

M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School

FINAL REPORT



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Introduction

About This Report

This final report is the result of an external school curriculum audit (ESCA) of M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School by Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research. This audit was conducted in response to the school being designated as in need of improvement under the New York State Education Department differentiated accountability plan, pursuant to the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. The utilized ESCA process was developed for and carried out under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Office of School Development, within the Division of Portfolio Planning.

About M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School

The Bergen Upper School (M.S. 571) is located in Brooklyn Community School District 13. The school serves approximately 170 students in Grades 6–8. M.S. 571 is colocated with P.S. 9, Teunis G. Bergen, an elementary school that serves students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Each school has its own floor(s) and shares common spaces such as the auditorium, library, gymnasium, and cafeteria. In a December 2010 Education Impact Statement, NYCDOE proposed the gradual phaseout and eventual closure of M.S. 571.¹ The report cited the reason for phasing out M.S. 571 as low performance and inability to turn around and provide a high-quality education to its students. According to the Education Impact Statement, M.S. 571 has struggled with low student performance. In 2009–10, only 8 percent of M.S. 571 students were performing on grade level in English language arts, and only 14 percent of M.S. 571 students were on grade level in math. On the 2009–10 New York City School Survey, nearly 28 percent of students reported feeling unsafe in the school, and 64 percent of teachers reported that discipline and order are not maintained at the school. As a result, M.S. 571 will no longer accept incoming students, and will phase out one grade per year; M.S. 571 will close at the end of the 2012–2013 school year.

In 2009–10, M.S. 571 did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in English language arts for all students, the black or African-American subgroup, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, the students with disabilities subgroup did not make AYP in mathematics. In 2010–11, M.S. 571 state accountability status was designated as Improvement (Year 1).² As a result of being designated as in Need of Improvement, the school participated in the ESCA, which was conducted by Learning Point Associates.

¹New York City Department of Education. Educational Impact Statement. The proposed phase-out of M.S. 571 The Bergen Upper School. http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/CDF11959-252C-4EA1-8F27-73F2E65A2091/95278/PEP_Notice_MS571_vfinal.pdf. Accessed on May 2, 2011.

²<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2010/01/AOR-2010-331300010571.pdf>. Accessed on May 2, 2011.

Audit Process at M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School

The ESCA approach utilized at the middle school level examines five topic areas: student engagement, curriculum and instruction, academic interventions and supports, professional learning and collaboration, and support for transitioning students. Data were collected at the school level through teacher surveys, administrator interviews, classroom observations, and an analysis of documents submitted by M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School during the month of March 2011. From these data, Learning Point Associates prepared a series of reports for the school's use.

These reports were presented to the school during a co-interpretationSM meeting on May 18, 2011. During this meeting, six stakeholders from the M.S. 571 Bergen Upper School community read the reports. Through a facilitated and collaborative group process, they identified individual findings, then developed and prioritized key findings that emerged from information in the reports.

The remainder of this report presents the key findings that emerged from the co-interpretation process and the actionable recommendations that Learning Point Associates has developed in response. Please note that there is not necessarily a one-to-one connection between key findings and recommendations; rather, the key findings are considered as a group, and the recommended strategies are those that we believe are most likely to have the greatest positive impact on student performance at Bergen Upper School

The Appendix provides a transition calendar inclusive of all four recommendations.

Key Findings

After considerable thought and discussion, co-interpretation participants determined a set of key findings. These key findings are detailed in this section.

Critical Key Findings

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 1:

There is low positive climate in classrooms, and there is a negative teacher attitude.

Critical Key Finding 1 is supported by information from classroom observations. There was limited evidence of a positive climate in 59 percent of classrooms, with low to infrequent evidence in another 29 percent of classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers remained distant and were rarely in physical proximity to students, and the teacher's tone of voice was loud and negative. One observation notes that a teacher's tone and comments were sarcastic and demeaning to students. Observations also noted some teachers offered global encouragement, and others offered no positive feedback or affirmation.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 2:

Differentiation for students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs) occurs inconsistently.

