

This week's question comes from an educator who wishes to remain anonymous:

***Differentiating for students, as I understand it, entails meeting students at their levels, but the end goal is to ensure that they meet the standards for the grade level.***

***What happens when, for whatever reason, you have one or more students who are reading several grade levels below and even the lowest level expectation for that child/ren will still not enable the student/s to meet the standard for the grade level?***

Differentiation has certainly been in the news recently. It's a word that educators hear a lot, and a lot is done in its name. There are probably many definitions people use for it, but I think it's safe to say that it generally means **strategies that teachers use to modify their instruction so that it's accessible to students with different backgrounds, skills, and prior knowledge.**

Today, three well-known educators/authors provide guest responses: Regie Routman, Carol Ann Tomlinson, and Laura Robb.

### **Response from Regie Routman**

Regie Routman is a longtime teacher and the author of many books and resources for educators. Her latest book is *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD, 2014). See [www.regieroutman.org](http://www.regieroutman.org) for information on her books, articles, PD offerings, and to contact her:

*Here, I am going to take the liberty of reframing the question. Differentiating as I see it is not just about meeting students at "levels," which are sometimes arrived at in arbitrary and questionable ways, but about **meeting students' needs and interests based on ongoing assessments**, most of which are informal and often called formative assessments. The end goal, as I see it, is not about meeting the standards but about **expertly teaching students what they need to know and want to know**. No matter how good any set of standards are, including the CCSS (Common Core State Standards), they are at best a framework and guide for what we want all students to know and be able to do. Successful differentiation depends more on highly knowledgeable teachers and leaders than it does on any standards or designated levels.*

*Another caution is in order. One common interpretation of the CCSS is that all students must read complex texts, ready or not. My Reading Recovery training and decades of teaching reading have unequivocally taught me that a steady diet of too-hard books causes students to regress, not progress. There are almost always a small group of students reading "below grade level." For those students, they need **explicit instruction and guided practice** on "just-right" books where they can read and interpret at least 95% of the words so they can focus almost all of their attention on understanding the text and making meaning. Again, it's important to keep in mind we teach students not standards.*

*For readers who are below grade level, we also need to ensure that they are present in the classroom receiving the same challenging content as all students. For example, most students routinely can understand and listen to books approximately two years above their reading level if the book is engaging and read aloud to them--and especially with judiciously chosen stopping points and teacher explanation, such as, "Here's what I'm thinking, and here's why I think thus and so."*

*A regrettable consequence of an overemphasis on having all students meet grade level standards--as opposed to an emphasis on expert teaching that meets each student's needs and interests while utilizing the latest standards as a guide and framework--is that students who most need individualized instruction tailored to their needs do not get much of it and, therefore, do not improve much. As well, **a mindset of standards before students often leads to excessive test preparation**, which does little to improve student learning in the long run and much damage to teacher and student attitudes about the meaning of school and learning.*

*It is up to the knowledgeable teacher to ensure that differentiation results in more personalized, relevant learning and higher achievement for all students across the curriculum. Becoming a highly knowledgeable teacher in a school where almost all teachers become highly knowledgeable--not just of expectations and strategies at their own grade level but across the grades--requires ongoing, professional learning led by the principal and teacher leaders.*

### **Response from Carol Ann Tomlinson**

Carol Ann Tomlinson is William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy and co-director of the Institutes on Academic Diversity at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. One of education's most influential voices, Tomlinson's books include *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, 2nd Edition (ASCD, 2014) and *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2013):

*This is a question that dogs caring teachers, of course. My best response to that question is one I developed in my third year of teaching when I taught Golden--a 15-year-old in my 7th grade class full of 12 year-olds. He whispered to me in the hall on his first day of school that year (a week after the year began), "I can't read." I understood immediately the courage it took to make that confession to a teacher he'd never seen. I understood that I couldn't let him down. What I didn't understand was how to teach reading, how to help him find a worthy place in his class of younger and more accomplished peers, how to arrange time or find materials to benefit him, what to do about grades, and so on.*

