Here are some intervention ideas that can help remove barriers to learning for at-risk students.

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Schools strive to educate fully every child who walks through their doors. Yet many schools find themselves burdened with large numbers of struggling learners who have not yet acquired the necessary foundation skills to successfully master the curriculum. Once learning deficits emerge, they can easily become chronic. Research indicates, for example, that young students whose reading skills fall significantly below those of their peers are at high risk for continuing reading difficulties throughout their school career (Stanovich 1986).

IN BRIEF

Principals can draw on a large number of research-based strategies to help struggling students. Many are associated with Universal Design for Learning, which advocates limited interventions that are useful for all students. The author provides strategies for identifying the cause of poor academic performance and taking appropriate remedial action.
Principals can draw on a large number of research-based strategies developed within the past two decades to help their school close the learning gap for struggling students. However, they should recognize that this growing knowledge base about effective interventions might also present a potential pitfall. Teachers might easily feel overwhelmed when asked to change their instructional routine to incorporate “best practices” in intervention. However, they will generally be less resistant to adopting more inclusive teaching strategies if they understand the unifying “big idea” that underlies these intervention strategies.

One such “big idea” for accommodating diverse learners is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). According to the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), the concepts that underlie UDL originated with a group of innovative architects who discovered that designing public buildings and spaces to meet the needs of the physically disabled actually improve these environments for everyone. For example, curb cuts originally designed to permit passage by those in wheelchairs also have benefited those riding bicycles or pushing baby carriages.

The philosophy that drives UDL—that “designing for the divergent needs of special populations [in classrooms] increases usability for everyone” (CAST 2003)—embraces several principles:

- Children with learning or physical disabilities do not represent a distinctly different category, but instead fall “along a continuum of learner differences” (CAST 2003).
- Educators are most successful when they adjust content and delivery of instruction to maximize success for all students, rather than concentrating on the needs of the most challenged learners.
- Instruction should not be tied to a sole source of information (e.g., textbooks), but instead ought to incorporate multiple resources, including digital materials, to illustrate key concepts and reinforce learning.

“...Schools should carefully screen academic interventions and choose only those...validated by empirical research.”

Universal Design for Learning is based on the conviction that a few key classroom accommodations can empower teachers to manage the needs of a diverse range of learners. In keeping with this philosophy of promoting universal access to instruction, we present a set of intervention ideas that can help instructional leaders remove barriers to learning for at-risk students:

**Find the Root Cause.** When a student does poorly on class or homework assignments, there are two possible explanations: Either the student lacks the skills to do the work or is not sufficiently motivated. One simple test that schools can use to decide which one applies is the “Can’t Do vs. Won’t Do” assessment (Witt and Beck 1999). The student independently completes two similar assignments (e.g., math worksheets), first with no incentive and then with an incentive that the student finds rewarding.

If the student completes significantly more work when offered an incentive, the root cause of the academic problem is probably poor motivation. The teacher should encourage and praise the student for effort, and perhaps offer rewards for work done correctly and on time. Little or no change in performance, even with an incentive, suggests that the problem is due to a skill deficit and the student should receive remedial instruction.

**Identify the Student’s Learning Stage.** Learning is a complex activity that advances through several stages. The Instructional Hierarchy (Haring et al. 1978) gives teachers a framework for linking a student’s stage of learning to appropriate instructional strategies.

The **acquisition phase** marks the point when the student is just learning the target skill. The goal for this stage is for the student to perform that skill accurately. Once accuracy is achieved, the student moves into the **fluency phase**. Here, the goal is to perform that skill quickly and without difficulty. Students who are both accurate and fluent in a skill advance to the **generalization phase**, where the goal is to use the skill in settings or situations where it would be most useful.

Teachers can use the Instructional Hierarchy to identify a student’s current stage of learning and match that student to appropriate academic interventions. For example, a teacher might provide individualized support, encouragement, and immediate corrective feedback for a student who is just learning to read basic text (acquisition phase). The same teacher might create an intervention for a child who reads fluently but seldom picks up a book outside of the classroom (generalization phase) by arranging for the child’s parent to reward the student for every book read at home.

**Match Students to Appropriate Levels of Instruction.** Students given academic material that is too easy or too difficult will not perform well and are less likely to be motivated. They do best when their work is adjusted so that the ratio of known to unknown material on a given learning task is high (Gettinger and Seibert 2002).

**Adopt Evidence-based Intervention Strategies.** Rather than selecting intervention ideas by trial and error, schools should carefully screen academic interventions and choose only those that are validated by sound empirical research.

