SCALING TO THE TOP TO CLOSE THE GAP

Special education and general education teachers teamed up to implement Marzano's proficiency scales and improve student skills.

By Andrea J. Spas and Steven A. Morrone

At Chariho Middle School in Wood River Junction, Rhode Island, closing achievement gaps for students with disabilities is a topic of frequent discussion, especially as it relates to the English-language arts curricula that is aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). At this rural school, 10 percent of the 950 students have individual education plans and 22 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch, so closing achievement gaps is a perennial issue. The implementation of new curricula has led to further discussion about the importance of ongoing collaboration between general and special educators to align levels of expectation and adjust instructional practice to close achievement gaps.

We struck gold when we—as a leadership team—read an article about the systematic use of educational researcher Robert J. Marzano's proficiency scales to scaffold instruction and accelerate learning for struggling readers. Light bulbs lit up our thinking as we thought about this work and how it could be the solution to our ongoing problem regarding closing the gap.

Get Started

After establishing that we would adopt Marzano's proficiency scales, we formally defined proficiency scales and their purpose during a subsequent special education content meeting. A "think sheet" guided teachers' work and contained the following focus questions:

- How can the scale help students to monitor their own progress toward learning goals?
- Considering the academic language of thinking, which words are most used in specific content areas (e.g., evaluate, analyze, synthesize, apply, summarize, etc.)?
- What evidence is acceptable for the different levels of achievement?
- Is this content specific?
- What are some examples of levels of mastery?

The discussion around these focus questions led the group to determine that the proficiency scales could be a springboard for collaborative discussions between the general educator, student, and special educator about how the student is progressing toward his or her goals and how that knowledge connects to classroom performance and tailored instruction.

Plan a Professional Development Day

A couple of weeks into the new academic year, we met to solidify our understanding of how to use the proficiency scales to close achievement gaps. Once we developed our common vision as administrators, we designed the agenda for our first professional development day with two guiding principles:

1. Increase communication between special educators and general educators regarding student progress toward standards aligned to individualized education program (IEP) goals; and
2. Connect students to their own learning.

Two critical steps had to take place before our professional development session, so we charged staff with a couple of tasks. First, it was important that each special educator felt comfortable and secure working with the general educator. Each resource teacher was asked to identify one regular educator who they would like to work with throughout the professional development. Second, we wanted staff to create proficiency scales connected to a common IEP area. We asked resource teachers to review the standards that are connected to their IEPs and identify one area that they could target in developing a proficiency scale.

We met in late September 2014 for the first session with a goal of creating proficiency scales aligned to the CCSS and related IEP goal areas. Staff were informed of what the end goal would look like once scales were used routinely with their students:

- There are open conversations between regular and special education teachers around shared need for a student;
- Teachers gain a "true read" on where the student needs to be;
- Teachers gain a better understanding of whether the student is ready for the next level of instruction;
- The bar is raised: there are high expectations (alignment to CCSS); and
- Students are actively connected to their learning.

We shared with teachers that the ultimate, end result is students communicating about their progress and developing "I can" statements.

Model the Process

After reviewing of the purpose and vision, we wanted to model the process for taking a standard and breaking it down with the progressions. We used an English-language arts writing anchor standard that targeted argument writing and broke the standard down with the progressions for grades 4 through 10. The group then applied this same work for informational writing.

Although special educators had been introduced to the proficiency scales the previous spring, this was new information for the regular educators, so we provided a review of the scales. A sixth-grade argument writing proficiency scale was shared with the group. Using the steps outlined within *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* (2014), we reviewed the process for drafting proficiency scales. We wanted teachers to become familiar with the scales and felt that this was best done by asking teachers to examine student work. Teachers were provided with argument writing samples and were asked to determine where the student fell on the proficiency scale. Teachers worked on this individually and then shared how they arrived at their alignment.

A regular educator and special educator worked as a team to create a proficiency scale connected to a writing IEP goal for a student they shared. The completed scales were put on large posters and shared with the group. Pairs then conducted a gallery walk and provided feedback on each proficiency scale using "I'd like" and "I wonder" statements. The proficiency scales and feedback were then reviewed as a full group. Partners then had time to revise their scales based on feedback from the group. Once proficiency scales were completed, staff shared them with one another.

We knew that ongoing communication between the regular and educator teachers would be critical to sustaining the efficacy of the scales. So, with a shared student in mind, each regular and special educator team was asked to develop a communication plan aligned to the guiding principles shared at the start of the professional development session.

We posed this guiding question to the group: How can you use the proficiency scales to bridge communication, modify instruction and service delivery, and hold students accountable for their progress? Partners created a communication plan that best fit their grade level, schedule, and collaboration needs. Each team shared their communication plan with the group, and administrators and colleagues shared feedback and ideas, including ways technology can support scheduling barriers.

Assess the Method

To sustain momentum, we held follow-up sessions with the special educators throughout the year. These sessions allowed staff to develop additional proficiency scales, extend this work to math, refine communication plans, and provide time for teachers to share feedback on implementation of the scales. We took a pulse of the work through an online survey and staff were provided with opportunities to share what worked, what didn't, and what was still in progress.

The survey asked teachers how the scales have improved collaboration with regular educators, how their service delivery evolved, and if students are learning more about themselves as learners. Overall, we are pleased with the responses. Teachers shared how the proficiency scales helped students generalize their skills to the classroom, better informed

instruction, and led to more focused conversations between special and general educators. Teachers reported that students had a better understanding of their IEP goals and where they needed to be. The following are responses that teachers shared regarding general feedback about the scales:

- "Pinpointing exactly where a student is on a given standard helps the special educator and the classroom teacher to strategize how to get the student to the next level."
- "My special educator and I developed a proficiency scale for writing informational text. Now we have plotted where our students are and have brainstormed strategies to help them achieve. We are going to put our plans in place and then score a future piece together to see if improvement has been made by comparing their performance."
- "Seeing the specific bullet of a standard side by side with previous and later grades was extremely interesting. Made it pretty clear what each grade level should focus on."

We are excited by how far both the regular educators and special educators took this work. Shared expectations for student proficiency paired with ongoing communication between general and special educators is critical to closing achievement gaps among student with disabilities. The Marzano proficiency scales are an instrumental resource in bridging these two pieces. The scales allow teachers to coordinate understanding of where a student is and where a student needs to go.

Not only are general and special educators gaining a better understanding of student performance aligned to the CCSS and IEP goals, but they are then coordinating, tailoring, and adjusting their instruction based on this understanding. Most importantly, students are actively connected to their learning and are equal contributors and collaborators along their path to proficiency. ▣

Andrea J. Spas is assistant director of special education in the Chariho Regional School District in Rhode Island.

Steven A. Morrone is the assistant principal of teaching and learning at Chariho Middle School in Rhode Island.