*If someone were to ask me to pick out the year of teaching I am proudest of--when I feel I grew the most and did my best work--it would be "the year of Golden." I learned to differentiate instruction in order to keep his trust, first for just him, and then for a few others in the class, and then for everyone in the class. More to the point, though, Golden grew from not knowing the*

*alphabet to reading at a solid third grade level by the time the year ended. That's excellent growth by any measure.*

*I get the sway that "THE TEST" holds over teachers' lives these days, not by their own choice. But I don't want any standardized test to make either Golden or me feel like a failure when both of us grew remarkably and both of us were in a much better place to take on the next year of school, and to take on life, for that matter.*

***What happens if a kid like Golden doesn't totally catch up in an effectively differentiated classroom?*** *I'd say the answer is the same as if he doesn't totally catch up in a general education classroom or a remedial program. **If he has worked diligently and grown markedly, teachers need to help him (and his parents) understand that there is still a distance to go--and that his progress should be celebrated.** If the outcome is less noteworthy, then everyone needs to be looking for ways to turn that around.*

*My argument for quality differentiation in general education classrooms also has something to do with Golden. He came to see himself as a member of and contributor to a class that engaged in energizing conversations, had terrific ideas, created interesting products, expected good things of one another, and pulled together to make those things happen. My sense is that as teachers become skilled with differentiation, kids like Golden can find strong support for their learning needs in the context of a dynamic environment fueled by the energy of achievement.*

*Not every student will close substantial learning gaps in a year--in any kind of classroom. Human development seems woefully inattentive to the standardized test schedule. **Our best teaching happens as we vigorously respond to students, not to mandates.***

### **Response from Laura Robb**

Laura Robb is the author of *Unlocking Complex Texts*, Scholastic, 2013 and *Differentiating Reading Instruction*, Scholastic, 2008:

#### *Eight Ways To Help All Readers Improve*

*It's difficult to accept, but in one school year teachers who have students reading three or more years below grade level will not be able to transform those students into skilled readers. I tell teachers and administrators to recognize that these students require three or more years of intervention to become engaged, grade-level readers.*

*Accommodations such as reading texts out loud or listening to books on tape mean students aren't reading. Moreover, these types of accommodations can contribute to students' backward slide. **Teaching students with challenging materials that they can read and learn from along with a rich independent reading curriculum will accelerate their reading achievement.** With this approach, students who can't pass the state test in sixth grade can develop the skills needed to pass by eighth grade.*

*In a class of diverse reading abilities, one book or a grade level anthology will not meet the needs of all learners. So the question to ponder is: How can I meet every student's instructional needs and help each one improve?*

*Richard Allington points out that by the middle grades and middle school, decoding is usually not an impediment to reading. However, researchers agree that poor general academic vocabulary, lack of target interventions, and no independent practice reading are obstacles to comprehending grade-level materials.*

*Independent practice reading increases students' background knowledge, builds vocabulary, and fosters automaticity in accessing skills to solve reading problems. Practice can also increase students' motivation to read and promote reading engagement.*

*To help teachers improve students' reading skill, I've identified eight ways to nurture and support all readers. Discuss these suggestions with colleagues and consider the role each one plays in your curriculum.*

### **1. Teach Reading Explicitly With interactive Lessons**

*With an **anchor text**, show students how you apply a reading strategy such as making inferences, connecting themes, or using context to figure out tough words. An anchor text is in the same genre as your current unit. It can be an excerpt, a picture book, a poem, a short story, myth, or legend. Short and explicit, anchor text lessons take no more than ten to fifteen minutes and are interactive. Once the teacher models a process, students work with a partner to try the strategy and share their thinking. This is the ideal way to model how to apply a strategy to informational texts or literature.*

