

# Staff Development for Teaching Slow Learners

If you have noticed that your teachers need more “tricks up their sleeves” for working with slow learners, you can initiate a staff-development plan for changing that. Here are some suggestions for using the time, resources, and staff that you already have to improve the teaching of slow learners.

**1. Ask your teachers what they need.** Distribute a short, needs-assessment survey to your staff so they can indicate how you can help them become more effective teachers. Many will want to improve their repertoire of strategies for teaching slow learners. If this is the case at your school, plan a staff development unit around teaching slow learners.

**2. Determine which students are considered slow learners.** Analyze the survey results, independently or with a small, representative group like your school’s child-study team, to better define the nature and scope of the problems as well as the target population by asking the following:

- Which students do teachers report as slow learners?
- Are there any emerging patterns? For instance, do teachers also indicate that they want to learn more about working with bilingual students?
- Could some of the slow learners also be bilingual?
- What behaviors do these youngsters display?
- What do teachers need to learn in order to become better at meeting these needs?

**3. Determine why these students are considered slow learners.** Brainstorm with teachers to help identify some of the root causes of slow learning. Some examples are:

- Lack of English-language understanding;
- Preoccupation with home problems;
- Weak memory, attention span, processing, or social skills;
- Low self-esteem;
- Lack of organizational skills;
- Younger than rest of class;
- Lack of exposure to school, books, or rigors of the school day;
- Reading, writing, or math difficulties;
- Health issues (past or present); and
- Frequent absences from school.

Some of the root causes for ineffective or frustrated teachers are:

- Lack of experience in classroom differentiation;
- Few active learning experiences or visual examples;
- Weak classroom management;
- Lack of involvement with ancillary staff (e.g., social worker, reading teacher, and speech and language therapist);
- Infrequent oral or written communication with child’s parent;
- Few chances for teacher to check for understanding; and
- Lack of meaningful practice of what was taught both in class and for homework.

**4. Decide what you want your teachers to learn.** To more effectively teach slow learners, teachers should learn to:

- Differentiate classroom instruction, improve organizational skills, and effectively manage classrooms;
- Team-teach and promote cooperative learning;
- Modify materials to meet the needs of slow learners, reduce distracting information in class materials, and plan work at the appropriate level for success;
- Check for understanding, promote active learning, provide concrete examples in lessons, and motivate students;
- Communicate with hard-to-reach parents;
- Work with bilingual students;
- Use educational games, puzzles, and other reinforcement techniques;
- Use multiple modalities (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile) when giving directions, explanations, and information;
- Develop a behavioral contract and use effective behavior modification techniques; and
- Teach students to:
  - Take notes when reading;
  - Outline reading materials;
  - Use context clues;
  - Highlight important information;
  - Find auditory cues to help them remember information;
  - Maintain folders and other organizational skills; and
  - Cue the teacher when they do not understand something.

**5. Decide how you will proceed.** Develop and share a plan based on the needs survey and your subsequent group discussions. For a specified amount of time, perhaps half the school year, develop a daily, weekly, or monthly calendar of events focused on teaching the slow learner. Be specific about what you are going to do and when you are going to do it. Given the confines of your school day, examples of what to do (events or activities) and when to do it (faculty or grade meetings, lunch, before or after school, etc.) might include:

- A presentation by a staff member or outside consultant at a faculty, department, or grade-level meeting;
- A weekly or monthly newsletter with helpful ideas, some of which could be contributed by various teachers;
- A viewing and discussion of a video about teaching slow learners; and
- A page on the school Web site dedicated to information about teaching slow learners.

**6. Visit classrooms and then share teachers' best practices.** Let teachers know that when you visit their classrooms, you will be looking for specific strategies that they are using to more effectively work with slow learners. Invite them to tell you what they are most proud of when you visit their classrooms. Then ask some of those teachers if they would share a strategy and any accompanying materials at the next staff meeting. Select two or three teachers to present at each meeting and give them the recognition that they deserve.

**7. Capitalize on the expertise of your child-study team.** Child-study teams usually include ancillary staff, such as a school psychologist, guidance counselor, social worker, reading teacher, bilingual specialist, speech and language therapist, as well as special education and general education teachers. Ensure that they are all equipped to help teachers be more effective with the students they bring to the child-study team. How are they helping the teacher to work better with their students who may have memory, focusing, motivation, or family problems that interfere with them keeping up with the rest of the class? Here are some ways your team can work for you:

- Each year, introduce the child-study team to the faculty. Make sure that the team emphasizes that their job is to assist teachers to work effectively with any child who is having a problem, not only those who may be suspected of having a disability.
- Attend at least one child-study team meeting a week. Check to see that the most appropriate team members are present for each individual case.
- Ensure that most of the meeting time is spent developing a practical, written plan for teachers to follow. Too often, the majority of time at these meetings is spent by a teacher venting about a child. Integral to the plan should be a class-

room visit by one of the child-study team members and a date for the teacher and team to follow up on the plan.

Using this theme-based approach to staff training will ensure that you are maximizing the time you have with your teachers to teach them how to work with slow learners.

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