

FIRST RESPONSE



A Guide to Designing and Delivering
Classroom Interventions

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The content of this guide was also heavily informed by site visits to existing schools. Each of the following schools provided inspiring examples of effective intervention strategies in action:

Casa Grande High School, Petaluma, California

Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, Devens, Massachusetts

Noble High School, North Berwick, Maine

South Iredell High School, Statesville, North Carolina

INTRODUCTION

Why We Created this Guide

This guide was created to help school leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, and support specialists reflect on and improve academic interventions in the classroom. In many cases, schools use what could be termed “hit or miss” interventions—that is, interventions that are not informed by student data, applied consistently, or integrated with curricula and instruction. Unfortunately, hit-or-miss interventions allow students to slip through the cracks, and those who begin a course performing below grade level or well behind their peers are at risk of never catching up. This guide describes an alternative—and more equitable—approach: a collaborative professional culture that anticipates, prepares for, and responds to individual learning needs, that accelerates knowledge and skill acquisition, and that remains unwaveringly focused on ensuring college and career readiness for all students.

To provide personalized and responsive academic support, schools not only need a systemic intervention model, but they must also embrace the belief that every student can grow, improve, and succeed. They need to believe that students are motivated to learn and want to learn—even when their words or behaviors suggest otherwise. And schools need to recognize the value of collective responsibility and distributed leadership, since successful academic support requires much more than a single teacher working in isolation.

In many schools, the Response to Intervention model has helped structure and focus academic support. The three RTI tiers—classroom-based interventions (Tier 1), targeted group interventions (Tier 2), and intensive individualized interventions (Tier 3)—outline an escalating series of interventions that are based on the extent or severity of a student’s distinct learning needs. Nationally, schools generally invest more attention, resources, and staff time in Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, which are often delivered by specialists outside of a regular classroom setting. While effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are essential, experts estimate that 80–85 percent of students should be successful with only Tier 1 support. Experts have also documented that an overemphasis on the top two tiers can lead some schools to underprepare teachers and underserve students in the classroom. If schools embrace responsive, differentiated classroom instruction that is informed by student data and the ongoing monitoring of learning progress, they can significantly reduce the resources expended on Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Our hope is that this guide will help school leaders and faculties think more strategically about classroom interventions.

How to Use the Guide

First Response is designed to help districts and schools strengthen intervention programs and practices—specifically, their approach to delivering academic support in the classroom.

The guide includes several components:

- A glossary of critical intervention terms.
- Brief profiles of effective intervention programs and practices from four high schools.
- Three self-assessment rubrics that will help schools engage in small- and large-group discussions about classroom-based interventions.
- A selection of protocols that school leaders and facilitators can use to structure conversations and work sessions.
- A selection of best practices and recommendations for both teachers and school leaders.
- Planning templates that schools can use to map out assets, challenges, and action-plan priorities related to classroom-based interventions.
- A selection of useful resources, readings, and research.

The three best-practice sections (pages 4–14) are organized into the following subsections, each of which features a selection of recommendations:

INSTRUCTION

- Student-Centered Learning
- Teacher as First Responder
- Academic Conferencing
- What Leaders Can Do

DATA

- Formative Assessment
- Students + Data
- Red Flags
- What Leaders Can Do

CULTURE

- Professional Collaboration
- Communication + Coordination
- Autonomy + Innovation
- What Leaders Can Do

Instructions

STEP 1

Begin with the three self-assessment activities, which are designed to help faculties engage in a focused discussion about their existing intervention systems and support practices in the classroom. The suggested protocols can be used to stimulate thoughtful self-reflection and begin identifying areas in need of improvement, attention, or planning. Use the space provided in the accompanying worksheets (*Self-Assessment Notes*) to record important observations, insights, or reflections.

STEP 2

In teams, review and discuss the accompanying selections of recommendations and best practices in each of the three sections: *Instruction*, *Data*, and *Culture*. Compare the strategies with current approaches in your district or school, and identify where programs and practices either align or diverge. The accompanying school profiles will help you to consider the strategies in context.

STEP 3

Review the column entitled *What Leaders Can Do*, a selection of guidance and recommendations for school leaders overseeing interventions. This step is intended to get administrators, program directors, intervention coordinators, and teachers thinking about and discussing the leadership, communication, and coordination strategies needed to successfully monitor and support classroom-based interventions.

STEP 4

Use the accompanying worksheets to document effective and ineffective strategies, which will help you and your colleagues begin mapping out critical needs and priorities. In the *What's Working* and *What's Not Working* columns, record only existing strategies and practices related to classroom-based student support.

STEP 5

The *Priorities + Next Steps* column is where you can begin to record relevant action-plan priorities. Once your district, school, or team has completed the process, you should have a clear set of prioritized strategies and action steps that can be incorporated into a district or school action plan, or into the goals for your team or professional learning group.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

- 1 This guide is designed to strike a balance between breadth and specificity, and to be useful to educators in a wide variety of roles and school settings. For example, the term “classroom” is used throughout the tool, but the recommendations are applicable to any learning environment or context, not just traditional classrooms. In some cases, the recommendations may address practices that your school is already using.
- 2 The self-assessment and planning process outlined in the guide is not designed to be an evaluation of school performance or effectiveness—it’s simply intended to be a useful self-reflection and planning framework for structuring professional conversations and developing action plans related to classroom interventions and personalized academic support.
- 3 The three columns in the self-assessment activities—*Passive*, *Reactive*, and *Proactive*—provide general profiles of intervention systems at distinct stages of development. These descriptions are merely brief, representative illustrations, and schools will likely recognize elements of their practice in all three approaches. Users should avoid attempts to perfectly match their school to a specific stage—the purpose of the activity is to encourage faculties and teams to engage in the kind of frank, constructive, forward-looking discussions that move them from where they are to where they want to be.
- 4 The practices recommended throughout the guide are not checklists. They are examples of effective practice based on research, site visits, and interviews with practitioners, and they are intended to spark thoughtful conversations about improving interventions in the classroom. No two good schools need to look alike, and users of this guide may be just beginning to address classroom-based academic support, or they have mature, well-functioning intervention systems that they are trying to tune and improve. The guide is about sharing strong practice, not prescribing it.
- 5 Developing effective intervention systems and delivering personalized instruction requires the kind of specialized expertise, practice, and training that is beyond the scope of this guide. For this reason, the authors strongly encourage schools and faculties to research effective personalization strategies and interventions for their specific student populations.

GLOSSARY

Academic conferencing: A formalized process that teachers and advisors use with students to examine learning progress, set goals, and plan for success. Teachers conference with individuals about specific needs and with large groups about general instructional strategies. Students can also lead conferences with teachers, advisors, and parents, during which they articulate individual educational goals and aspirations, present work products, and reflect on learning progress.

