Development Plan made some of the most profound impacts on school culture and climate related to differentiated instruction.

Many other exciting things happened during Year Four. The entire teaching staff participated in a book study of Carol Tomlinson’s Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom. Teachers from other schools visited Taylor Ranch School to observe our teachers differentiating instruction, and some of these teachers even attended our planning days with consultant, Dr. Catherine Brighton, who again returned for three days.

Also important to note is that during these four years other developments took place and connected to this initiative making it richer and more sustainable. For example, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar and listen to Jay McTighe, coauthor of Understanding by Design. McTighe emphasizes a meaningful way of designing lessons with the end in mind. This punctuated our previous discussions related to the implementation of differentiated instruction and contributed to a higher level of learning. In addition, the 30-Hour Professional Development Plan outlined by the district provided structure for accomplishing our goals.

These training structures began spilling over into other structures within our school. As the staff began identifying the positive impact of using data to drive instruction, structures began to change. For example, teachers gained a better understanding of incoming students through a summer assessment of incoming kindergartners coupled with weekend workshop for incoming kindergartners and their families. As a result, kindergarten teachers were more equipped to start instruction based on the students’ readiness level as opposed to spending weeks finding out where to begin. This structural change is lasting and one of many.
YEAR FIVE

It’s peculiar; I never thought at the beginning of this process our journey would have taken the staff so far. I really admire the fact that so many teachers have been willing to submit to many hours of hard work and training without significant “arm twisting” or “hand holding.” This dedication on the part of my staff has really made a lasting impression on me. I am proud of my staff and the fact the teachers have become so knowledgeable in a relatively short amount of time. Even though the grant opportunity was scheduled to end after five years, I had no doubts this process was long from being over.

During Year Five Taylor Ranch School continued various forms of professional development for our faculty and broadened the scope of our experience with differentiated instruction and its implementation in the classroom. We made real efforts to incorporate curriculum mapping and lesson design in our training opportunities during Year Five.

Dr. Brighton visited our school once again as a consultant and spent time with us via e-mail and over the phone. Staff members continued to review current literature and other publications on differentiated instruction. We made daily decisions that align with the philosophy of differentiated instruction. This initiative has truly changed the way we think about teaching and learning.

Year Five also led to the continual evolution of our Leadership Team consisting of ten teachers from all grade levels. This leadership team embarked on a mission to promote what we had learned within and without our school district. The Leadership Team including administrative staff shared knowledge related to differentiated instruction with other educators within the Sarasota County School District. We provided our first four-day summer institute for Sarasota County’s elementary teachers in June 2006, at the close of Year Five. Our goal was to help teachers balance and connect all the research based teaching and learning strategies that we know work in the classroom. Our hope was that this institute would be another beginning to continue articulation about student differences and collaboration among teachers district wide.
At the close of our five year grant cycle, we received wonderful news. The Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice invited us to apply for funds to support a sixth year of implementation. Happily, we received this grant award.

YEAR SIX

During Year Six, we once again provided planning days for teachers to collaboratively develop differentiated units. We also incorporated time for teachers to coach one another. This involved teachers observing one another and then having follow-up conferences. Grade levels had planning days to work on backward lesson design and training for our 30-Hour Professional Development Plan was designed to sustain the work we have done thus far with differentiation.

In the early part of the year, seven of our instructional staff participated in facilitator’s training and subsequently trained teachers from several Sarasota County elementary schools during Year Six. Also, several fifth grade teachers collaborated with sixth grade teachers from the middle school in an effort to vertically articulate curriculum and instruction goals.

We were fortunate to be visited by two expert consultants in differentiated instruction during Year Six. Dr. Catherine Brighton returned and her colleague, Dr. Holly Hertberg-Davis, also visited Taylor Ranch School. A full day of training was provided by these two consultants for the entire faculty on the professional day in March.

We are now finishing Year Six and ensuring that our beliefs in the value of differentiated instruction align with Sarasota County’s NeXt Generation Teaching competencies. Taylor Ranch School has a “jump start” on preparing teachers to meet the expectations as outlined by the superintendent and the county in terms of being highly trained and fully equipped to meet the needs of all learners. By the time this revised version of our handbook is published, we will be involved in our second summer institute for county teachers. This time around, middle school and high school teachers from various schools in the district will be joining us.
We know differentiated instruction increases student achievement and success. We want everyone else to know it too. We truly wish you the best in your personal discovery process.

Every journey has a beginning. Ours will hopefully never end. We are anxious to make each new discovery as we continue to examine quality teaching and learning.

Notes:
Lessons Learned

Differentiated instruction is not necessarily a “new” concept for many teachers. What is new is the idea that teachers have the responsibility to carefully design instruction not only according to state and district guidelines but also aligned with the guidelines as set forth by student differences. Teachers must engage in the reflective process and be participants in ongoing open and honest dialogue about what students must know, understand, and be able to do. This collaborative dialogue must include a careful examination of assessment data combined with thoughtful analysis regarding the readiness, interest and learning styles of students. This is the biggest lesson anyone in education should learn.