**Require Active Student Response.** It is difficult for teachers to determine whether students have learned and know when and how to use cognitive skills and strategies. Struggling learners in particular have difficulty in grasping and applying higher-level thinking strategies. Teachers should structure learning activities to require students to demonstrate their learning in observable ways (Heward 2003). For example, a teacher may prompt students to respond chorally to yes/no...
questions to gain an immediate indication of those who have not yet learned the material. Or students may be divided into cooperative learning groups, with each student responsible for teaching part of a lesson to his or her peers. In both examples, “thinking activities” are translated into behaviors that teachers can observe and evaluate.

Be Explicit in Teaching Strategies. Because struggling learners “do not generalize problem-solving strategies and skills effectively” (Shaw 2000), teachers cannot assume that the majority of their students will internalize a learning strategy based on a single verbal explanation. Instead, the teacher should present the strategy as a step-by-step model, first demonstrating the strategy using a “think aloud” approach, then having students use the strategy while offering encouragement and corrective feedback, and finally prompting students to employ the strategy independently.

Review, Review, Review. Acquiring strong, basic academic skills is a primary goal for struggling learners (Shaw 2000). However, too often these students learn skills at a rudimentary level but do not have sufficient opportunities to practice them until they have been fully mastered. Teachers may be reluctant to promote regular drill and practice because it can be quite time-consuming to create imaginative, motivating practice activities at basic levels. But without a programmed drill-and-practice component, marginal students will probably fail to master a target skill. Even after a skill has been mastered, students must be given periodic opportunities to review the skill in order to retain it over time.

Give Students Opportunities for Choice. When teachers give their classes opportunities to choose how they structure their learning activities, student motivation to learn increases and behavior problems often go down (Kern et al. 2002). Students develop a sense of autonomy when permitted to engage in even modest choice-making (e.g., selecting books to read for an assignment or deciding where to sit in class) that gives them voice and a sense of ownership in their learning.

Monitor Student Progress Frequently. There are no ironclad guarantees that a struggling learner will respond well to a particular academic intervention. The teacher should collect data frequently to monitor the student’s progress. This allows the teacher to judge within weeks rather than months whether an intervention is effective or needs to be changed.

Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is a valid and reliable assessment tool, ideal for tracking student progress in such basic academic areas as reading, math, writing, spelling, and pre-literacy skills (Shinn 1989). CBM probes can be created by the classroom teacher, are easy to administer and score, and provide relevant information about a student’s fluency and accuracy in the skill being assessed.

Develop Schoolwide Programs for Common Academic Problems. Schools often discover that they have a number of students with similar academic problems. An elementary school principal may find, for instance, a high number of academic referrals from second-grade teachers concerned about slow readers. A school might quickly become overwhelmed if it tried to create intensive, customized intervention for each child in a large pool of similarly needy students. A more efficient approach might be to put together a building-level program that addresses the shared academic needs of groups of students. Using this approach, the principal with numerous referrals for slow readers in the second grade might start a cross-age, peer-tutoring program in reading. Older students would be trained to use simple, research-based strategies to increase the reading fluency of younger children.

Create an Intervention Team. The collective wisdom and expertise of groups of educators far outstrips that of any one person. Principals who establish intervention teams with strong teacher representation benefit from the shared experience of individual members,
making intervention planning more manageable while often resulting in better student outcomes. Intervention teams are most effective when they follow a structured problem-solving model and promote the use of evidence-based interventions.

References


Witt, J. and Beck, R. One-Minute Academic Functional Assessment and Interventions: “Can’t” Do It...or “Won’t” Do It? Longmont, Colo.: SoprisWest, 1999.

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WEB RESOURCES
A large collection of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) resources can be found online at www.interventioncentral.org/htm/docs/interventions/cbmwarehouse.shtml.

A useful source for empirically validated instructional strategies is the What Works Clearinghouse, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. www.w-w-c.org

Intervention Central contains a collection of research-based intervention scripts to address both academic and behavioral concerns. www.interventioncentral.org

Specific intervention strategies that are tied to the Instructional Hierarchy can be found at www.jimwrightonline.com/pdf/docs/instrhier.pdf.

Detailed training materials to start a cross-age peer-tutoring program can be downloaded from www.interventioncentral.org/htm/docs/interventions/rdngfluency/prtutor.shtml.

Training materials for one highly successful intervention team model, School-Based Intervention Teams, can be accessed at www.interventioncentral.org/htm/docs/interventions/sbit.shtml.

Discover a wealth of information about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at www.cast.org/teaching/everystudent/.

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