### **2. Differentiate Reading instruction**

*Moving away from one text for all to differentiating reading materials makes sense because each student has an opportunity to learn and improve. **Organize a reading unit around a genre and theme and have students read in the genre at their instructional level.** For example, a study of biography can be organized around the theme of obstacles. Students read about different men and women; common discussion points include how each person dealt with and overcame specific obstacles, the personality traits that enabled each to cope with challenging events and achieve success, and the structure of the genre.*

*It's possible to offer students choice with instructional reading by forging a relationship with your public and school librarians. About two weeks prior to starting a unit, ask both librarians to pull books for the instructional reading levels in your classes. Ask the librarians to jot the instructional reading levels on sticky notes and place them on the book's cover. Add books from your class library and create stacks that students can choose from, but remove the sticky notes.*

### **3. Enlarge Students' General Academic Vocabulary**

The NAEP study from 2009-2012 shows a tight correlation between students' vocabulary strength and reading comprehension! To be effective and comprehensive, **vocabulary instruction should occur daily for 10 to 15 minutes in all subjects**. The focus of instruction should be on general academic words because they occur in all disciplines. Lists of general academic words are available online. Don't teach the lists. Instead, directly teach general academic words that are in books you read aloud, in the anchor text, you're using, in short, complex instructional materials, and in textbooks.

#### **4. Provide Targeted Interventions**

Circulate among students while they read, write about reading, and apply explicit lessons. Carry a clipboard lined with dated sticky notes and stop by students' desks to see if they require help with a specific skill or strategy. Have a brief discussion with the student to offer ways to cope with confusions and challenges, jot suggestions on a sticky note, and give the note to the student as a supportive reminder while she reads or writes. When interventions occur frequently, teachers can prevent a small misunderstanding from blooming into an obstacle.

#### **5. Integrate Independent Reading Into Your Curriculum**

The research of Richard Allington, Nell Duke, Steven Krashen, and Donalyn Miller points to the importance of students reading self selected print or e-books: they should read 40 to 60 books a year in addition to instructional reading. Books students can and want to read show them how words work in diverse contexts, enlarge their background knowledge, and deepen their understanding of genre structure. When you set aside 20 to 30 minutes for **independent reading** at least three times a week, you build stamina, students' ability to concentrate, and at the same time send the message that reading is valued and important.

Invite students to present a short book talk each month and in a school year twenty-five students will hear about 250 books. Students are more receptive to peer recommendations and look forward to discovering books that classmates endorse.

#### **6. Engage Students in Meaningful Discussions**

Motivation to read increases when students have opportunities to talk about texts with peers because reading becomes social. When pairs or small groups discuss the same or different texts they practice close reading, using text evidence to support positions, and exploring themes. In addition, they improve listening skills and the ability to clearly express thoughts and hunches.

#### **7. Invite Students To Write About Reading**

The research of Steve Graham and Michael Hebert in *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* shows that integrating writing about reading and writing workshop into English or language arts can improve reading comprehension. You can download a free copy of this study at [www.carnegie.org/literacy](http://www.carnegie.org/literacy).

*When students write about reading, they record, in readers' notebooks, responses such as summaries, reactions to a quote, a character's decisions, or linking information within or across texts.*

#### **8. Build Class Libraries to Give Students Access to Books**

*To save budget dollars, schools often eliminate librarians who keep the collection current and help students find books. In today's world, classroom libraries are a necessity because they provide students with easy access to books. A class library with magazines, newspapers, graphic novels, and a variety of print and e-book genres offers students choices and the ability to check out a new book after shelving one they've completed.*

#### **Reading Matters**

***Instructional reading, vocabulary building, and targeted interventions that meet individual student's needs combined with an independent reading curriculum can build reading proficiency. Remember, a sixth grader reading at a second-grade level won't leap four years forward in one year. Give students the gift of time, expert reading instruction, and the motivation to read independently. Progress will surely follow.***

The following contributions come from Katherine S. McKnight, Jessica Hockett, Christie Amburn, Elise Yerkey and Barbara Blackburn.