As we forayed into the depths of the true meaning of differentiation, we learned quite a bit about ourselves too. We realized that differentiated instruction in the classroom is not a simple strategy or something you might find in a “teacher’s helper” book. Differentiated instruction is a way of designing instruction tailored to meet the needs of a variety of students in the classroom.

We also realized that we were being consumed by a drive to differentiate for student needs to the extent that we were differentiating just to differentiate. Not everything in the classroom needs to be differentiated and every student does not need an individualized education plan. In fact, groups should be flexible, students should have opportunities to be involved in the construction of lesson plans and also have part in the evaluation process. The teacher must use data to drive instruction. The simple fact remains that sometimes, every student does need to do the same activity. This is okay, as long as the teacher has used data to determine this fact.
In addition, we realized that although many teachers at Taylor Ranch School have become somewhat of “experts” at differentiating instruction, we all have a lot of room to grow. That part we knew already – the idea that all of us have room to grow. The part we were surprised about was the fact that differentiating instruction allows us to feel validated in the process. For example, one day we were working together as a school, planning how to implement a tiered lesson. A teacher raised her hand and shared a classroom experience in which the tiered lesson did not go as she thought. The group shared similar stories and offered suggestions and that teacher felt validated and refreshed. The practice of differentiating for instruction is a reflective practice combining the art of teaching with the science of data.

The final big lesson we learned is the fact that differentiating instruction is not a choice, or a strategy or a tool. Differentiated instruction is an approach to instruction that embraces the uniqueness of the individual while promoting the possibilities for the future. As we continue to grow in our practice, we hope to expand our knowledge and increase our ability to plan for student differences. This is a process, one worth pursuing.

Notes:
Summary “In a Nutshell”

A differentiated classroom is a safe environment where students can engage in the learning process with the promise of ultimate academic success and achievement. Differentiated instruction is purposeful, respectful, high quality curriculum and instruction, designed to meet student needs. Planning for student differences is a core component of differentiated instruction. Ensuring the success of all students through planning, reflection and data analysis is key.

Society demands students to be able to synthesize, analyze, and apply higher level thinking skills; therefore, schools have an even greater responsibility to prepare students to deal with the changing face of the workforce. Preparing students for the future by ensuring that all students make at least one year’s growth each school year is a crucial, if not essential responsibility of everyone in the education profession. Differentiating instruction in order to fulfill the responsibility of ensuring students make a year’s growth is the fastest, most effective practice in education today. It just makes sense.

In fact, anyone outside of the education profession easily and quickly identifies the necessity to analyze student growth and achievement and design instruction based on this data. You would think that this necessity is fairly obvious! If students have not mastered certain concepts, how can they possibly be ready to move on? You certainly wouldn’t expect a firefighter to go put out a fire if you haven’t taught him to carry a hose. Nor would you want a chef to prepare you a meal if she doesn’t know basic measuring units. So why on earth would you expect a student to master two-digit addition if he doesn’t understand the concept of place value?

This seems simple enough, but surprisingly enough many educators are so determined to “get through” the curriculum that they neglect the more important challenge of “getting through” to the students. Differentiated instruction challenges teachers to truly examine the county
curriculum and the mandates from the state and further define what it that students should know, understand, and be able to do. This reflective process encourages teachers to engage in professional learning communities, open dialogue with peers and support staff, reflect on planning, and utilize ongoing data analysis related to student growth. Curriculum mapping, lesson design, data analysis, collaborative planning, literacy instruction, and respecting student diversity are all tools of a teacher proficient in differentiated instruction.

If all of this is not enough to convince an educator of the importance of differentiated instruction perhaps the following stories will provide further insight to the dramatic impact that differentiation can make in a classroom.

Once there was a classroom of students where the teacher passionately imparted all the knowledge and wisdom of her years of experience combined with the rigorous requirements of an over-packed curriculum. There was no question that this teacher truly cared for her students and wanted desperately for each and every student to succeed. In the end, she had difficulty understanding why five of her students failed the FCAT and a couple of the top students in her class began to demonstrate apathy towards schoolwork and even acted out behaviorally. Some of the other students seemed to enjoy the schoolwork that she meted out with equal fervor and still others neglected to demonstrate consistent effort towards quality work. This teacher questioned the parenting skills of the families, she bemoaned the lack of interest and caring of students in a media drenched society and rallied against the influence of the television. Through all of her cries, she never thought about the fact that although she intended to treat all students with an even hand, and give all students the opportunity to do the same work, she was really setting her students up for failure, frustration and even disillusionment. In the end, the teacher was discouraged, frustrated and disillusioned.

