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Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day

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Providing Focus: Expectations, Differentiation and Environment

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During the 2010-2011 school year I had the privilege of leading the opening of a new middle school. Establishing focus for our work allowed our staff to develop as a team, articulate beliefs, and agree on the actions need to reach all learners. As a result, our staff successfully dealt with change and the challenges of opening a new school. The experience of opening a new school reaffirmed my belief in the importance of believing in our abilities and the abilities of our students, differentiating instruction and assessment, and ensuring an environment for learning.

Beliefs and Expectations

The impact of teacher expectations on student achievement is one of the most widely researched areas in education. "Expectations regarding student achievement do affect teacher behavior and teacher behavior then affects student achievement" (Marzano as cited in Umphrey, 2008, p. 17). Eliciting the best from our students meant that we, as a faculty, needed to believe in our own abilities to reach even the most reluctant learners. In fact, "the collective efficacy of the teachers in a school is a better predictor of student success in schools than is the socioeconomic status of the students" (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005, p. 99). Professional athletes often cite a person who "believed" in them as a driving force for success. Likewise, educators have postulated for many years that expectations regarding student achievement do affect teacher behavior, and in turn teacher behavior affects student achievement. As noted by Blankstein (2004), "the link between success in a given endeavor and our belief in our ability to succeed is well established" (p. 17). Every teacher needs to believe that they can inspire students to believe in their own ability and then scaffold the student experience so individual students actualize

that expectation. Consider a note taking technique to support students from the perspective of two different authors. "Providing students with a fill-in-the-blank-style advance organizer is a great scaffolding move that also serves as a summarization device (Wormeli, 2005, p. 44). Heward (1996) also identified fill-in-the-blank "guided notes" as an effective instructional technique for "helping students with learning disabilities (and their classmates) succeed in the regular classroom" (p. 230). Seeking

out effective strategies is an outgrowth of belief in the ability of every student to learn as well as a staff's belief in their abilities to reach all students. Next, we need to consider the importance of differentiating instruction and assessment so that our beliefs are actualized through our pedagogy.

Differentiated Instruction and Assessment

According to Weinstein (2002), "if teachers are fully persuaded that children have multiple abilities, that ability is malleable, and that all can meet a specified standard, they will feel encouraged to broaden their teaching strategies and offer a wider range of performance opportunities that would measure competencies" (p. 207). As professionals we are constantly learning and refining our craft. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are the cornerstones of what we do. Recording and reporting student progress links our work with next steps so that our efforts, and the efforts of our students, can be focused. Student achievement can be improved when teachers track student progress according to identified learning targets (Pollock, 2007). Aligning our assessments to the standards we seek to teach is essential for recording and reporting to be most effective.

Differentiated instruction means addressing students' readiness needs and their preferred way of learning so that teachers recognize and accommodate for the ways students vary as learners (Tomlinson as cited in



Rebora, 2008). However, differentiated instruction is not a “try anything” approach. In fact, specific principles of differentiated instruction have been identified (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003) as well as best practice techniques (Tomlinson, 2003). For example, Tomlinson and Eidson (2003) identified six principles focusing on curriculum, individual learners, challenging tasks, flexible grouping, varied assessments, and grading for growth as “... key principles that typify a defensibly differentiated classroom” (p. 13). Advancing our understanding of differentiated instruction and assessment is assisting us in our collective efforts to positively impact student achievement. In fact, our staff is conducting a book study of *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching* (Tomlinson, 2003) to assist us in advancing our abilities to differentiate instruction and assessment. We now turn our attention to an environment for learning.

An Environment for Learning

For effective instruction to take place the environment of the classroom must first be attended to by the teacher (Wong & Wong, 1998). Teachers have used Physical Proximity (Gordon, 2001), Positive Reinforcement (Cameron, Banko & Pierce, 2001) and Token Economy systems (Brophy, 1983) successfully to try to shape proper behavior and to create an environment conducive for learning. In offering suggestions for Differentiated Instruction, Tomlinson (2003) addressed the importance of classroom environment by stating, “environment will support or deter the student’s quest for affirmation, contribution, power, purpose, and challenge in the classroom” (p. 37). In discussing research on how the brain functions, Jensen (2005) noted the importance of building a supportive environment to support learning. Goleman (2006) also wrote on the importance of environment stating, “by offering a secure base, a teacher creates an environment that lets students’ brains function at their best” (p. 283). Research on school connectedness confirms that when students feel connected to their school they are more successful (Breaking ranks in the middle: Strategies for leading middle level reform, 2006). The literature is clear that a positive and supportive environment is essential for learning. In addition, we also have an intuitive understanding that connecting with students and individualizing the school experience makes sense. We need only remember our own school experiences to affirm our belief in the power of environment and personal connection. At our school, teachers model and discuss appropriate emotional and physical responses on an ongoing basis. In addition, we have a daily advisor/

advisee program where we teach school-wide behaviors and universal values, as well as provide behavior and academic support to individual students. We embraced the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) approach to help align our individual and team efforts into a cohesive school-wide approach. Whether controlling impulse, putting off gratification, or controlling moods, Goleman (1995) made the point that emotions impact people’s lives and children must be given instruction on how to use their emotions in a positive manner. Many believe that schools should not be expected to take the place of families and I wholeheartedly agree. However, as Goleman aptly noted, “as family life no longer offers growing numbers of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place communities can turn to for correctives to children’s deficiencies in emotional and social competence” (p. 279). As some students have more “deficiencies” than others, the amount and types of support individual students need may vary. However, some infractions are not open to a range of responses and consistency must be maintained. Thankfully, we have a district-wide discipline handbook. We believe it is essential that we assist our students and families with understanding our policies, procedures, and expectations. As noted by Brown and Beckett (2006), “...discipline policies that are understood and accepted by teachers, students, and parents and consistently enforced by school officials, correlate with lower levels of student disruption” (p. 235). We remain committed to being consistent and ensuring our community understands our behavior expectations and consequences. We focus on teaching proper behavior and procedures, positively reinforcing expectations, and consistently applying consequences so that an environment for learning flourishes.

As principal, I must be able to provide focus for our staff. Believing in our abilities and the abilities of our students, differentiating instruction and assessment, and ensuring an environment for learning provided a foundation for success and the needed focus to successfully serve our students.

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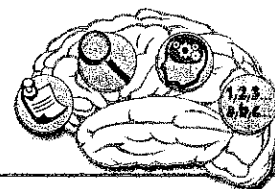
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