

# Slow Down; You're Moving Too Fast

Those of you old enough to know the delightfully poetic and cheerful Simon and Garfunkel song will remember the plea to slow down to make the morning last. Many of our young students facing learning challenges wish the same thing. Some call these students slow learners. They may be low achievers, children with various developmental delays, or children whose testing tells us they are low-cognitive learners. But slow learner does not mean no learner. And it is imperative that principals of elementary and middle school students make sure that these children, often without IEP or 504 classifications, do not fall through the cracks.

Our young students who are not quick learners, but who *can* learn in a slower-paced environment, take a self-esteem beating every day they enter the classroom. Math facts, decoding skills, short essays, and science concepts are pitched to them at 90 miles per hour. They strike out every time. So, what can we do to make sure that our instruction reaches all children?

NAESP's *Leading Learning Communities* offers principals overarching guidelines and specific strategies that certainly provide a helping hand—and a little more time—to children who learn slowly. NAESP's Six Standards that Characterize Instructional Leadership call on us to set high expectations for all students. We must not write off children who are not quick off the mark. Another standard tells us that "successful schools are organized around student learning." We must recognize that all students do not learn at the same pace. The most successful schools, we have found, provide both a rigorous curriculum and the key instructional strategies that support all students, including those who cannot handle a fast flow of information. Principals can create a culture that honors flexibility, collaboration, innovation, and support for the entire learning community—teachers and students—in order to improve student achievement.

At times, we must be prepared to ask essential questions about time and learning and be courageous enough to implement the out-of-the-box solutions that often are needed to ensure that children who learn more slowly have time to "get it." It may mean block scheduling, skill-building time set aside for certain students, or extended deadlines for work to be turned in. For students whose reading fluency is slow,



audiobooks and other assistive technology may be the solution, while we continue to provide instruction that will improve decoding and fluency skills.

Another way for schools to support slow learners is to create after-school programs aligned with what is going on in the classroom that give students more time to understand critical concepts and help with completing homework. NAESP is a member of the Time,


Learning and Afterschool Task Force, which recently issued a report, funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation, called "A New Day for Learning." The report recommends that learning should be "a comprehensive, seamless approach" for all students. In practice, this new day for learning includes many after-school programs similar to Partnerships in Pasadena, California, that garnered community resources to provide after-school learning opportunities that were linked to in-school academic goals. Innovative programs like this, particu-

larly those with an in-school connection, offer students who need more time the extra hours and support to develop a genuine understanding of what they are learning in school.

As principals, we also can help create professional development opportunities focused on teaching strategies to differentiate instruction in order to include all students in the learning process. One of our goals must be to help all children, including students with special needs, to blossom into lifelong learners—teaching

students how to organize their lives to find the time they need to learn new skills.

A primary goal of our principals and many other educators is to address the needs of the whole child. The Learning First Alliance cites several conditions that must be in place to educate the whole child, including that students are motivated and engaged in learning, and that expectations are high for all children. For children who learn more slowly, a school's focus on the whole-child philosophy is critical for their success. To be motivated and engaged in learning, at its core, means the student is given both the time needed to understand and apply knowledge, and also that the material is presented in a way that meets the specific learning style of the child. It also means that we expect that they will achieve to their potential and not write them off as simply slow learners who can't make it in the classroom.

As leaders of our schools, we can—and do—make a difference in the lives of children who do not quickly absorb the staggering amount of information presented to them every day. More time to learn—and attending to the needs of the whole child—will help make the morning last for all of our children. 

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