Another teacher looked around in her classroom and carefully reflected on the diverse backgrounds of each student. She considered learning styles, interest and readiness. She thought about each student’s socio economic status and cultural backgrounds. She examined the expectations outlined by the county curriculum guide and outlined what students should know, understand, and be able to do for each area of instruction and continually engaged in ongoing dialogue about best practices for instruction. She used curriculum mapping to guide her reflective process and designed lessons beginning with the end result in mind. In addition, she analyzed student data and modified instruction to
meet the needs of every learner. She engaged in respectful dialogue with her students and continually re-evaluated where students were in the learning process. Many of her lessons were tiered so that students were challenged according to readiness, learning style or interest. In fact, throughout the day she planned instruction to motivate, challenge and inspire student learning. Her students were well prepared to pass the FCAT and whatever other academic challenges they faced. Her top students made a year’s growth, as did the rest of her class. She had minimal behavior problems as her students were motivated, inspired, and determined to be successful. In the end, this teacher was further motivated, inspired and determined to reach for even greater heights the next year.

These two stories are somewhat fictional, but based on actual classrooms. In fact, as you were reading, you may have found certain pieces of each story present in your own classroom. We are not saying that an educator needs to be perfect and plan nine billion separate lessons during the course of any given day. What we are saying is that planning meaningful instruction means more than pulling a file out and shouting, “How cute! Let’s do BATS next. How fun!”

Really thinking about the positive impact an educator can make on the future means more than pulling out “cute” activities or doing some activity to meet a curriculum guide objective. We are preparing students for the future. What do we want them to know and understand when they leave our classroom? Is it that bats are interesting and fly at night – or that bats play an important role in the overall ecosystem and we have a responsibility towards maintaining that ecosystem as well? What do we want students to know and understand? How can we make sure that EVERY student makes at least a year’s growth, no matter where they are in relationship to the grade level objectives? What are the best practices to guide instruction?

Are educators asking these questions?

One more thing, this handbook is a tool to engage educators in a reflective process. In no way do the authors purport themselves to be experts, with all the answers to all the questions. We are just as much engaged in the learning process as our peers. We know what works for students because we engage in the reflective process and read the latest research related to best practice. We passionately pursue excellence and are willing to try as many strategies as we can to ensure the students in our care master required goals to achieve academic, social, and emotional success in school. We realize that teaching is more than the teacher
acting as a “sage on stage” or handing out the same assignments to every student giving everyone equal opportunity to fail. We know that teachers have the responsibility to give everyone the opportunity to succeed, and differentiation is the key to this responsibility.

There is no greater focus or purpose than preparing students for the future. There is no better time to get started than the present. Whatever type of educator you are, if you are a new teacher, experienced, or in between, a principal, a support staff member or just someone who generally believes in the positive impact one person can make on the lives of children, know this: We have a responsibility to prepare students for whatever the future may hold, and just caring isn’t enough, we have to put caring into practice and make it happen. The favorite saying of teachers, “I want to make a difference,” isn’t enough, not nearly. How are you going to make a difference? What are you going to do?

When you figure it out, let us know. We would love to add your thoughts to these pages. We want to share your vision as you share ours. The students need us. There is no such thing as a student who wants to fail. Let’s give every student an opportunity to be successful together. After all, we are in the business of educating students and preparing students for the future. Let’s work together interdependently to accomplish this vision.

Notes:
Resources


Kelly Ellington is principal of Taylor Ranch School in Venice, Florida. Before her tenure as principal, Mrs. Ellington served as assistant principal at Taylor Ranch School when she began work on the Differentiated Instruction Grant awarded by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice. In addition to her administrative roles, Mrs. Ellington was a classroom teacher with kindergarten through sixth grade certification. She was a classroom teacher for eleven years. She was Taylor Ranch School’s Teacher of the Year in 1996-1997.

Mrs. Ellington graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Education from the University of Cincinnati. She continued her education with a Master of Science in Educational Leadership at NOVA Southeastern University. She participated in Sarasota County’s Leadership Academy as well as the Preparing New Principals program. She continually looks for new ways to challenge the thinking of educators through her participation in various training seminars, including the University of Virginia’s annual Summer Institute on Differentiated Instruction (SIAD) and Best Practices Institute (BPI). In addition, she is the mentor for new and aspiring administrators and acts as a support for her staff members.

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Tracey Cardenas has been Team Leader for Kindergarten at Taylor Ranch School. She has been a classroom teacher for fifteen years, serving in all grades kindergarten through third. She also serves as a supervising mentor for interns and first year teachers. Mrs. Cardenas has been involved in the Differentiated Instruction training at Taylor Ranch School from the inception of the five-year grant cycle. In addition, she served as chairperson of the leadership team for Differentiated Instruction for the past year. She has presented at various in-service trainings, including providing training for teachers at other elementary schools in Sarasota County, and holds several certificates of achievement for learning accomplished practices such as “McREL Train the Trainer.” In July, 2007, she will be presenting at SIAD at the University of Virginia.

Mrs. Cardenas graduated from the University of Georgia with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, Early Childhood Development. She also holds a Master’s Degree in Education and New Professional Development from George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia. This unique program was a research based Master’s program designed to encourage teachers to engage in action research in the classroom and inspired Mrs. Cardenas to always pursue best classroom practices.

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