Critical Key Finding 2 is supported by information from the results of the teacher survey. Forty percent of teachers reported using the same English language arts (ELA) standards when teaching students with disabilities, while 66 percent reported using the same ELA standards when teaching English language learners. Teachers varied greatly when reporting the frequency with which they differentiate content, process, and product for students with disabilities. Survey results were similarly inconsistent for differentiating instruction for ELL students. Surveyed teachers reported differentiating content, process, and product to ELLs at various frequencies.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 3:

Data does not drive instruction consistently.

Critical Key Finding 3 is supported by information from the results of the teacher survey. According to survey results, teachers use teacher-created assessments more frequently than standardized tests, individualized education programs (IEPs), and formative assessment data. About 20 percent (2) of the staff reported never/almost never using formative, periodic assessment to plan and deliver instruction. Ten percent (1) of the staff reported never/almost never using IEPs when planning and delivering instruction.

CRITICAL KEY FINDING 4:

Instruction does not support student engagement, higher-order thinking skills, student choice, and students developing their own ideas. Instruction does not include detailed feedback.

Critical Key Finding 4 is supported by information from classroom observations and results of the teacher survey. In 88 percent of classrooms observed, evidence of student engagement was limited, students were passively engaged in the lessons, or engagement was not sustained. Depth and breadth of content understanding was generally missing. Facts or generalizations were not consistently addressed in content understanding. Further, there were very limited opportunities for students to engage in analysis and problem solving. During several observations, teachers rarely provided students with feedback. The answers were given, and teachers moved on. Students had some opportunities for choice, including topics of study and partner selection; however, learning tasks were primarily teacher-driven and did not include many opportunities for student choice or opportunities. Lessons were based solely on curriculum guides.

Teachers reported limited opportunities for students to engage in extended projects, with more than half reporting students worked on presentations or extended projects one to two times a month. One third of the teachers reported that students had opportunities to write reflections in journals with the same frequency, and one third reported that students never/ almost never worked on models or simulations. Conversely, 45 percent of teachers reported that their students work on worksheets or respond to textbook questions daily or almost daily.

Recommendations

Overview of Recommendations

According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009), the most significant impact of school closing on both reading and math achievement occurred before schools were actually closed. Students' reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) showed loss of about a month and half of learning during the 2010–11 school year. In math, the learning loss was equivalent to slightly more than half a month. Steiner (2009) suggests that it is important for schools that are preparing for closure to continue to use data to guide their decisions; make it clear to stakeholders how students will continue to thrive; provide support to students and families throughout the transition; clarify the principal's new role in the transition; and provide staff members with clear information about next steps.

The results of the ESCA process will help M.S. 571 implement a transition plan that is inclusive of three focus areas that will have a positive impact on the school learning community. M.S. 571 needs an approach that is supportive of students and families through the transition and that provides clarifying next steps for staff members. Such resources will make it easier for people within the school community to work together toward successfully phasing out M.S. 571 and transitioning both students and staff to other schools.

During the co-interpretation process, the school team noted three key findings—that differentiation for students with disabilities and English language learners was not occurring consistently, there was a lack of rigor, and data were not being used to drive instruction. The auditors who conducted the co-interpretation noted inconsistent opportunities across classrooms for students to engage in higher-order thinking and complex tasks. Instructional rigor is particularly relevant for schools scheduled for closure.

THE THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

With these issues in mind, Learning Point Associates developed the following three recommendations, which can be implemented beginning in the 2011–12 school year and throughout the transition process.

1. Develop and implement a schoolwide initiative aimed at increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.
2. Develop learning activities and implement instructional strategies that differentiate instruction for all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
3. Implement instructional strategies that increase opportunities for higher-order thinking, analysis and problem solving, and deeper content understanding while also encouraging high-quality instructional feedback between the teacher and students or among students.

