We all know them—the students who are not keeping up with their peers in class. They know who they are, too, and even though many put on a front of indifference, it is a source of deep pain and guilt for most. Many students fall behind in the first few years of schooling and never catch up. They become resigned to 12 years of failure at school. And after they leave school? Statistics show a life of disadvantage.

There are no magic bullets in education. We are not going to close the learning gap, but we can narrow the gap substantially and turn around the lives of a large number of young people who would otherwise face a daunting future.

Models of Provision

Even with the very best classroom teaching, a significant proportion of students fail to make satisfactory progress because they start behind their peers from Day 1 and go on to define one end of what typically becomes a widening achievement gap. Unfortunately, current structures compound the problem. The norm is still an Industrial Age assembly-line model of schooling that assumes equal readiness to learn and equal rates of learning. Students are grouped into grades based primarily on age rather than their starting points for instruction. At the end of the year, most students move on to the next grade, to new curriculum objectives and standards, and to new teachers, regardless of how well they mastered the objectives of the preceding grade. Those who don’t move up are retained and required to repeat the same instructional program that didn’t work the previous year. It’s not hard to figure out what the likely outcomes are for those who don’t make adequate progress in the first two grades under such a depersonalized set of arrangements.

The assembly-line model was a great invention when universal elementary education was first established 130 years ago, but it is has outlived its usefulness. It doesn’t deliver basic entitlements that are now enshrined in law.

What is the new model of schooling? As we elaborate in our book Breakthrough, the modern model of schooling is based on the “Triple-P” core components: personalization, precision, and professional learning. These must be operationalized through a set of design elements. Distributed leadership and coordination at all levels makes it all work (see Figure 1).

Six Core Beliefs

To realize the Triple-P components, it is necessary to have certain core beliefs and understandings in place.

1. **All students can achieve high standards, given sufficient time and support.** The belief in the potential of students to learn is conditional on sufficient time and support being provided. This implies that time and support must be conceptualized as variables, not as fixed quantities. The assembly-line model of schooling tends to treat them as fixed, with all students getting the same amount of instructional time and the same amount of support. Low-performing students often need significant additional time and support to catch up. Equal treatment will lead to very unequal outcomes.
2. **All teachers can teach students to high standards, given the right conditions and assistance.** This belief affirms the capacity of trained teachers to teach to high standards, but is conditional on the necessary structures and conditions being present and the provision of relevant professional learning opportunities embedded within the daily life of the teacher. If the conditions and assistance are not present, teachers cannot be expected to meet the needs of the most difficult-to-teach students.

3. **Intervention in the learning process should occur when there is an indication of a failure to learn.** You don’t wait until the end of the year to find you have a problem or wait until the summer vacation to fix the problem. Failure will have been reinforced and the students will have slipped too far behind to catch up. This is not to say that the summer vacation is not a good time to provide extra support, but rather, that intervention must start much earlier. Intervention should kick in at the beginning of the year as soon as student starting points have been established.

4. **Early intervention resources should be focused on the early years of schooling.** This is a tough message. Resources in education are always limited. Although there is a moral and a legal imperative to respond to the needs of all students at whatever level of education, resources will be most effective when the most resource-intensive interventions are focused on the early years of schooling. There are few, if any, programs that have been shown to be successful in correcting reading problems beyond the second year of schooling (Kennedy, Berman, and Demalone 1986). Schools have a narrow window of opportunity to assist struggling students to catch up. This does not mean that later efforts are a waste. These efforts may improve learning outcomes for targeted students, but the data show that these students are not likely to catch up to their peers.

5. **Low-performing students require focused instruction.** We refer to this in *Breakthrough* as precision and it cannot happen without attention to the third core component, professional learning. It implies:

   - Knowing precisely the strengths and weaknesses of each student at the point of instruction through accurate formative assessment;
   - Knowing the appropriate instructional response and, in particular, when and how to use which instructional strategies and matched resources; and
   - Having the classroom structures, routines, and tools to deliver differentiated instruction and focused teaching on a daily basis.