Curriculum-based assessment: A common assessment used to gauge student progress toward the acquisition of expected skills and knowledge in a course. Teachers typically design the assessments in collaboration with colleagues, and data from curriculum-based assessments are used to modify instructional techniques or identify students for additional support.

Anchoring activities: Purposeful learning tasks, tied to academic content and standards, that are given to students at regular intervals, such as when a class begins or when students finish an assignment early. Anchoring activities—which may include tasks such as learning logs, vocabulary work, or portfolio management—allow classroom teachers to devote time and attention to individual students or groups of students who may need additional support.

Differentiated instruction: Instructional strategies used to personalize teaching and learning experiences in the classroom that are based on student learning needs and interests. Teachers differentiate instruction by offering students choice in content, processes, and products, and by using flexible grouping strategies.

Exhibition: A public event, or “demonstration of learning,” during which students present and explain their work and learning progress. Exhibitions typically follow long-term projects or research studies, and culminating exhibitions are often called “capstones.” In addition, parents, community members, and local experts are often invited to attend the exhibition and offer constructive feedback to students or assess the presented work using a rubric.

Flexible grouping: A differentiated instructional strategy in which teachers group students to achieve specific pedagogical outcomes. For example, teachers may group students by personal interests, learning needs, or individual choice, or they may group students to create opportunities for in-class support—for example, more accelerated students may be assigned a collaborative group project, while struggling students receive targeted instruction and coaching from the teacher.

Formative assessment: Both formal (quizzes, essay drafts) and informal (discussions, exit tickets) assessments that check for student understanding of expected skills and concepts. Formative assessments, which are often ungraded, are used primarily to adjust instruction and curriculum designs. If an assessment is used only to evaluate student performance, and not to improve teaching and learning, it is not a formative assessment.

Interventions: Modified or supplemental instruction that is used to improve learning outcomes for students who are underperforming, failing to meet standards, or struggling to grasp critical skills and knowledge. Interventions can be delivered in a wide variety of ways, including inside and outside the classroom, or individually and in small and large groups.

Personal learning plans: An academic-planning document created by students under the guidance of a teacher, advisor, or other trusted adult. Personal learning plans come in many forms, but they typically evolve over time and include individual educational aspirations and goals, as well as personal learning strengths and weaknesses, among other features. In general, personal learning plans help students be proactive about postsecondary planning and preparation, while also encouraging them to take ownership over their education.

Teacher as first responder: A philosophical and pedagogical stance in which teachers assume primary responsibility for delivering interventions in the classroom. Since teachers know student learning needs best, they are uniquely able to provide personalized, responsive, and timely interventions.

Scaffolding instruction: Instruction that delineates and stages learning expectations and activities to make the achievement of course standards more manageable for students. For example, teachers may ask students to perform discrete parts of a project before moving on, such as graphically organizing sources before writing a research paper.

Universal screening tool: Any standardized assessment instrument used to evaluate basic skills and knowledge, such as reading and mathematics, to determine if some students are likely to need additional support within or outside of the classroom. Some students might be assigned to Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, such as a reading lab or math tutorial, based on their screening scores and other evidence, including work samples and teacher recommendations. Teachers can also use diagnostic screening data to differentiate instruction for all students, not just those identified for additional support.

CASA GRANDE HIGH SCHOOL

PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA

Casa Grande High School serves approximately 1,800 students. The school has ninth- and tenth-grade interdisciplinary houses, as well as four college-and-career academies for grades eleven and twelve. Since 2008, school-wide scores on California's Academic Performance Index have risen by an average of 60 points, which includes a 120-point increase for English language learners and a more than 90-point increase for students with disabilities. Casa Grande has early release every Wednesday, during which department and academy teams discuss classroom instruction and interventions. As part of its early-warning system, the school uses watch lists to monitor learning needs, academic progress, and red flags, such as students who have a GPA below 2.0 or who have earned a D or F. During early-release time, teacher teams review watch lists and collaboratively determine intervention plans, including personalized strategies for individual students. This year, teachers are developing interdisciplinary projects, driven by student choice, to increase engagement in the classroom. "Kids learn by doing," says assistant principal Eric Backman. "We're working hard to show kids the real-world applications of what they learn."

Professional Collaboration

Casa Grande's Media, Marketing and Management (M³) cluster uses an integrated curriculum and standards-based instruction in multiple content areas. Teachers collaboratively plan interdisciplinary projects that incorporate student interests, and academic work is grounded in real-world experiences. M³ facilitator Chuck Wade shared examples of how the interdisciplinary, standards-based approach has reached individual students. One student who wouldn't write in a mainstream English classroom ended up writing more than required while creating a video game about the life of Huckleberry Finn. Algebra students who were having trouble grasping applied-math concepts, such as Cartesian coordinates and inequalities, demonstrated mastery of learning standards through a Pac-Man game. "The key thing," says Wade, "is to follow the goal of meeting the needs of individual students" and to use "teacher relationships with students to find out what excites them."

The tenth-grade Solstice House is using the theme of "change" in its interdisciplinary classrooms this year. In its Herbal Medicine



Making project, English students are creating a field guide to local herbs; history classes are studying hunter-gatherers and exploring the evolution of medicine over time; science classes are creating a cream made from locally collected herbs; and math classes are learning about ratios, proportions, conversions, and measurements while making the cream. Solstice House facilitator Kim Tay says that engaging, multidisciplinary projects create meaning for students and foster greater collegiality among teachers. "Common vision is key," says Tay, but "allow [teachers and teacher teams] to be different and work independently." When teams set their own priorities and create their own interdisciplinary units, it can increase motivation, inspiration, and originality—which in turn motivates, inspires, and engages students.

Interventions

The math department at Casa Grande is focused on building student-teacher relationships. In a content area that has not been known for making strong social-emotional connections with students, math teacher Melinda Maderious says that after-school "one-on-one time with students changes the dynamic in the classroom." The math department currently staffs an after-school math lab at a local elementary school that is located close to the homes of many English language learners in the school. By changing the location of their after-school support, the math department is working to serve more students. Maderious encourages teachers looking to create more equitable and responsive conditions inside their classrooms to visit other schools and continuously try out new approaches. "Have an idea and run with it," Maderious says. "Collaborate together even if you don't have a lot of resources or administrative support. Start with a little [project] that builds interest and momentum with other students and teachers."

Suggested Protocol Instruction Self-Assessment

Chalk Talk

Adapted from Hilton Smith and Marylyn Wentworth

Time: 30–45 minutes

Materials

Whiteboard, chalkboard, or poster paper; markers or chalk (one per participant)

Essential Question

Choose one of the following questions or write your own:

- How can we improve instruction to increase educational equity?
- How does our instructional practice support all students?
- To what extent are teachers at our school "first responders" in the classroom?