For each recommendation, additional information is provided in the narrative on specific actions that the school may consider during its action planning process, as well as real-life implementation examples and research resources for further reading.

Please note that the order in which these recommendations are presented does not reflect a ranking or prioritization of the recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Student Engagement

Develop and implement a schoolwide initiative aimed at increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.

LINK TO RESEARCH

Research indicates that school transitions, such as the transition precipitated by school closures, correspond with a measurable drop in student academic achievement, loss of self-esteem, and an increase in dropout rates (Felner et al., 1993). Student engagement provides an essential foundation for increasing achievement levels. “Educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards” (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 2).

Literature about middle school reform acknowledges the importance of an academically challenging and supportive environment to engage young adolescent learners. Student motivation, a meaningful curriculum, and student choice also are important factors for engaging middle-level learners (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Learning Point Associates, 2005; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995).

In a report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement, which was taken by 42,754 students, Yazzie-Mintz (2010, pp. 2–3) describes a spectrum of student disengagement—from temporary boredom to dropping out—and attributes this disengagement to the following: uninteresting and irrelevant material, work being too challenging or not challenging enough, no interaction with the teacher, not liking the school or the teacher, not seeing value in the assigned work, adults at the school not caring about the student, safety and bullying concerns, schoolwork not connecting to real world or real work, feeling little connection with any adult at the school, teacher favoritism, ineffective instruction or instructional methods, feeling unheard and not responded to or respected, and feelings of frustration and disconnection.

When students feel marginalized or alienated at school, they lose interest and become disengaged. Yazzie-Mintz (2010, p. 17) concludes that there are considerable gaps not only in academic achievement but also in student engagement, and suggests the integration of engagement data with academic data as a useful tool for school planning and decision making.

Factors that would increase student engagement, according to the surveyed students (Yazzie-Mintz, pp. 18–23) are as follows: supportive and nurturing schools; increased individualization; classes that are more fun as well as interactive, experiential, and relevant; a schoolwide belief in relationships, respect, and responsibility; coaching and modeling for the staff of good student engagement practices; reflection on and response to student ideas; adult understanding of student skills, strengths, and interests and having these qualities inform instruction; experiential learning and interdisciplinary studies; and opportunities for students to work together on finding solutions to real-world problems and issues.

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Center for Mental Health in Schools (Website)

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Website)

<http://www.casel.org>

Illinois Learning Standards for Social/Emotional Learning (Website)

http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility (Website)

<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>

Students need to build a sense of self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2003) in an inclusive environment in which they can achieve competence. They should be engaged in authentic and personally meaningful work, using a culturally relevant curriculum with an appropriate level of difficulty and challenge—one that requires problem solving (Voke, 2002). In addition, Gordon (2006) suggests the recognition and leveraging of individual student strengths and recalls a typical student response from the 2005 Gallup Youth Survey:

My teacher understood the way that I learned and worked. I was never criticized for my ideas or feelings, but I was met with questions and ideas that could change the way I looked at something. —Jessica, 17, Waverly, IA (p. 77)

A rubric, “Partnership Guide for Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, pp. 185–187) offers a list of engagement activities (establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence) and assessment tools. The Executive Summary of *Engaging Schools* (National Academy of Sciences, 2003, pp. 4–9) provides 10 recommendations for reaching “the goals of meaningful engagement and genuine improvements in achievement” for high school students. Easton (2008) discusses engaging struggling high school students by using experiential learning, essential questions and a whole-child perspective in curriculum development, instructional strategies, professional development, and teacher evaluations. “If there is a secret to motivation in the classroom,” says Gordon (2006, p. 80), “it lies in the interaction between the teacher and the student.”

“There is a growing consensus that whatever else is done, schools must also become places where it is easier for students and teachers to know one another well and for students to connect to the school and its purposes, says Sergiovanni (2000, p. 58). “Schools in other words must be caring and learning communities.”

