Excelling With an Excel Period

Like all school transformations, ours can be described by detailing the before and after. Until five years ago, Candlebrook Elementary’s students traditionally received remediation and enrichment services through a pullout program. This practice resulted in students missing new grade-level instruction on various concepts and skills.

Our school had an instructional support team (IST) model that usually targeted students who were failing or recommended testing to determine their eligibility and need for special education. The objective of the team was to brainstorm some interventions that could be done at school and at home to determine if the student could make progress. Students would then be given accommodations or a modified program.

During the 2011-2012 school year, our district adopted the response to intervention and instruction model (RTII), causing the IST model to change to a child study team process. Now student data would be used to identify student needs and challenge them at their instructional levels. The result: intervention before students were failing, and students became successful by making continuous progress.

RTII raised the bar for all students.

Implementation

Our students are heterogeneously grouped in classrooms, yet teachers are still expected to differentiate teaching. We found that it was not sufficient to only provide instruction and supplemental materials and resources that students needed. We knew that homogeneous groupings needed to be scheduled during the school day to maximize teacher instructional time and student learning.

Becoming an RTII school meant that we could use all of our support resources—reading specialists, learning support teachers, English as a Second Language support, gifted and talented support, the librarian, and others—for all of our students in addition to the classroom teachers regardless of any academic “labels” given to students.

The RTII model uses the pyramid diagram to demonstrate how students are assigned to a Tier I (enrichment/grade-level extension of the core curriculum, further application of skills that are above or on grade level), Tier II (remediation on an approaching grade-level ability, review, and refinement of the core curriculum), or Tier III (intensive instruction to those who are demonstrating below basic knowledge and ability using research-based interventions and weekly progress monitoring) level of intervention.

To schedule these homogeneous groups for their instruction, we carved a 40-minute block of time in our daily schedule for all students to attend their Excel class. Excel stands for Extended, Curriculum Enrichment Learning. These classes are staggered throughout the day by grade so that the support staff are available to assist the grade-level teams. During this time, no new grade-level instruction is taking place. Instead, students are provided with services during this time and not missing any new grade-level instruction. (In the past they would have received these services by being pulled out of class during prime instructional time.)

Through our student data team review process, we determine how many students will be assigned to a specific tier and how many classroom teachers and support staff will need to instruct a Tier I, II, or III class during that grade’s Excel period.

Results

As a result of homogeneous groupings and targeted instruction, students have made significant progress in reading and math. Many are able to return to their classrooms and actively participate in their grade-level lessons.

As we go through this process, another goal is to see the number of students in Tiers II and III decrease throughout the year. The groups are flexible, so a student can change tiers during the interim if data show evidence. During each marking period, we inform parents of their child’s Excel assignment and progress.

Child study team meetings address students who are not making progress.
through the tiered instructions and interventions. The team will review and assess the success of interventions, determining recommendations for future screenings, additional data collection, or accommodations.

Teachers are able to use a variety of supplemental materials to enhance our curriculum resources. The Excel groups are flexible to provide the appropriate instruction with the goal that students maintain, at a minimum, grade-level expectations. We would like as many students as possible to have more practice applying their skills to rigorous and relevant experiences.

Next Steps
We continue to update our child study team handbook with various methods of data gathering so teachers can provide specific supports for particular students.

The school uses Assessment Tracker (K12 Systems/Sapphire) to store student data from our Google doc spreadsheet, which enables us to generate a variety of reports to assist us at our data team meetings as we review student progress. We are also using Assessment Tracker to produce our PA Core Standards-Based Progress Reports.

We also update the materials that may be used during the Excel period to meet student needs. Our new English Language Arts program has remediation, ESL, and enrichment components. It also has leveled books (approaching, on-level, beyond) for guided reading on the same topics and genre, which are being taught in the classroom as whole-group instruction. Our science textbooks also have leveled books on each unit for students to read and discuss the same science concepts covered in class, but at their instructional reading level during the Excel period.

We review the results of our state assessments and determine if our students have made a year’s worth of progress/growth in addition to their achievement performance. This information will assist us in making data-based decisions on how we should further respond to the interventions and the instruction presented during the Excel period.

During the past year, many of our teachers’ student learning objectives were based on student progress resulting from the Excel period. These include 80 percent mastery or higher on reading inventories, a growth of at least one reading level using Running Records, and a 10 percent increase from baseline and benchmark data for oral reading fluency.

Our Excel period has now become the time of day that we know students are excelling with the necessary remediation, extra practice and application, and enrichment extensions that help them to be more successful during the rest of the instructional school day.

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