Process

- 1 The facilitator writes the essential question on the board.
- 2 Participants read the self-assessment rubric on the following page, keeping the essential question in mind. Participants should note sentences or phrases that are particularly striking to them.
- 3 Participants volunteer to silently write selected sentences, phrases, or concepts on the board or poster paper.
- 4 In writing, participants then silently expand upon the selections, pose questions, respond to ideas, or draw connections between concepts and comments.
- 5 The facilitator closes the writing portion of the Chalk Talk and invites the group to discuss what has been written. The following questions can be used as conversation guides:
 - What do you notice about what we wrote?
 - What new ideas or questions came up for you?
 - How do these comments address the essential question?
 - What next steps should we take?

Passive

- Classroom instruction consists mostly of students working independently or receiving direct instruction from the teacher. Students are given few or no choices over the content of lessons, the activities used to learn it, or how they demonstrate learning.
- Teachers keep grade books and report student performance using progress reports and averaged grades. Teachers direct students to seek out additional support outside of class time.
- Students tend to be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge. Curriculum and instruction are built on the assumption that all students progress at roughly the same rate. Teachers are either unsupported or unwilling to tailor instructional needs for individual students, and students are not actively invited to participate in decisions about their own educational progress.
- Teachers provide rubrics to students that explain the criteria that will be used to evaluate work and how students can meet course standards, but the rubrics are not discussed with students. Students do not generally use the rubrics for planning, self-assessment, or reflection, and some students complain that the rubrics are not clear or that they do not know how to use them to improve their work.
- Student learning activities generally emphasize retention, recall, and basic explanations. While teachers may set high expectations for the amount of work required to succeed in a course, they generally set much lower expectations for rigor, complexity, and sophistication in student work. Taxonomies of cognition such as Bloom's or Marzano's are not widely utilized to evaluate the cognitive engagement of lessons and instruction.
- Professional development focuses on the procedural steps teachers take when documenting interventions, and all teachers receive the same professional development opportunities, regardless of their experience, content area, or learning needs. There is little or no continuity in professional development from year to year, and no data or monitoring mechanisms are used to determine if the professional development program is leading to improved instruction.

Reactive

- Classroom instruction incorporates a few basic forms of differentiation, such as shifting between small groups, independent work, and whole-class instruction. Most learning activities remain uniform, and students are given a few choices over how they can demonstrate learning acquisition and progress.
- Teachers notify students once they have fallen behind and direct students to remediation opportunities outside of class time, such as tutoring services, learning labs, credit-recovery programs, and after-school sessions. Support strategies are rarely applied in daily classroom practice, and there is little communication among teachers and staff about what specific strategies have been most successful for students.
- Students are invited to discuss academic progress only after problems have arisen, and they are referred to outside-of-class support after traditional instructional methods have failed. Students consult with tutors or support specialists to create plans for improving their learning, but teachers only occasionally participate in these discussions.
- Teachers provide rubrics to students that explain the criteria that will be used to evaluate work and how students can meet course standards, and teachers discuss work with students using the rubric after it has been assessed. Some teachers use student self-assessments and peer assessments, but many teachers do not believe that self-assessment can improve student work.
- Teachers are aware of how to use cognitive taxonomies to differentiate instruction, but they are not regularly used to guide curriculum design and instruction. Only some students are given opportunities to engage in more rigorous learning activities and higher-order thinking. Teachers generally assume that students must master lower-level skills before they can tackle higher-order skills.
- Professional development is based on broad school-wide needs identified by data analyses, and teachers receive some general guidance related to differentiated instructional strategies. Administrators monitor classroom instruction, but they do not provide regular feedback to teachers on instructional quality. Professional development is evaluated by exit surveys and anecdotal information, but there is little evidence of changes in classroom practice or student learning.

Proactive

- Academic-performance records, scores on pre-assessments, and data from regularly administered formative assessments inform all curricula, instruction, and interventions, including differentiation and scaffolding strategies. Students are regularly given choice over the content, processes, and products of their learning.
- Teachers and students regularly discuss learning progress—both when students are struggling and when they are exceeding expectations. Students develop personal learning plans in collaboration with teachers, advisors, and counselors. Students are given multiple opportunities to practice skills and receive feedback from teachers before summative assessments are administered.
- Students are active participants in their own education and take ownership over learning outcomes. Teachers use learner profiles and formative assessments to catalog student learning assets and determine how to build on those strengths. Students are given options and choice in how they demonstrate mastery of course objectives.
- Teachers provide detailed rubrics and work exemplars to students, and they discuss the criteria for meeting course standards with all students, making sure they understand the criteria and course expectations. Students use the rubrics and work exemplars to guide their academic planning as they create, revise, and improve their work. Teachers regularly use self-assessments and peer assessments to facilitate student understanding.
- Student learning activities address the full range of cognitive skills, and all students are required to analyze, evaluate, and create content every day. Lower-order thinking skills are used to support higher-order tasks, and teachers treat cognitive taxonomies as a spectrum, not a hierarchy or ladder, to develop more sophisticated comprehension and promote deeper thinking about the content.
- Professional development addresses clearly articulated instructional goals that have been determined by a review of school data, teacher data, and other evidence related to student learning needs and performance. Professional development is differentiated based on content area, experience, and learning needs determined by student learning growth, classroom observations, and other data. Professional development is continuously evaluated to determine effectiveness.

Student-Centered Learning

- Invest time at the beginning of the school year to determine student assets and construct baseline learner profiles. Ask students to describe their college and career goals, their personal interests, and their strengths, challenges, and preferences as learners. Regularly reference the profiles with students when differentiating learning content, process, and products.
- Balance the presentation of content (direct instruction) with the creation of learning conditions that facilitate comprehension and skill acquisition for each unique learner (differentiated instruction). Use a variety of flexible strategies—whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, one-on-one support, academic conferencing—and monitor which strategies work best for particular students and classes.
- Be practical and realistic in the use of differentiation strategies. Balance low-preparation strategies—such as incorporating more student choice over learning content, processes, and products—with high-preparation strategies—such as learning contracts, personal learning plans, and group-inquiry projects. Set achievable goals and gain mastery over a specific practice before incorporating additional strategies.
- Engage and motivate students through interest-driven learning experiences, such as capstones, exhibitions, performances, and project-based, community-based, or service learning projects. Let students select topics of study, contribute to the design of projects, or determine how they will demonstrate learning achievement and progress.

