

Intervention: It's Not Just for Students

The cracks through which some children fall are being illuminated by the spotlight of accountability. It is the job of today's leaders and their teams to identify these children through the constant vigilance of data awareness; to catch them before they fall through the cracks; and to ensure that they are firmly placed on the stairway to proficiency.

School principals face the challenge of creating the climate, structures, and practices for academic success for *all* children, particularly those with special needs. It is essential and, more often than not, required that innovative school reform initiatives be employed to specifically address those needs. The critical task is to achieve equity and educational excellence while preparing all students for high-stakes testing. Intervention is frequently needed.

When Intervention Helps

Intervening in the academic lives of students is a complex business. Many children who need extra help, especially those in urban settings, are already behind when they enter the educational environment. Identifying them very early has become critical. Some have not responded to the instruction they have received. Others may have missed only one crucial skill, but appear to be further behind than they are. So writing a prescription for intervention on an individual basis takes a high degree of commitment to looking at the whole child from pre-kindergarten or even earlier.

Changing instruction to fit children's needs, not forcing them to re-learn what they already know, and keeping their minds alive even as they re-learn what they didn't get the first time, takes a great deal of sensitivity, patience, and skill.

Sadia White is such an interventionist.

Perhaps it is because her father was a teacher. Perhaps it's because she heard and heeded the clarion call that "all children count." Or perhaps it's just that White, a former elementary school principal who is now assistant superintendent for elementary schools in the District of Columbia, is by nature a responsible person. Whatever the reasons, White firmly believes in intervention—to improve students' work, teachers' work, and her own work.

Prescriptions for Learning

"It was in my fifth year of teaching that I had my epiphany,"



recalls White. "I was a good teacher, but I was always looking for ways to get better. That year, I had a class that just wasn't getting it. They didn't learn the way I taught." That's when she began to intervene in her own teaching: "Instead of saying, 'What's wrong with my students?' I said, 'What's wrong with me?'"

Historically, teachers have taught to "the middle." But in today's accountability environment, that will not do. We all believe that every child counts, and the age-old practice of letting the higher-level kids fend for themselves and the others find their own level is no longer to be countenanced.

"That's where differentiation becomes critical," White says. "You have to believe that all children can master and learn, but you must find the right process and the right strategies to engage the student. Data is the tool for doing that."

As a principal, White followed this path with the ultimate in instructional differentiation: individual learning "prescriptions."

As "intervener-in-chief," she required herself each month to check on how well the "medicine" from each prescription was working. She would ask teachers questions like, "Why didn't this child move ahead on her reading comprehension?" and "What intervention are you employing to improve this?"

Questions like these helped teachers focus their thinking on the learning needs of individual students. But to teach a whole class of students with learning needs requires skills beyond the normal. So White began intervening in the learning of her teachers. She asked herself, "What can I do to support them? What classes or courses can they take?" Did her teachers appreciate these interventions? "Let me put it this way," White says. "I asked them, 'Wouldn't you want your own doctor to use the best practices available?' They were professional enough to realize that they were now going to have to be continual learners."

What is White's philosophy of intervention? "Well, we need to know our data, and I don't mean schoolwide data," she says. "We need to know it classroom by classroom, and child by child." It's hard work, "but the harder you work, the more successful your students are. The harder you work, the smarter you get. So accountability needs to be rethought as something that keeps the conversation on the work."

As far as she is concerned, keeping the conversation on "the work" is really intervention by another name. ■

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