

# Creating a Failure-Free School

Alan M. Blankstein and Kari Coccozella

By building a “Pyramid of Interventions” to guide remediation, schools can rescue many students who would otherwise have failed.

## IN BRIEF

The authors describe the intervention process developed by the HOPE Foundation and a Colorado elementary school in response to poor student performance in reading and math. The key element is a four-level “Pyramid of Interventions,” with the lowest level identifying and diagnosing students’ needs; the second level providing grade-level intervention; the third level providing vertical team support; and the fourth level providing intensive cross-grade, volunteer, and tutoring support.

If we have articulated in the school mission statement that all students can learn, what do we do when some are not performing at a proficient level? This was the question the principal and faculty at Skyview Elementary School in Thornton, Colorado, asked themselves when they saw the test scores in the spring of 2002, indicating that a majority of students were below proficiency in reading and math. It was clear that action was needed.

Like most schools, Skyview serves an increasingly diverse student population. The mobility rate is growing along with the percentage of ESL students and those receiving free and reduced-cost lunch. And yet, just a year later, the school showed an increase of between 25 and 29 points on tests for fifth-grade reading, writing, and math, earning recognition by the Colorado Department of Education. How did Skyview accomplish so much in such a short time?



## Building a Pyramid

There are generally three things that struggling schools need to do in order to succeed. First, the schools' leadership and staff must actually believe that virtually every student can not only succeed, but can achieve at high levels. Second, they must agree on a common philosophy for action. Finally, they need to create a structure like the "Pyramid of Interventions."

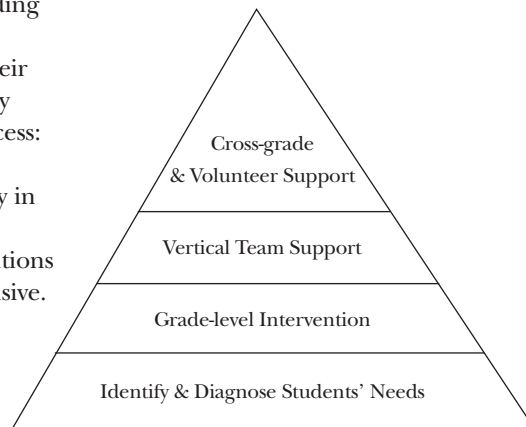
At Skyline, eight teacher leaders took on the responsibility of building the pyramid.

Working collaboratively with their peers and the administration, they began by using the following process:

- Identify interventions already in place.
- Sort and classify the interventions from least intensive to most intensive.
- Identify sections of strength and weaknesses among existing interventions.

- Brainstorm suggestions for additional interventions and potential resources.
- Create a system for tracking the success of students and interventions.
- Show a preliminary pyramid to staff for additional input.
- Understand that additions and deletions may be needed, based on student needs and staff expertise.

### The process produced this pyramid:



**Level 1. Identify and Diagnose Students' Needs.** Many problems can be caught and addressed early. The Skyview staff spends the first two days of school diagnosing and sharing information on every student, with an eye toward providing necessary support. They:

- Look at prior student performance (report cards, assessments, attendance records);
- Consult with prior-grade teachers regarding student performance;
- Discuss the advisability of offering differentiated instruction;
- Contact parents for support and involvement;
- Consult with district content-area coaches for suggestions for struggling learners;
- Use classroom or grade-level volunteers to tutor small groups in areas of need; and



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- Meet with the principal to identify and plan potential intervention strategies.

**Level 2. Grade-level Intervention.** If students need additional support, teachers may access the wisdom and resources of their grade-level teams.

- Use short-term group meetings during the school day to focus on specific areas of need.

- Use district coaches to model lessons in classrooms, or work with the entire grade level to identify best practices for underachieving students

**Level 3. Vertical Team Support.** This level is designed to provide fresh perspectives as well as additional resources. For example, it may be that a student who is doing poorly in fifth-grade math missed some computational skills that can now be accessed in the regular fourth-grade classroom.

**“The most intensive instructional support is provided at [the cross-grade and volunteer] level, often outside of regular school hours.”**

In addition, the vertical team of teachers serves as a corridor through which the students will travel as they advance in school, and teachers come to know their future students—and their needs—in advance. The team:

- Meets twice a month, once to review the team’s students, the other time for in-depth discussion of individual students;
- Completes log sheets reflecting the success of each student; and

- Identifies further interventions and timelines for monitoring student success.

**Level 4. Cross-grade and Volunteer Support.** The most intensive instructional support is provided at this level, often outside of regular school hours. This includes:

- Using special education staff to supplement, but not supplant, student’s instruction;
- Providing a homework club that meets twice a week, before or after school;
- Creating small groups across grade levels or individual student assignments for instruction in key content areas;
- Providing “bubble group” instruction before or after school for those in reach of proficient or advanced achievement levels;
- Using college students to support

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small-group challenge or remedial programs;

- Using high school students to fulfill service-learning requirements by tutoring students;
- Using trained parents and community members for one-on-one instruction in literacy and math;
- Using the “buddy system,” where the student meets with a certified staff member or mentor weekly to check on the student’s progress; and
- Providing short-term, one-on-one counseling with the school social worker or psychologist.

The process of creating a pyramid like this one can be lengthy, but is in itself a team-building endeavor. Combined with a belief in students’ ability to learn and a common philosophy for action, the outcome has turned around a school by rescuing many students who otherwise would have failed. Schools like Skyview are creating pow-

erful cultures in which failure is no longer an option. ■

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*High-Performing Schools*. His e-mail address is [alan@communitiesofhope.org](mailto:alan@communitiesofhope.org).

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## WEB RESOURCES

The HOPE (Harnessing Optimism and Potential through Education) Foundation describes the Failure Is Not an Option philosophy used by Skyview Elementary School.

[www.communitiesofhope.org](http://www.communitiesofhope.org)

The National Association of School Psychologists provides the text of a chapter on school-based interventions from its book, *Interventions for Academic and Behavior Problems II: Preventive and Remedial Approaches*.

<http://nasponline.org/bestsellers/interventions.html>

The National Association of Elementary School Principals posts an abstract of a Web-exclusive article, “Are We Overselling Remediation?” on its site. NAESP members can access the entire content.

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