Teacher as First Responder

- Adopt a "first responder" mindset in the classroom. Commit to facilitating the academic and personal growth of all students, and assume primary responsibility for developing and delivering personalized academic interventions in the classroom.
- See yourself as an advocate for all learners. Embrace the belief that every student can learn and succeed if they are given the right mix of instructional strategies, practice time, personalized interventions, and social-emotional support.
- Reduce your reliance on direct instruction, and become instead a "learning facilitator" or "coach" for students.
- Diagnose learning problems using evidence. If students are struggling, avoid assumptions or attributing problems to inherent character traits. Use formative assessments, one-on-one conversations with students, and discussions with support specialists to determine what's not working and why it's not working.
- Promote a "growth mindset" approach to learning in your classroom—for both your students' improvement as learners and your ability to help them learn. Share with students your own teaching goals and ask for their feedback to help you improve.

Academic Conferencing

- Make self-reflection a formal part of the curriculum—for both yourself and your students. Schedule time for regular check-ins with individual students, integrate whole-class discussion about learning activities, and use anonymous surveys to collect insights on each student's learning experience.
- Actively develop student self-advocacy skills. Help students recognize their own learning needs, foster a classroom culture that encourages students to speak up, develop a clear process for requesting support, and use stories about students their own age who successfully advocated for themselves.
- Use your academic-conferencing time to strengthen relationships with students. Ask questions, listen to their requests, and discuss personal interests and outside-of-class experiences. Use what you learn during academic conferences to enhance curricular relevance, increase student choice, and personalize instruction.
- Utilize personal learning plans to guide academic conferences, and connect short-term learning progress to long-term goals and aspirations. Help students document their learning goals, identify their own learning strengths and weaknesses, and describe their aspirations for high school, postsecondary education, and careers.
- Nurture student and group autonomy so that you can build in conferencing time with individuals or groups of students. From the first day of class, make sure students know that they will be working independently or in small groups throughout the year, and that they will be expected to stay on task.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Develop a professional learning community program that involves all teachers, paraprofessionals, and support specialists. Groups should meet multiple times a month, during the school day, and they should be run by trained facilitators who follow agendas that are intensively focused on refining and improving curricula, instructional practices, and interventions.
- ✓ Group teachers who share students. For example, interdisciplinary grade-level or team-based professional learning communities allow teachers to discuss common students and their distinct learning needs—a necessary precondition when it comes to coordinating interventions both within and across classrooms.
- ✓ Model your own investment in high-quality instruction. Research differentiated instruction, student-centered practices, and high-impact interventions, and then present your findings to teachers. Regularly observe classroom instruction, provide constructive critical feedback to teachers, and lead professional-development sessions.
- ✓ Monitor the impact of professional development. Use observation protocols to track the use of specific instructional practices, and analyze student data and assessment results to monitor learning growth and identify areas of instructional weakness.
- ✓ Provide professional development in differentiated, personalized instruction to every teacher. Skillful differentiation is essential to effective Tier 1 interventions, but it takes time, practice, study, and support to implement well and consistently in the classroom. As the school culture progresses away from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning, model learner-centered practice by allowing teachers to choose the differentiated practices they will try and how they will learn the new strategies.

Self-Assessment Notes

What's Working

Priorities + Next Steps

What's Not Working

NOBLE HIGH SCHOOL

NORTH BERWICK, MAINE

Noble High School serves roughly 1,000 students from three different towns. Noble has embraced a core belief in the ability of all students to be successful, and the school's commitment to educational equity is reflected in the heterogeneous grouping of students at all grade levels. Ninth- and tenth-grade students are grouped in teams, and teachers have biweekly common planning time that they use to develop interdisciplinary projects and student interventions. In 2009, the graduation rate was 75 percent, but it rose to 85 percent in 2011. Similarly, postsecondary enrollment in two- or four-year collegiate institutions grew from 44 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2011. Despite a dramatic increase in the number of students pursuing postsecondary education, collegiate persistence rates over the same period remained flat at roughly 85 percent.

Professional Collaboration

When considering how Response to Intervention works at Noble, guidance counselor Heather Tyler—a member of Team 2, one of Noble's tenth-grade teams—says that their approach to RTI is more focused on making connections with students than on the instructional strategies employed by teachers. During common planning time, teams typically discuss the learning styles, strengths, and interests of students. Because of the school's ninth- and tenth-grade teaming structure, teachers meet every other day and have frequent opportunities to reflect on their practice and discuss the students they share. During common planning time, students are enrolled in a support class called a "tutorial," and teachers have the opportunity to talk directly with students either one-on-one or as a full team. Occasionally, the team will ask a student's parents to attend a team meeting and participate in a discussion of their child's learning needs.

Every two weeks, teams specifically dedicate meeting time to discussing interventions and creating personalized learning plans for students who are struggling. When a student is in danger of failing a class, team teachers use a protocol to guide their conversations about the student. The teams also use the school's RTI website to match instructional practices to specific student behaviors or learning challenges, and each personalized student plan is uploaded to the school's student information system. All team teachers have access to the RTI plan, along with the student and his or her parents. According to Nancy Simard, director of



guidance, the most critical factor is having a point person to coordinate interventions. At Noble, guidance counselors are assigned to each team, and they are responsible for making sure that RTI plans are followed and for checking in with team teachers on student learning progress.

Interventions

Tracy Whitten, the social studies teacher on Team 2, says that Noble's approach to heterogeneous grouping makes tailoring instruction commonplace throughout the school. Tracy, like many Noble teachers, uses tiered assessments to differentiate content, complexity, and process for students. When students are assigned a project or major assessment, Tracy gives them a rubric that describes the core knowledge and skills they will be expected to learn and how they can demonstrate the achievement of standards. The rubric also describes knowledge, skills, and demonstrations of learning that students can pursue for advanced and distinguished work. Because the students know precisely what they need to learn and how they can demonstrate proficiency, Tracy has established a common language she uses with students. And since course goals and expectations have been clearly articulated, students can appropriately plan out their work and proactively address their own learning gaps. When Tracy and her colleagues discuss students who are struggling, they talk about students who are "not meeting" learning expectations, as opposed to students who are "failing." This simple shift in language is rooted in Noble's core belief in the ability of all students to meet learning standards and succeed academically—provided, of course, that they are given clearly described standards and expectations, frequent formative feedback from peers and teachers, and a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Suggested Protocol Data Self-Assessment

Save the Last Word for ME

Adapted from Patricia Averette

Time: 30–45 minutes

Essential Question

Choose one of the following questions or write your own:

- How can we use data most effectively and efficiently to improve our teaching?
- What data really matters? How will we know we're looking at the "right" data?
- How do students think about data? How do we improve their understanding?

