Bridging the Gap Between “I Can’t” and “I Can” With RTI

When students feel that they are successful, their confidence level rises, and they are more likely to try harder. Whether educators are seeking to accelerate students in areas of giftedness or bridge gaps in learning, students’ needs are individual. As we work as a team to individualize the process and instruction for each child—taking a closer look at the at-risk students—we are bridging the gap between “I can’t” and “I can.”

Florine Dial Johnston Elementary School in Cherokee County, Georgia, implemented numerous response to intervention (RTI) strategies at each level of student need to convince students that they can succeed in learning math. Cherokee County School District (CCSD) students score lower in math on nationally normed tests than they do in reading and language arts, and Johnston’s adequate yearly progress data also shows a need for growth in math.

To help increase these scores, students are identified and offered Early Intervention Program (EIP) services based on those that show a deficiency in reading or math on benchmarking assessments administered to all students three times yearly. Students that score at or below the 75th percentile are considered “at-risk” and are ranked based on those who show the greatest need. Then, EIP classes are formed allowing those with the greatest need to be served first, until all allotments are filled. Johnston has two full-time EIP positions and one half-time position.

The state-funded EIP is designed to help students bridge gaps and reinforce classroom learning. The program provides additional instructional resources to help students who are performing below grade level obtain the necessary academic skills to quickly reach grade level performance. CCSD collaboratively trained each school team on how to find, implement, track, and report student responses to interventions in reading, writing, math, and behavior.

Teachers provide differentiation within their classrooms, so that the needs of individual students are met.

Once trained, school representatives independently redelivered the information to each school faculty.

Johnston divides students into four levels of need. Tier I students, which make up 66 percent of all regular education students, have not specifically displayed a weakness in any area. Tier II students, 14 percent of Johnston students, are those who have demonstrated a weakness in math and/or reading and qualify to receive services through the EIP program. Tier III students, who represent up 66 percent of all regular education students, have not specifically displayed a weakness in any area. Tier II students, 14 percent of Johnston students, are those who have demonstrated a weakness in math and/or reading and qualify to receive services through the EIP program. Tier IV qualifies for special education services.

Achievement-Boosting Strategies

Using grants funded with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) money, Johnston implemented several strategies to boost math progress. At the Tier I level, third-through fifth-grade students participate in “Math Wars,” with sixth graders facilitating. In this program created by Principal Gena Hood and led by the math committee, students compete by homerooms to find the correct answer first to problems spanning each math strand for their grade level. The sixth graders check the answers and keep score. Several other components include math jingles, or math fluency songs; hand-held, interactive tools to increase math fluency; and daily math journals in which students complete a problem of the day and then write an explanation of their process and answer. We also use the math performance tasks provided by the Georgia Department of Education that simulate the depth and rigor of processing skills students must master. Many teachers use the book *Times Tables the Fun Way* to help teach facts with a visually concrete element.

Our teachers have been trained on various game-oriented strategies to extend learning, refine skills, and increase motivation and involvement within the confines of the mathematical lesson being taught. In addition, Pearson’s Success Maker math program assists teachers in differentiating to meet the needs of all students. This online program presents students with leveled problems in a game format. When a student answers correctly, the level of difficulty increases. An incorrect answer prompts an immediate tutorial on solving the problem. Using these strategies and others, teachers provide differentiation within their classrooms, so that the needs of individual students are met.

Four-Tier Approach

If, after the multitude of teaching strategies, the student demonstrates a weakness based on specific standardized tests and criteria, then that student becomes eligible for the EIP. Three times each year, students complete a benchmark assessment. The AIMSweb subscription purchased through grant funds provides the probes used to assess students in reading and math. AIMSweb is a benchmark and progress monitoring system that reports results to students, parents, teachers, and administrators via a web-based data management and reporting system to determine response to intervention.
When scores are gathered the EIP team identifies students that fall at or beneath the 25th percentile in any area. Once a weakness is identified, the student becomes eligible for EIP services and is then considered a Tier II student. Based on level of need, teachers use progress monitoring probes to measure the effectiveness of the academic interventions and form instructional decisions from the information collected.

Within Tier II, EIP is the primary intervention, as students are pulled out of science or social studies for a reinforcement of math. EIP teachers use carefully selected, research-based interventions that have been approved for use by our school district. Strategies include various games, hands-on approaches, interactive online tools, and small group work. Johnston also has implemented a peer tutor program in which students in grades 4-6 apply to tutor students in kindergarten through third grade. This one-on-one tutoring is done each morning from 7:30 until 8:00 a.m., with activities prescribed by the younger child’s teacher.

As these interventions are being implemented, teachers monitor student progress every two to three weeks to ensure that students are responding positively to the intervention. If students are not making gains in their weak area, then teachers collaborate, and an extra level of support is added. The extra intervention could be implemented in EIP, by the classroom teacher, or in the after-school instructional extension program that meets twice weekly. If the student is not making the desired gains, that student can move into the more intensive Tier III.

Tiers II and III are very similar in administration of interventions on a routine basis. In Tier III, students are monitored weekly to ensure the student is responding to the additional level and intensity of interventions, as their need is greater. Teachers monitor progress often to ensure that each student is responding positively. At Johnston, AIMSWeb houses all of the student data and creates graphs to show the students’ growth over time as well as provides the progress monitoring probes used by EIP teachers.

If a student continues to demonstrate a weakness or show little to no response despite the intensive interventions, he or she may become eligible for Tier IV, special education. Upon collaboration and parental consent, assessments are administered, and the student is offered a strong framework of support based on the IDEA Act of 2004, ensuring services to all students with disabilities. Special education teachers use Singapore Math, TouchMath, Partner Games, and other research-based resources.

Collaboration With Parents
Throughout the process, parental involvement is critical. From the beginning steps of identifying weaknesses to meetings confirming eligibility of a student with special needs, parents are included in the process. An EIP parent informational night is held at the beginning of each semester to educate parents on how to best help their student at home, and teachers supply parents with many interventions and at-home study resources. Parents are also invited to every meeting concerning their child, and collaboration is encouraged.

In fifth grade alone, students in Tiers II and III recorded tremendous growth in math. Tier I students registered an average growth of 11.74 points from Spring 2010 to Spring 2011 on state assessments, while students in Tiers II and III showed an average growth of 30.08 points. Students at Johnston Elementary are making great gains in math as individual needs are being met at a wide variety of levels. The various scaffolds we have put in place allow the vast majority of our students to declare “I can!”

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