CHAPTER 5

MEET ME WHERE I AM AND CHALLENGE ME

The school team provides support for students with disabilities, yet still engages them in rigorous, grade-level content every step of the way.

THE PROBLEM: "WATERING DOWN" INSTRUCTION DOESN'T HELP STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Effective teachers look for ways to differentiate instruction between groups and individualize instruction for specific students. But too often, instead of maintaining the rigor of the material and building students up to that level, school teams "water down" curriculum for struggling students to below the grade level of an average student.

Sometimes this happens because teachers are not given the resources or professional development to understand how to differentiate instruction effectively. Without support, instead of helping students with special needs tackle challenging material, they often lower the bar and make it easier. This does a disservice to these students and doesn't prepare them to tackle even tougher challenges later on. As Chapter 1 "Believe In Me" explains, this lowers expectations for all students instead of giving them the rigor they deserve -- and need -- to accomplish their future goals.

All students benefit from content that challenges them. Of course, it is unrealistic to hold students with very severe disabilities to the same standards as every other student. But often school teams only give students with moderate disabilities curriculum that matches their comfort level and don't provide any academic curriculum at all to students with severe disabilities. This doesn't give these students the chance to grow. With the right support in place, many of these students can rise to challenge.

When these students don't receive challenging material in one grade, it sets them up to be unprepared for challenging material in the following grade, and eventually in college, career, or life. Rigor, with appropriate support, matters at all levels. If school teams constantly water down materials, these students will never have a chance to reach their potential to meet or exceed grade level standards.

THE SOLUTION: USE SPECIAL EDUCATION MODIFICATIONS THAT BENEFIT EVERYONE THROUGH UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)

An important lesson for educators surprisingly comes from the field of architecture. By law, architects in the United States have to create buildings that have few barriers for diverse groups of people.

However, when architects make adjustments, they don't just benefit people with disabilities. They also make buildings more accessible for a wide range of people. For example, when buildings have ramps instead of only stairs, they not only help those in wheelchairs. They also help parents with strollers, or people with carts.

In the 1990s, David Rose, Anne Meyer and colleagues at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) developed a theory that applied this same idea to education. They called it Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and based it on the most recent research on brain development and how people learn. Rather than teaching to the middle, in this approach, teachers "engineer" lesson plans, considering how they can make content accessible for the widest range of students without watering it down.[74] When the government reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, they officially included the term "universal design" within the federal law.[75]

At Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, Principal Heath Caceres stresses this point about UDL with his staff: "Everybody has a disability. At some point, everyone has struggled to understand or accomplish something without extra support." By remembering universal design when creating lessons, teachers make sure everybody can access content in the best ways they can.

Research supports this theory. Research from the University at Albany found that "effective literacy instruction for special education students in the early years resembles effective instruction for all students."[76] Some recent studies have shown that when classrooms use differentiated instruction and UDL, they have higher levels of access and learning among all students.[77]

"We used to think our role was to make sure general education teachers knew who was in their rooms so they could make the right modifications," said Michael Tefs, Superintendent of Wooster City Schools in Ohio. "Now, we know our role is to provide time for all teachers to work together to improve instruction for all students."[78]

This means that great special education ends up being great general education. Of course, for some students with more severe disabilities, school teams must still provide one-on-one support specifically catered to their needs. But often, when teachers design their lessons for the widest range of learners possible, these modifications make instruction more effective for everyone.

"We want the paraprofessionals to make that transition from 'I'm just serving Peter' to 'I'm serving everybody,'" said Lafayette Principal Caceres. "We want them to be thinking, 'I'm going to focus on Peter and make sure he's getting what he needs, but I'm going to be able to have a relationship with every student in this class.'"

UDL has become even more important now that student populations are even more diverse. Teachers can't rely on a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Instead, they should consider how adapting a lesson for one group of students can ultimately help all students.

THREE KEY PARTS TO UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

1 - Present content in different ways

First, UDL emphasizes presenting content in multiple ways. This allows students with different learning styles to access the information equally. For example, for one lesson, a teacher gives all the eighth grade students in her class a book at a ninth grade reading level. But she gives her struggling students -- whether they have a disability or not -- a shorter passage to read and has them read it several times.

She also provides these students with guided notes to help them summarize each part, and covers a list of vocabulary words with them before reading to make the text less overwhelming. Strategies like this still expose struggling students to high levels of rigor, but in more bite-sized formats.

In math, if a student learns best from hands-on activities, teachers can give her clay, food or wooden blocks in order to practice numerical problems.[79] To be clear, teachers should still expect students with moderate disabilities to arrive at the same answer as every other student and understand the same standards. Teachers can simply allow students to get there on different paths.

2 - Allow different forms of assessment

Most of the time, teachers have students show what they've learned through written tests and essays. But many Common Core standards do not require that students must show their learning this way. UDL stresses that teachers should allow students to express what they've learned in many ways. For example, when teaching students narrative techniques like dialogue and plot, teachers could ask students to "draw a cartoon strip, do an oral presentation, complete a work of art, compose a musical piece, or write a graphic novel." Students can also analyze dialogue and plot in a short video or a live interview, instead of a written essay if the standard is measuring the students' ability to analyze dialogue rather than their ability to write an essay.[80]

3 - Build upon a student's strengths

Recent research on neurodiversity shows that a disability can also provide unique strengths to a student that can work to their advantage (see Chapter 2 "Include Me").[81]

But too often, special education focuses instead on student deficits. In the past, special educators often taught students how to "live with their disability." In contrast, a neurodiversity-based approach teaches students how to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. That ends up benefiting everyone.

Ultimately, great special education instruction doesn't make content "easier." Instead, it combines high expectations with the right support. Through intentionally designing lessons that cater to all students, including students with disabilities, school teams can ensure that all students feel supported while also being challenged.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

MEET ME WHERE I AM AND CHALLENGE ME

The school team provides support for students with disabilities, yet still engages them in rigorous, grade-level content every step of the way.

WHAT TO ASK

- How does school staff differentiate instruction and interventions based on student needs?
- How do they make sure all students feel supported in taking on rigorous material that they find challenging?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network leaders train principals how to analyze data to make decisions about differentiating instruction and can explain how principals train teachers in that same process.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school provides accommodations so that students with disabilities can reach the same expectations as their peers and only provides modifications (changing the content/expectation) when absolutely necessary. Teachers can communicate a rationale for modifications and accommodations.
- All students, regardless of whether they have a disability, have an individualized learning plan tailored to their unique needs.
- The school team meets before any major transition in the student's education (e.g. moving from elementary to middle school and graduating high school) to align with the student and family on goals, anticipate challenges, and develop a support plan.
- The school has a culture where having different paths to achieve a common goal or outcome is normal and celebrated. The principal, teachers and students can share stories that show this, and students are encouraged to take different approaches to solve problems and reflect on those differences.
- The school trains both general and special education teachers how to use the principles of Universal Design Learning in their lesson planning.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Instruction is individualized so that all students can meet the state standards.
- Teachers provide support and services to address students' specific disabilities and build upon their unique strengths, without allowing a diagnosis or a label to limit their high expectations for each and every student.
- As much as possible, teachers measure students with disabilities on the same tests and assignments as general education students. This assures they are on track toward high school graduation, college and a successful career.