Process

- 1 After dividing into groups of four, participants read the self-assessment rubric on the following page, keeping the essential question in mind while highlighting or underlining sections that help them think about the essential question.
- 2 A volunteer chooses a significant passage and reads it out loud to the group.
- 3 The other three participants each have one minute to respond to the passage and describe what it makes them think about or what questions it raises.
- 4 The first participant then has three minutes to state why the passage was selected and what he or she heard from colleagues. The first volunteer has "the last word."
- 5 The group conducts four rounds. The same process is followed until all members have had a turn.
- 6 The facilitator opens the discussion to the whole group. The following questions can be used as conversation guides:
 - What were some commonalities in your discussion?
 - What were some new ideas or realizations?
 - What are some possible steps for us to take as a school/team?

Passive

- Data analysis is primarily viewed as a method of school or teacher accountability. Despite data that suggests the need for significant changes in curriculum and instruction, school leaders have largely overlooked the issue, or they do not know what data must be tracked and monitored to improve classroom instruction and student learning.
- A single universal screening tool is used to recommend students for interventions at the beginning of the school year. Many classroom teachers do not have access to screening data or they have not been trained in the use of school data systems. Students do not understand the significance of the screening tool and their results are not clearly explained to them. Teachers monitor grades at marking periods and ensure that students understand their grades.
- Data are not used to initiate or inform interventions, and academic support is only triggered by teacher recommendations or student and parent requests. The school tacitly expects individuals—teachers, counselors, students, parents—to recognize the need for support, request services, and create support plans, without taking steps to ensure a clear process for identifying students and recommending necessary interventions.
- Decisions on assessment and student progress are made by individual teachers, and courses reflect a wide variety of expectations for student work and demonstrations of learning. Because assessment designs and practices vary so widely, it is not possible to aggregate or compare student performance across courses, content areas, or grade levels.
- Teachers and administrators are largely uninformed about formative-assessment strategies, and consequently learning gaps tend to go unaddressed until the problems become too obvious to overlook. Some teachers use exit tickets or other modes of gauging student understanding, but it is unclear how these practices affect day-to-day instructional practices in the classroom.

Reactive

- Data are primarily viewed as an indicator of school performance—not as guides to school improvement. Teachers and administrators do not spend time investigating and understanding the connections between school practices and educational outcomes. School-wide data are occasionally discussed during staff meetings, but these conversations rarely lead to programmatic, curricular, and instructional changes.
- A data team uses a universal screening tool to recommend students for interventions. Classroom teachers are aware of individual student performance on the screening tool, and they have received some training in using this data to inform instruction. Teachers monitor student grades at regular intervals, but teachers only initiate or recommend interventions after students have failed a quarter or semester.
- Interventions are initiated by student data, but responses, instructional modifications, and intervention strategies are not systemic or coordinated, and there is often a great deal of variation in the implementation and quality of interventions across courses, content areas, and grade levels.
- Teachers use a few common assessments in the core content areas, but the school has not articulated a process for aggregating and analyzing student performance, and there is little time scheduled during the school day for collaborative faculty discussions about student learning needs and progress. Curricular and instructional decisions are usually made by individual teachers with little support from colleagues.
- Administrators and teachers have been trained in the use of formative assessment to diagnose student learning and skill acquisition, but the practice is only intermittently used to guide daily instructional decisions. Formative assessment practices are not linked to curriculum-based assessments or to specific skills and standards, and they tend to measure recall of basic factual information.

Proactive

- School, teacher, and student data are viewed as guides to improving educational programs, instructional practices, and student outcomes. The school community shares its data publically, celebrates progress, and openly acknowledges challenges. Data conversations are goal-oriented and focused on the programs and practices that participating staff can address and improve.
- Multiple times a year, the data team analyzes information from multiple sources—universal screening tools, assessment scores, course-success figures, attendance and behavioral rates, teacher evaluations—to determine intervention strategies and tier assignments. The data are proactively used by classroom teachers to differentiate instruction and interventions, and teachers immediately address missing work, absenteeism, misbehavior, and low assessment scores before academic struggles compound and lead to failure.
- The school has a clearly articulated system of warning signs, referral protocols, and intervention responses that are based on research and established best practices. All teachers understand and follow the intervention protocols, and all students and parents understand the system and how to request support services. The school's leadership or data team evaluates and modifies the intervention system on an annual basis.
- Teacher teams use common curriculum-based assessments to gauge student progress toward meeting expected learning standards. In regularly scheduled professional learning group meetings, teachers identify trends and patterns in student performance and discuss ways they can improve curricula, personalize instruction, and accelerate learning acquisition for students who have fallen behind or are struggling academically.
- Teachers use formative assessments that have been aligned with curriculum-based assessments and learning standards, and teachers use formative-assessment data to guide daily decisions about grouping, learning modes, content, and work products. Teachers and students regularly discuss the data, and students know and can recite the specific standards they have mastered and those they still need to meet.

Formative Assessment

- Use formative assessments to guide flexible grouping strategies, determine readiness for summative assessments, and inform classroom-based interventions. Be transparent with students about instructional adjustments that are based on formative-assessment data, and look for patterns of misunderstanding that can be addressed through differentiation, mini-lessons, one-on-one support, or personalized projects.
- Use student self-assessments, ungraded concept tests, classroom discussions, or analyses of past achievement data to assess knowledge and skill levels before beginning a unit of study. To help students recognize their individual learning growth and feel a sense of personal accomplishment, ask them to reflect on subsequent assessment results in relation to pre-assessments.
- Make sure that all students understand the purpose of formative assessments, and that results will not be factored into final grades. Communicate that formative assessments are used to identify learning gaps, improve instructional techniques, and provide them with detailed feedback on learning progress.
- Use formative assessment data to plan tiered lessons or personalized strategies such as anchoring activities, and create curriculum plans that are flexible enough to allow for in-process modifications and self-paced learning activities for students.
- Require students scoring below proficiency on formative assessments to work in small, teacher-led groups or attend out-of-class support sessions to address learning gaps. Monitor student improvement on assessments and release students from support sessions when they have demonstrated proficiency.

Red Flags

- Identify all students whose past performance indicates a greater risk of struggling academically. Use the ABC framework: students with a history of Absenteeism, Behavioral challenges, and Course failures are much more likely to need additional support and personalized interventions.
- Clearly differentiate between red flags that require modifications in classroom instruction and support, and those that require mandatory Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. For example, while students struggling staying on task in class may need a new seat assignment or more choice in the classroom, students who have demonstrated significant knowledge gaps on pre-assessments may be assigned to a temporary Tier 2 support to improve foundational knowledge and skills.
- Schedule common curriculum-based assessments to coincide with prescheduled professional development time—early-release time, late-start days, professional learning group meetings—so that you can immediately process results with colleagues and rapidly modify instructional strategies based on the new data.

