Meeting Each Student’s Needs

If your school is like mine, it probably has many students who are not considered to be typical learners. Every child has unique learning styles, brain patterns, background knowledge, cognitive skills, work habits, interests, and strengths. While this is a beautiful facet of our diverse and changing society, it provides an additional challenge to meeting every child’s individualized needs. To accommodate their education, most schools implement gifted and talented and special education programs, learning labs, and other specialized services with the noble goal of providing individualized attention and learning experiences.

At my school, we strive to provide 482 individualized learning experiences for our 482 students. When we encounter a child who is struggling academically, socially, or behaviorally, we rally the troops and institute a brainstorming intervention team, which comprises the student’s teachers and parents and building experts (e.g., instructional coaches or resource teachers). The team’s goal is to identify a different strategy (or series of interventions) that will help get the child back on track. Then, for a period of several weeks, we monitor the success of those interventions and reconvene if necessary to try out new innovative strategies. This procedure is a form of response to intervention (RTI).

As a mentor in NAESP’s Peer Assisted Leadership Services (PALS), I guided Taj Jensen during his first year as a principal. I raised the following questions to generate his thinking about these issues and to prompt his actions:

- What is the standard operating procedure in your building when you have identified students who are struggling at school? How do you ensure the steps you take are in the best interest of each child?
- How can you set up an intervention team at your school? Who would serve on it and how would you sell the idea to your staff?
- How can you tell if your staff is ready to use RTI?
- How do your teachers feel about testing struggling children? How can you combat negative thinking so that classroom teachers view themselves as part of the solution?
- What specific steps can you take to build a culture in which teachers brainstorm interventions automatically—without a formal setting?
- What interventions are available at your school, in your district, and in your community? How far off the beaten track are you willing to let your staff go in order to meet the needs of each individual child?

—Pete Hall

New to Principal. This new column features the perspectives of two principals—a mentor and a protégé—as they reflect on how they approached a single school leadership issue.

A
fter reflecting on Pete’s questions during my first year as principal, I urged my school’s leadership team to investigate our approach to providing interventions for our struggling students. However, before convening our intervention team—Student Success Team (SST)—we needed to contemplate the impact it would have on our students by asking: how would we implement a series of intentional strategies to help students; how these new practices would affect struggling children who have not yet been identified with specific learning disabilities; and how these practices would affect the disproportionate number of children who have been identified with specific learning disabilities and who are receiving special education services within our building.

The success of our SST will depend on whether it is appropriately implemented by highly trained professionals who understand the purpose and intent of interventions. The staff agreed that we needed to create a school climate that fosters a love of learning, collaboration about best practices, and a spirit of true differentiation by providing the following six elements:

- High-quality, research-based instruction and behavioral supports in general education;
- Scientific, research-based interventions focused specifically on individual student difficulties and delivered with appropriate intensity;
- Use of a collaborative approach by school staff to identify need, develop a plan, implement interventions, and monitor the entire process;
- Data-based documentation reflecting continuous monitoring of student performance and progress during interventions;
- Documentation of parent involvement throughout the process; and
- Systematic assessment and documentation of the intervention, attesting to the fidelity and consistency of its implementation.

—Taj Jensen

Pete Hall is principal of Sheridan Elementary School in Spokane, Washington. His e-mail address is petehall@educationhall.com.

Taj Jensen is principal of Onalaska Elementary School in Onalaska, Washington. His e-mail address is tjensen@onysdwed.net.edu.

For more information about PALS, visit www.naesp.org.