Of course, achieving precision in instruction requires expertise from professionally trained teachers who spend time at the beginning of the year establishing students’ starting points. It implies that they will have a comprehensive set of easy-to-use formative assessments at their disposal and a means for quickly recording and analyzing the pattern of results so that it can influence their classroom teaching tomorrow, not some time in the distant future.

6. **Good first instruction by the classroom teacher is the key.** The needs of low-achieving learners should be met within the regular classroom. Certainly there will be a need within all schools for English language learning, special education, and intervention teachers who will provide intensive small-group or one-on-one assistance to students. Highly trained teachers with specialist expertise are expensive to deploy and cannot be expected to deal with a large number of students. With good first instruction by regular teachers, especially in the early years, the number requiring out-of-class specialist assistance can be kept to a level that is manageable. It is imperative that the first year of formal schooling be all day, five days a week, and with a highly structured yet individualized curriculum promoting both social and cognitive development. The time for intensive one-on-one intervention is in the second year of schooling when acceleration is still possible and the gap is not beyond the reach of intervention or classroom programs to close.

**In-Class Intervention**

If classroom teachers are to be the front line in the school’s intervention strategy, attention needs to be given to equipping them for the task. This highlights the importance of the third of the Triple-P core components, professional learning.
To meet the needs of the full range of students within the classroom, and especially the needs of low-achieving students, it will be important that teachers are proficient in the effective use of small instructional groups and a variety of powerful instructional strategies to provide focused teaching. Flexible and constantly changing small instructional groups allow teachers to teach to the needs of individual students.

By teaching six to eight students in a small group within the regular class, a teacher can ensure that all students receive instruction at the point of need more regularly than can be achieved by individual conferencing. There is now a considerable body of evidence to indicate that substantial gains in student learning are possible if use is made of small-group instruction (Abrami et al. 2000). But this will only happen when teachers know how to put in place classroom-management routines and design activities that allow small-group instruction to proceed without disruption from the rest of the class. They may also need assistance and encouragement in setting up task management boards, time clocks, table organizers, and transition routines to ensure that students are able to operate productively when the teacher is engaged in small-group instruction.

Specialist Interventions

The most effective intervention programs will generally be one-on-one or small-group programs (Lauer et al. 2006). As these are generally expensive to operate, it is important that the school makes a longer-term commitment to a carefully selected program and ensures that it has several teachers fully trained to implement it.

Our own experience over a decade of collecting data from many hundreds of schools in Australia and the United States with Reading Recovery attests to the effectiveness of this program in catching up students in the second year of schooling to their peers in reading. Despite the evidence of its effectiveness, however, many of the schools with which we have worked have been reluctant to make the longer-term commitment and to provide sufficient coverage within the school. In other schools, the program has been introduced before first instruction by the class teacher has been fine-tuned to the stage at which the number of students in need of one-on-one intervention has been reduced to manageable proportions.

Intervening and providing extra assistance to those students who fall behind involves a lot of organizational and professional challenges. But it also requires lots of commitment and moral purpose. These qualities need to be manifested at the school, community, district, and state/federal levels. In many ways, the true test of a public education system is how well it responds to those who find the greatest difficulty in learning.

References


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<th>On the Same Page</th>
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<td>Here are suggested questions related to this article that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.</td>
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1. To what extent do we as a faculty embrace the six core beliefs advanced by the authors?

2. What are some of the conditions necessary to help low-performing students?

3. According to the authors, what are some of the ways we might intervene in the learning process at the first indication of a student’s failure to learn?

4. What action steps do we need to take so that each classroom teacher in this school has a comprehensive set of easy-to-use formative assessments to establish “student starting points” as well as influence and target their instruction?

5. What kind of support do teachers in this school need to become proficient in the use of flexible and constantly changing small instructional six- to eight-student groups and simultaneously manage them without disruption from the rest of the class?

6. What are the professional learning opportunities that must be embedded in the daily schedule of our school so that we as a faculty are better able to provide “safety nets” that help low-performing students achieve high levels of proficiency?

—Created by **Stephen Gould**, a consultant and leadership coach with 20 years experience as an elementary school principal.