Students and Data

- In academic conferences and one-on-one discussions, help students recognize their own learning challenges, reflect on their progress, and set personal goals for improvement. Help students set goals that are based on their distinct learning needs and levels of self-discipline and independence—for example, some students only need monthly goals, while others need daily or weekly goals.
- Dedicate time to helping students understand and process standardized-assessment scores. Use assessment results as an opportunity to refocus students on learning growth and personal goals, rather than on fixed attributes such as talent or intelligence.
- Aggregate formative and summative assessment results, and present class-wide performance data to students. Describe where the class is making progress and where it needs to work harder. Use these sessions to build a more open, collaborative, learning-focused classroom community in which students begin to see one another as members of a learning team all working toward the same goals.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Ensure that all teachers, paraprofessionals, and support specialists have access to all academic and behavioral data on their students. Make sure student data are readily accessible in a centralized online archive—such as a student information system or shared database—that all staff know how to use.
- ✓ Provide training in data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Start with the faculty and staff members who are most interested and invested in data-informed instruction and decision-making. Empower the individual or group to create efficient data-collection processes, pilot new approaches, facilitate data-analysis workshops for colleagues, and build greater school-wide understanding of data-driven teaching and learning.
- ✓ Invite teachers from lower grade levels to department meetings and data-analysis sessions to share their personal knowledge of students. At the end of a year, teachers have a deep understanding of individual students.
- ✓ Make sure that teachers, paraprofessionals, and support specialists don't overlook gains they can make immediately, such as improvements in attendance, behavior, and a few critical learning gaps. Quick "wins" can build a sense of collective efficacy and, for students, a feeling of personal pride, agency, and accomplishment.
- ✓ Evaluate universal screening tools annually to ensure that they are accurately and reliably predicting at least 90 percent of students who need Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. When students are misidentified by screening tools, meeting their needs in the classroom becomes more challenging and subjective.
- ✓ Keep data conversations focused on instruction and student learning, not just on numbers, percentages, and numerical increases. Scores and percentages are proximate indicators of student knowledge, skill acquisition, and learning growth, and they should be seen as instructional guides, not end goals.

Self-Assessment Notes

What's Working

Priorities + Next Steps

What's Not Working

SOUTH IREDELL HIGH SCHOOL

STATESVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

South Iredell High School serves 1,300 students and is considered a “school of distinction” in the state—which means that more than 80 percent of students earn passing scores on end-of-course tests and that the school has made strong progress in improving student performance. At the center of South Iredell’s success is its Freshman Academy. Established in 2007, the academy’s goal is to ensure that “all ninth graders will be academically promoted to the tenth grade, including success in core academic courses without lowering standards.” All ninth-grade students enroll in Algebra I, and South Iredell promotes college and career readiness by addressing the critical mathematics skills that will be essential to postsecondary success. While 50 percent of students nationally pass Algebra I, more than 82 percent successfully pass Algebra I end-of-course exams at South Iredell. Another revealing data point: more than 95 percent of ninth graders successfully complete all required coursework and continue on to tenth grade. By shepherding students through ninth grade, South Iredell also dramatically increases the likelihood that the students will graduate in four years.

Professional Collaboration

Teachers at South Iredell participate in professional learning communities that are grouped by course, grade level, and content area, and they use data to improve school-wide instructional quality. Professional learning communities have helped South Iredell consistently improve instruction and support for students. In content-based learning communities, for example, teachers discuss data from Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles (see below) and from common formative assessments that are given to students every four to five weeks. Teachers create formative assessments and other common materials collaboratively, and they support one another by sharing effective lessons, strategies, or activities. In this way, teachers have developed a common understanding of mastery and high-quality student work. When meeting as departments, professional learning communities focus on broader curriculum issues and student learning trends, which leads to revisions in curriculum design, course structures, and instructional approaches. And in grade-level learning communities, the focus is squarely on student needs both inside and outside the classroom. Every student has a grade-level advisor who is charged with building relationships with advisees and communicating with parents and



families. Bryan Paslay, the Focused Learning Community Director at South Iredell, says that professional learning communities are “essential” because “teachers build trust in one another and share the workload.”

Interventions

At the core of South Iredell’s approach to instructional improvement is Plan, Do, Study, Act—one- or two-week instructional cycles that are based on an ongoing dialogue between teachers and students. The name represents four distinct instructional phases—planning, doing, studying, acting—during which teachers and students review learning goals, and then come up with a plan to reach those goals. After executing the plan (Do), teachers and students reflect on formative and summative assessments to determine if the plan helped students meet their learning goals both individually and collectively (Study). Teachers and students then offer suggestions for improving instructional activities and learning experiences in the future. Finally, they make adjustments based on the data and their ongoing dialogue (Act). South Iredell principal Aron Gabriel says the approach has shifted the school culture from “a teaching system to a learning system,” with students actively participating in the instructional process. And when their ideas are incorporated into classroom instruction, the students’ sense of ownership and engagement increases.

Suggested Protocol Culture Self-Assessment

The Three As

Adapted from Judith Gray

Time: 30–45 minutes

Essential Question

Choose one of the following questions or write your own:

- How does our school’s culture support or inhibit the success of all students?
- What are your personal contributions in promoting a positive school culture? Who do you depend on and who depends on you?
- How can we engage our entire school community—students, teachers, staff members, families, and community members—in developing a more positive school culture?

Process

- 1 Participants silently read the self-assessment rubric on the following page, noting passages that relate to the following three questions:
 - What do you **Agree** with?
 - What would you **Argue** with?
 - What do you **Aspire** to?
- 2 Each question is discussed in order. Participants should refer explicitly to the text to support their ideas.
- 3 The facilitator opens the discussion to the full group using the essential question as a guide.
- 4 Based on the group’s specific needs and goals, the participants identify at least three concrete next steps that can be taken to promote a more positive school culture.

Passive

- Teachers and administrators have openly professed the belief that student performance is largely due to family background or intrinsic student characteristics. When students struggle in class, it is assumed that they are either unwilling or incapable of learning. In general, teachers do not believe that instructional modifications are needed or that student performance could improve if changes were made.
- Teachers meet on an ad-hoc basis, but time has not been built into the school day for common planning time and teacher collaboration. Meeting participation is sporadic and uneven, and many teachers feel that faculty meeting time encroaches on prep time. A history of ineffective meetings has eroded motivation for greater collaboration.
- When teachers meet, there are no assigned roles and those who do lead meetings have not been trained in group-facilitation strategies. Meetings generate ideas to improve student learning, but there is no clarity about who will follow through or how the ideas will be acted upon. Communication about team meetings to administrators, paraprofessionals, and support specialists is generally poor.
- School leaders do not participate in common planning time or monitor teacher meetings to gain a better understanding of what resources and professional development are needed to make personalized instruction and interventions more successful. Managerial tasks consume most of the day, leaving few opportunities for administrators to assume a more active role leading curriculum development and instructional planning.
- Parents and students have access to the school's student information system, where they are expected to monitor grades, attendance, and learning progress. Most teachers and administrators expect students to take primary responsibility for communicating academic difficulties and successes to parents. Surveys indicate that parents do not believe the school communicates adequately and that they do not feel well-informed about curricula and interventions, or about their child's learning progress.