#### **Response From Katherine S. McKnight**

Katherine S. McKnight is an educator, award-winning author, and consultant specializing in adolescent literacy. She is the author of Common Core Literacy for ELA, History/Social Studies, and the Humanities: Strategies to Deepen Content Knowledge and Common Core Literacy for Math, Science, and Technical Subjects: Strategies to Deepen Content Knowledge. Follow her on Facebook or Twitter:

*I sense frustration in this question and I sympathize with it. As teachers, we're subjected to so much external pressure! And you're correct in acknowledging that our only hope of teaching students is to reach them where they are, rather than where we (or more likely, someone else!) think they should be.*

*In any given fifth grade classroom, for example, you're likely to find an actual breakdown something like this:*

- \* 2 students reading at the third grade level or lower*
- \* 5 students reading at the fourth grade level*
- \* 15 students reading at the fifth grade level*

*\* 2 students reading at the sixth grade level*

*\* 1 student reading at the seventh grade level or higher*

*The way I'd approach this through the Common Core State Standards is to examine each anchor standard and determine how it's articulated for each of the grade levels that are actually present in my fifth grade classroom.*

*Let's look at Reading Anchor Standard 6, for example. (Remember, the anchor standard states the over-all, long-term goal of all students, kindergarten through grade 12.):*

- College- and career-ready students - Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.*

*Now let's see how that goal is articulated for students as they read literature in the various grades:*

- Grade 3 students - Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.*
- Grade 4 students - Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.*
- Grade 5 students - Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.*
- Grade 6 students - Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.*
- Grade 7 students - Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.*

*Can you see how, in each grade level, the students are working toward the goal of the anchor standard? At the end of the school year, the majority of my fifth grade students will be able to "describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described." Some of my students will be approaching the goal of the anchor standard at a lower- or higher-grade level. But they'll all be on the same path, attempting to do the same thing at different levels of complexity.*

*Throughout the school year, then, I can use the same lesson plans and classroom activities for all my students. They may be applying them to different texts, of course, and approaching the task at various levels. But the goal of my class will remain constant. My students will all be learning how to "Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text." And they'll continue to work toward that goal throughout their entire K-12 education.*

## Response From Jessica Hockett

Jessica Hockett is an education consultant in differentiation, curriculum design, and lesson study. With ASCD Professional Learning Services, she has worked with school districts on differentiated instruction, curriculum development using Understanding by Design, and development of programs and services for advanced learners:

*The goal of differentiation is optimize student growth. It assumes that students are more likely to grow--and more likely to do well on high-stakes assessments (which are not differentiated)--if their teachers approach and plan instruction with student differences in mind than if their teachers ignore those differences.*

*This requires a multi-faceted view of students, seeing students' not only terms of their academic readiness relative to goals, but also their interests and preferred ways of learning. To gauge student readiness, teachers rely not on standardized test scores or last year's report cards but classroom-level pre- and formative classroom assessment evidence. If these assessments are high-quality and aligned that with unit and lesson goals, teachers can not only see "where" students are with respect to standards, but also use results to inform instructional planning, including decisions to differentiate tasks for student readiness.*

*Academically-speaking, differentiation involves making sure that each student makes progress toward and beyond grade-level standards from his or individual starting point. Is it possible that some students will not reach those goals in a given semester or school year, even in classrooms where differentiation is practiced well? Yes. But the idea is that they are further along than they might have been as a result of what the teacher has chosen to do in response to their needs.*

*The challenge posed by this reality is less an indictment or critique of differentiation than it is a question of how to communicate information about student learning. Grading policies and report cards that use what experts call "3-P" grading not only support differentiation and help combat the misconception that differentiation involves having or setting different expectations for different students, but also provide more complete and more accurate information about student learning. Put simply, **teachers should be able to report student performance relative to goals/standards; student progress or growth over the course of the marking period, and the student's process, or how the student is doing with certain work habits and performances.** Although most teachers do consider such factors, they tend to meld them into a single grade, which can lead to grade inflation (or deflation) and cloud the grade's meaning. Considering, reporting, and valuing performance, progress, and performance separately allows teachers to be truthful about a student's skills while honoring the growth the student has made.*