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: WHOLE-SCHOOL PRACTICES

Incorporating student engagement practices should be part of the annual school improvement process. Whole-school practices such as building a safe and supportive school environment are part of this process. Students can learn effectively only in environments in which they feel safe and supported, and where their teachers have high expectations for their learning. Implementation of a schoolwide positive behavior plan that is based on prosocial values, social competencies, incentives, and positive peer relationships will lay the foundation for classroom-level work and must occur before the classroom work can begin.

M.S. 571 must keep in mind that with each year, staff will be reduced and/or have to contend with increased usage of substitutes to cover teacher classes, as teachers and staff begin to become less engaged in the transition process themselves. As such, whole-school engagement practices become even more critical to ensuring student progress during a time of transition.

The following guidelines were developed by the Victoria Department of Education and Early Child Development (2009) for implementation of effective student engagement strategies across whole schools at the building level:

1. Create a positive school culture.

Teachers and staff must recognize students as individuals by acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of the student population. The school must find ways to connect students to school (through clubs, sports, student council, and other activities) so they develop a sense of belonging. The school should provide transition programs and practices at different stages of schooling that will minimize anxiety, increase resilience, and ensure that students develop a readiness to enter their new environment and make successful transitions between year levels.

2. Encourage student participation.

Giving students a voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it also is about having the power to influence change. Incorporating meaningful involvement of students means validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education to improve the school.

3. Proactively engage with parents/caretakers.

Keys to successful partnerships with parents/caretakers and families include strong two-way communication, volunteer opportunities, curricula-related collaborations, shared decision making, community-based partnerships, and efficacy building.

4. Implement preventative and early interventions.

The school needs to determine how it will intervene when students exhibit disengaged behaviors—specifically poor attendance and antisocial behaviors. Prevention strategies should target the whole school and should be designed to reduce any risk factors that may contribute to attendance or behavioral issues.

5. Respond to individual students.

The school should have a process in place to identify and respond to individual students who require additional assistance and support. It is imperative to coordinate early intervention and prevention strategies that utilize internal as well as external support services in order to identify and address the barriers to learning that individual students may be facing.

Schools also can implement major changes to their structures that can make it easier to develop positive learning relationships, including small learning communities, alternative scheduling, team teaching, teaching continuity, school-based enterprises, and professional learning communities, but these initiatives are predicated on teacher and staff participation in the school improvement/transitioning process.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Keeping students focused and engaged in the classroom is quite a challenge amid all the complex changes—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social—that they experience during this phase of their lives. Adolescence represents a critical period during which youth struggle to take on new responsibilities and learn decision-making skills while concurrently establishing

a sense of self and identity. This period also marks a stage where adolescents are learning to regulate their behavior, which can present a challenge to keeping them on-task in the classroom. (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003).

1. Relate lessons to students' lives.

A relevant curriculum relates content to the daily lives, concerns, experiences, and pertinent social issues of the learners. Teachers can gain insight into student concerns by taking periodic interest inventories, through informal conversations, and from classroom dialogue (Learning Point Associates, 2005). These issues and topics then can be incorporated into units, lesson plans, and further classroom discussions.

2. Make the learning authentic.

Newmann et al. (1995) advocate for authentic instructional practices to engage learners, and they offer three criteria for authentic instructional practices: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school.

The first criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate the construction of knowledge by acknowledging students' existing understanding and experience. Identifying student preconceptions and initial understanding is critical to the learning process. "If students' preconceptions are not addressed directly, they often memorize content (e.g., formulas in physics), yet still use their experience-based preconceptions to act in the world" (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 5).

The second criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate disciplined inquiry through structured activities; the inquiry process is critical to the construction of knowledge (Marzano, 2003; Newmann et al., 1995). This process consists of building on the learner's prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding, integrating new information, and using the knowledge in new ways.