Reactive

- Teachers generally believe that students who are unsuccessful are capable, but that they need one-on-one support outside of class to learn effectively. Teams meet to discuss changes for student learning, but they focus mostly on structural elements of school change, rather than on instructional practice. Many of the factors discussed, such as bell schedules or school-wide policies, are outside of the teams' control and only indirectly impact classroom practice.
- Common planning time is built into the school day for departments and teams that typically meet after students have shown signs that they are struggling academically, socially, or emotionally. When individual students are discussed, the team focuses mainly on the changes needed in student behavior, rather than on the instruction and interventions needed to support them more effectively.
- Faculty teams meet regularly, assign roles for each meeting, and follow an agenda that is typically focused on students who create disruptions in the classroom or who have fallen behind academically. Participation by administrators, paraprofessionals, and support staff is uneven, which make it more difficult to coordinate interventions and make nimble instructional adjustments.
- School leaders encourage teachers and teams to develop new approaches to curriculum, instruction, and interventions when students fall behind, but practices are rarely shared and interventions are often uncoordinated. Leaders only occasionally attend team meetings and planning sessions, so their understanding of challenges, successes, and student learning needs is often uninformed or out of touch.
- Teachers regularly remind students, during classroom time or advisories, about missing assignments, absenteeism, or other issues. The school schedules periodic conferences for parents to meet teachers and discuss concerns. Student attendance at the conferences is encouraged, but not required, and teachers generally feel that the parents they need to see most do not attend the conferences.

Proactive

- All teachers have embraced the belief that every student can succeed with proper support. When students are initially unsuccessful, the school faculty and staff examine their practices to understand what could be done to help students succeed. School leadership encourages innovations that help more students succeed in the classroom and ceases programs and policies that hold students back.
- Common planning time and professional learning group meetings are built into the school day for all teachers, paraprofessionals, and support specialists to collaborate. Teams are determined based on shared students, and discussions focus on specific student learning needs and responsive, personalized support strategies. School leaders believe faculty collaboration is essential to continuous school improvement, and they actively protect common planning time.
- Support teams include teachers, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, special education staff, and administrators, which has greatly improved school-wide coordination of interventions. Each team devotes time and attention to improving group processes and professional relationships. Trained facilitators lead team meetings, and all members are assigned clear roles and responsibilities. Professionalism, mutual respect, and student-focused problem solving characterize all team meetings.
- School leaders both expect and support instructional innovations and risk-taking that are based on evidence, research, and professional experience. Administrators and teacher-leaders dedicate school resources—such as time, financial commitments, and logistical support—when new approaches are being developed, tested, and evaluated by teachers.
- The school uses a variety of strategies—student-led conferences, home visits, personal calls, community-engagement events, and online and social media—to foster a culture of participatory learning with students and parents. Teachers actively reflect with students on academic progress, assessment data, and their overall learning experience in school, and they proactively reach out to the parents of struggling students to make sure they are informed and engaged in their child's education.

Professional Collaboration

- Learn how to facilitate group conversations. For professional learning groups or data-analysis sessions, effective facilitators make all the difference—especially when meeting time is short and professional development needs are high.
- Make sure professional conversations remain focused and productive. Professional discussions can easily be derailed if they lapse into digressions, complaints, excuses, or unhelpful assumptions about student learning abilities.
- Use agendas and protocols for all team meetings to ensure that objectives are achieved and time is used productively. Allow flexibility in the use of protocols, but make sure that meetings remain goal-oriented and solutions-focused.
- Begin professional discussions with objective, evidence-based observations or statements before moving on to inferences and more subjective interpretations. Groups that skip this critical step often overlook patterns and trends in the data and miss revealing insights.
- Develop group norms to guide behavior and expectations during work sessions. Clearly define out-of-bounds behaviors, and revisit norms periodically to ensure that they reflect evolving group needs. Norms can also double as group goals—for example, “No negative comments about students” is both a norm and a goal that can help keep discussions focused on solutions, rather than problems.
- Dedicate time during every meeting to discuss student strengths and capabilities. By intentionally discussing positive student attributes or examples of innovative teaching strategies that engaged or motivated struggling students, the group activates a “building on strengths” frame, rather than “repairing deficits” frame.
- Monitor team progress and regularly recognize both individual and group achievements. When interventions are successful, identify both the causes and characteristics of success to build group knowledge and momentum. If the involvement of parents proves critical to successful interventions, for example, the team may decide to engage parents earlier in the intervention process.

Autonomy + Innovation

- Dedicate time every week to sharing and improving your professional practice. Read one essay, book chapter, or research study, and consult with colleagues—either in your school or through online and social media—about specific instructional issues. Set achievable short-term goals for your own independent professional development.
- Introduce instructional modifications incrementally. Don’t try to do everything at once, but refine and improve your techniques over time. Ask colleagues to observe your practice and provide constructive feedback.
- Balance autonomy with collaboration. Instructional innovation requires professional flexibility and self-sufficiency, but effective interventions require strong cooperation and coordination. Don’t be afraid to take risks in the classroom, but then don’t forget to use your colleagues as sounding boards.

Communication + Coordination

- Use staff meetings, professional learning groups, and data-analysis sessions as opportunities for team members to discuss specific student learning needs and the coordination of interventions—both general intervention assignments, processes, and practices, as well as personalized instructional adjustments for high-need students.
- Make communication with parents a top priority for all interventions. Personal calls and in-person meetings, whether through home visits or in-school conferences, can increase awareness and understanding of their child’s learning needs, while also communicating a sense of caring, attentiveness, and personal investment in their child’s academic success.
- Make the intervention process transparent. When academic support is delivered in the classroom, tell students how the intervention will work and what they will be expected to learn. Always verbally reaffirm your belief in their ability to succeed.
- Make sure that students and parents know the procedures they need to follow when seeking additional support or clarification about interventions. All intervention policies and procedures should be clearly described on the school website and in relevant publications, such as the program of studies or student handbook.
- Create classroom norms in collaboration with students. Ask students to identify the conditions, behaviors, and expectations they believe will create a positive, supportive learning environment for them and their peers, and reach collective agreement on the norms. Refer to the norms frequently, and revise them whenever new situations require modifications.