## Response From Christie Amburn

Christie Amburn is a middle school principal in Loudon, TN. Before becoming an administrator, she taught in general and special education settings and worked as a district instructional coach:



*When a student cannot be successful with grade level standards, it is critical that we find ways to close the achievement gap. Our school has designated focused learning time for each grade level. During this time, all students receive intervention, remediation, enhancement, or extension. All available personnel are utilized to facilitate smaller group sizes for the neediest students. Several data sources are analyzed to determine grouping, and groups are updated frequently as students progress. The most trained personnel use research-proven intervention programs to close achievement gaps of the lowest performing students.*

*So what to do in the classroom setting? Appropriate grouping is essential to meeting the needs of all students in a heterogeneous classroom. Both small group instruction and collaborative grouping are important to consider when planning.*

*During small group instruction time, teachers should modify the curriculum for the lowest performing students by breaking standards into basic components. For example, if the middle school literature lesson is focused on citing evidence and drawing inferences (RL7.1), the teacher can work with students to cite evidence and discuss inferences in lower level texts. Alternate texts should be related to the content of the grade level text when possible. Small group instruction should be engaging and respectful. In the above example, students can use highlighters to cite their evidence or scissors to cut out evidence and paste it to a display board.*

*When students are working in collaborative groups, the teacher should be very thoughtful with group placement. **Lower performing students can glean a great deal of knowledge and understanding by listening to and participating in collaborative group work.** However, it is crucial that students are placed into groups where this can happen. All students need to be trained to work in group situations where shared and individual accountability are expected.*

### **Response From Elise Yerkey**

Elise Yerkey is an instructional coach for English Language Arts and the Common Core State Standards at a K-12 school district in Southern California. She holds a Master's degree in education and is credentialed to work with students with disabilities:

*The beauty of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is that they focus more heavily on skills rather than content. **It is much easier to differentiate content while still focusing on the same skill.** Let's just look at one reading standard as an example. Reading Informational Standard 2 (RI.2) for grade 5 reads: Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text. Let's suppose this child is two grade levels behind in foundational reading skills. Would it be possible for this child to meet the grade level standard for Reading Informational Materials while reading a lower-leveled text? Yes, because if you look at all RI.2 standards K-12, the common theme or skill is determining main/central ideas and summarizing text. The learning progressions between the standards are linked by a common thread and therefore are much more fluid. This makes it easier for teachers to differentiate while still focusing on the skill addressed by the standard.*

*Another factor that allows for differentiation is technology. With the inclusion of digital literacy in the CCSS, there are more opportunities for supporting struggling readers, as demonstrated by computer-adaptive testing provided by the nation's two testing consortiums. Because of built-in universal supports, students have the option of having text read aloud to them when not being assessed on reading foundational skills. This enables them to demonstrate mastery of the grade-level standard or skill even if they lag behind with regard to foundational reading skills. The challenge is to provide those supports in the classroom. With computer-adaptive testing, a student's performance can be gauged based on his or her individual progress rather than solely on national norms.*

### **Response From Barbara Blackburn**

Barbara Blackburn is a nationally recognized speaker and consultant in the areas of rigor, motivation, and leadership. She is also the author of 14 books, including the best seller, *Rigor is NOT a Four Letter Word*. She can be reached through her website:

*One of the most effective differentiation strategies I've seen is that of **layering meaning**. Let's say you need students to read an informational article on the atmosphere, but they can't read it because it is too difficult. With layering meaning, you find another article on the same topic, written on an easier level they can read. They read that one first, then--and this is what we don't do oftentimes--you bring them back to the original, grade-level article and, with scaffolding, have them read it. Because they have built prior knowledge and vocabulary with the easier article, they are better able to handle the more difficult text.*