The third criterion for authentic instructional practices is value beyond school (Newmann et al., 1995). This criterion may entail connecting content to personal or public issues as well as the demonstration of understanding to an audience beyond the school. Examples of such activities include writing persuasive letters to the city council to advocate for a skate park, interviewing community elders for an oral history project, or communicating the impact of a development project using scientific concepts.

3. Give students choices.

Finally, providing choice in middle-level classrooms will engage learners. Providing opportunities for students to select a topic or text acknowledges young adolescents' need to exercise more decision-making power. Giving students ownership in their learning process increases motivation and keeps interest levels high. Students who have a strong interest in a specific subject may wish to pursue an independent project. These projects may be used as a differentiated way to explore the curriculum. (See "Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom" on the following page.)

Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom

Following are some suggestions for showing regard for adolescent perspectives. These ideas are based on the work of Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth (1997) and Tomlinson (1999).

Independent projects will extend learning beyond the curriculum in the textbook and develop enthusiasm, commitment, and academic skills in addition to allowing students to develop deeper relationships with subject matter.

“Brainstorming with...children on what kinds of projects they could do may also generate ideas teachers may never have thought of on their own” (Smutny, 2000, p. 7).

Surveying students’ interests in the beginning of the school year will give teachers direction in planning activities that will “get students on board” from the start. Surveying again at key points during the year will inform teachers of new interests that develop as their students grow.

Interest centers are designed to motivate students’ exploration of topics in which they have a particular interest. They are usually comprised of objects that students can explore, such as shells, leaves, maps, or projects, and are centered around broad topics. Students can choose from the menu and note their choices accordingly. Teachers decide how many items on the menu (minimum) that each student is required to complete. This is adjusted to meet instructional needs on an individual basis.

Examples of Student Engagement

The National Center for School Engagement (2007) compiled the following examples of student engagement best practices from school districts across the United States:

Factor in Math Fun: In Oswego, New York, a Factoring Fan Club was created for ninth grade math students to get them excited about factoring, to keep it fresh in their minds, and to be “good” at factoring. Source: Oswego School District, Oswego, NY

Celebrate Pi Day on 3/14: This event was created to help students enjoy math by offering a fun-filled day honoring pi. Events included a pie-eating contest, measuring the diameter and circumference of round objects to calculate pi, and other games related to circles. Source: Independence School District, Independence, VA

Mobilize Community: Community Now! is an asset-based community development tool of the Connection Institute. It uses asset-based language and planning to bring the community together to discover what values the community shares as a whole. It then works to mobilize community members around its assets and shares values to become proactive rather than reactive in its planning. Source: Kittery Children’s Leadership Council, Kittery, ME

Collaborate with Higher Education: In Mesquite, Texas, a local college delivers 3.5 hours of continuing education courses (educational opportunities) to truant students and their families. The curriculum includes the negative consequences associated with poor school attendance and the positive consequences associated with scholastic achievement. Transition from high school to college is discussed, and a tour of the college is provided. Source: Dallas Independent School District, TX

Offer Incentives: As a reward, a lunchtime soccer game is organized for students with good attendance by school staff. Source: Summit School District, Frisco, CO

Support Positive Behavior: Jacksonville School District adapted the principles of Got Fish? (a book to build business morale) for the classroom. Principles include: being there, playing, choosing your behavior, and making their day. Students are recognized when observed living each of the principles. Source: Jacksonville School District, Jacksonville, FL

Create Student-Generated Classroom Rules: In Eugene, Oregon, students create a list of classroom rules. Each student signs off on the rules and is held accountable by fellow students. In addition, they developed their own honor roll, in which students are recognized for doing their best, following directions, and not talking out more than three times a day. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

Facilitate Positive Student-Teacher Connections: Some schools in Oregon encourage students to sign up for a one-on-one lunch with their teacher during school time. The teacher uses this time to get to know the student and offer encouragement and praise. Students benefit when their teachers demonstrate that they care about student well being in addition to academic success. Source: Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

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Recommendation 2: Differentiated Instruction

Develop learning activities and implement instructional strategies that differentiate instruction for all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.