What Leaders Can Do

- ✓ Protect faculty and staff collaboration time. Use email and other communication channels, not faculty or team meetings, to communicate operational logistics. Resist both internal and external pressures to use common planning time, professional learning groups, and faculty meetings for any business other than collaborative, goal-driven instructional improvement.
- ✓ Foster the conditions necessary for success. Advocate for essential resources, professional development, and support. Instructional improvement does not occur in a vacuum—school policies, leadership decisions, cultural factors, and professional development opportunities all influence instructional innovation and interventions in the classroom.
- ✓ Develop a faculty-led workshop series. Identify teachers and support specialists with unique skills and expertise, and recruit them to lead targeted workshops for colleagues throughout the year. While professional learning communities create the conditions for consistent teacher collaboration, faculty-led workshops can showcase particularly successful practices and reach a larger percentage of the staff.
- ✓ Create opportunities for teachers to pilot new approaches to teaching and learning, with the goal of scaling successful models school-wide. School vacations, summer breaks, and community-based programs can often be used to launch innovative programs without conflicting with regular course schedules.

Self-Assessment Notes

What's Working

Priorities + Next Steps

What's Not Working

FRANCIS W. PARKER CHARTER ESSENTIAL SCHOOL

DEVENS, MASSACHUSETTS

Personal learning plans have been a part of the academic program at Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School since it opened in 1995. At Parker, personal learning plans include summaries of student learning strengths, a set of three or four learning goals for the year, and two or three strategies that will help students achieve each individual goal. Personal learning plans outline a yearlong process during which each student works alongside trusted adults to personalize their educational experience and take responsibility for their own learning. The plans are saved as digital files and made available to all teachers, which is critical to the effective coordination of instruction and interventions.

Teachers regularly set aside time during the school day for students to reflect on the progress they are making toward reaching their individual learning goals. Advisors check in with each student individually to see if the selected strategies are working, if adjustments need to be made, or if other interventions and support strategies are needed. Since they have access to each student's personal learning plan, teachers use the documents when making decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment for individual students, classes, and groups of students within classes. The school's system of ongoing reflection and adjustment helps students adapt, refocus, or request the support they need throughout the year.

Debbie Osofsky, advisory coordinator at Parker, says that personal learning plans help students "recognize that they are central in their own learning....They support the [teacher's] ability to know the student well so the teacher can effectively advocate for the student and facilitate the student's ability to advocate for themselves." Personal learning plans exemplify Parker's core educational philosophy:



student as worker, teacher as coach. Teachers help students recognize the importance of setting goals, practicing and working toward them, learning from their mistakes, and revising their plans. To be effective coaches, teachers need to know their students well, including the level of knowledge and skills students begin with and the scaffolding they need to reach their full potential.

A number of cultural factors make personal learning plans successful at Parker, including the school's commitment to self-reflection. Students are regularly asked to reflect on the progress they are making, and on what instructional strategies are working or not working for them. Teachers also reflect on their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices during common planning time, with an emphasis on how those strategies are meeting the specific learning needs of students. But perhaps the most important cultural factor is the belief that personal learning plans are for everyone, not just for students identified for intervention. "All kids have strengths. All kids have things they are working on. All kids benefit from being known well and having this type of support as they learn to advocate for themselves," says Osofsky.

Making PLPs Work

Personal learning plans can be a critical instructional asset that can help teachers personalize instruction for all students. Yet it is all too common for schools to invest significant amounts of time and energy in perfecting their template, only to greatly underutilize personal learning plans in the classroom. This list of essential practices from Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School will help make personal learning plans an integral part of how teachers, students, and families communicate about teaching and learning.

- Students, parents, and advisors should all be involved in the development of personal learning plans. A collaborative process is more likely to result in a common understanding of student learning goals and support needs. Advisors should gather information from the student's academic record, parents should answer a few questions about what they would like their child to achieve, and students should review former learning plans or reflect on past habits to determine what has worked before and what hasn't.
- Limit personal learning plans to a few critical learning goals—between two and four—to keep students focused and give them an achievable set of learning targets that, when met, will result in a sense of accomplishment. Goals can address specific academic skills, such as improving math performance, or broader social-emotional goals, such as assuming a leadership role in the school.
- Parents should meet with students and advisors in the fall and spring to discuss learning progress. Student-led conferences are a great way to foster student ownership over the learning process.
- Advisors and students should meet regularly throughout the year—every four-to-six weeks—to review personal learning plans, discuss which strategies are working, and determine if new strategies are necessary. Scheduling regular review sessions in advance will make it far more likely that personal learning plans will continue to inform instructional practices and student learning throughout the year.
- Teachers need ready access to personal learning plans. The plans should be saved as digital files in a central internet-accessible location, which will make it much easier for teachers to consult personal learning plans when determining Tier 1 interventions. Additionally, if teachers can frame interventions in terms of helping students meet their own learning goals, they can increase the likelihood that students will embrace adjustments to instruction, assessment, and learning activities.
- Teacher teams should schedule time, at least quarterly, to review personal learning plans and identify important trends and patterns. If a significant percentage of students are selecting specific goals—such as improving writing, for example—teachers can modify curricula and instruction to offer more learning or support opportunities in that area.

Useful Resources

U.S. Department of Education

The Department's website features several free resources produced for the Smaller Learning Communities Program, including presentations and resources from the April 2012 thematic meeting on strategic interventions.

▶ www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/resources.html

Educators for Social Responsibility

ESR is a national leader in school reform and provides professional development, consultation, and educational resources to adults who teach young people in preschool through high school.

▶ www.esrnational.org

National Center on Response to Intervention

This website features a wide variety of resources, readings, webinars, videos, and protocols related to implementing Response to Intervention in your school.

▶ www.rti4success.org

Harnessing Teacher Knowledge

A guide to developing systems for professional learning and planning. Produced for the Smaller Learning Communities Program, the tool includes self-assessment activities, planning worksheets, sample agendas, a facilitation guide, and other helpful materials.

▶ www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/resources.html

▶ www.greatschoolspartnership.org

School Reform Initiative

This website has an extensive archive of protocols that educators can download for free.

▶ www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols

Readings + Research

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About the Smaller Learning Communities Program

The U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Program awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies to support the implementation of smaller learning communities and activities designed to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Smaller learning communities include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or themes, "houses" in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, autonomous schools-within-a-school, and personalization strategies such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.

In May 2007, the U.S. Department of Education established a new absolute priority for the program that focuses grant assistance on projects that are part of a larger, comprehensive effort to prepare all students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.

The Smaller Learning Communities program is authorized under Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (20 U.S.C. 7249), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

For more information

ed.gov/programs/slcp