LINK TO RESEARCH

A study of 10 failing Chicago public schools (nine of which were slated for closure) found that the adoption and implementation of an instructional program that included differentiated instruction had a positive and significant impact on student achievement (Leinwand & Edwards, 2009).

Differentiation of instruction means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs of students. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual. Differentiating does not mean providing separate, unrelated activities for each student, but it does mean providing interrelated activities that are based on student needs for the purpose of ensuring that all students come to a similar grasp of a skill or idea (Good, 2006). Teachers can differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment according to the readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of their students (Tomlinson, 2003).

Qualitative and meta-analysis research indicate that students in differentiated classrooms achieve better outcomes than students in classrooms without differentiation (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Tomlinson et al., 2003). When instructional materials are differentiated to meet student needs, interests, and readiness, academic gains increase (Lou et al., 1996). Students in classrooms that are effectively differentiated have been found to have achievement gains on state tests in reading and math (Brimijoin, 2001; Tieso, 2005).

While there is no single set of strategies that constitutes differentiated instruction, the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2009) has identified the following guidelines to help educators form an understanding and develop ideas around differentiation:

- Instruction moves beyond minute details and facts, and is concept-focused and principle-driven.
- Several elements and materials are used to support instructional content.
- Flexible grouping is used consistently.
- Initial and ongoing assessment of student readiness and growth are essential.
- Learning tasks are interesting, engaging, and challenging.
- Student products allow for varied means of expression, alternative procedures, and provides varying degrees of difficulty.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

School leaders can support the effective implementation of differentiation within and across classrooms by providing time for teacher planning and execution of plans, providing ample and suitable materials for academically diverse classrooms, and developing and otherwise ensuring access to differentiated curriculum.

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

A Look at Differentiating Instruction: Tips for Teachers (Publication)

http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Feb09.pdf

A Teacher's Guide to Differentiating Instruction (Publication)

http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Jan07.pdf

Center on Instruction: Differentiated Instruction Resources (Website)

http://www.centeroninstruction.org/resources_searchresults.cfm?searchterms=differentiation

Differentiated Instruction and Implications for UDL Implementation (Website)

<http://www.cast.org/ncac/index.cfm?i=2876>

1. Focus on foundation.

Embed professional learning opportunities around differentiation within the school's annual professional development plan. Schools that have moved to schoolwide implementation of a differentiated approach to instruction caution that the process is both complex and time consuming. The success of efforts to differentiate instruction will ultimately lie with teachers. However, some teachers will lack either the necessary knowledge or skills (Gregory, 2003). To help teachers prepare to make the change, schools should provide resources on differentiated instruction and time for teachers to discuss them. Teachers may need training in strategies—such as curriculum compacting and learning centers—that can be used to support differentiation (Protheroe, 2007).

2. Analyze student needs.

Identify which assessments will be given and how assessment data will be used for purposeful student grouping. Gaining an awareness of student knowledge and understanding is a key component of successful differentiation. Assessments can be formal or informal. They can be schoolwide, universal screening tools, content-area diagnostics, or assessments to gauge student knowledge and familiarity with a topic prior to the start of a unit of study. Decide which assessments teachers will use to accurately measure their students' strengths, weaknesses, and interests and provide guidance for next steps in instruction. Results should be tracked and used to design instructional strategies tailored to student needs.

3. Design instruction.

Design lesson plans, including instructional strategies, learning activities, and assessments that incorporate differentiation. Once all stakeholders have a deep understanding of what differentiated instruction is and what it is not, the current structure of the curriculum and its supports or lack of supports for differentiation, and student needs, teachers should work collaboratively to design and embed instructional strategies into the curriculum that support differentiation. Identify opportunities to infuse different parts of the curriculum with differentiated instructional strategies.

Subject-Specific Differentiation Resources

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/reluctant_writer.html

This guide offers an overview of the different strategies and methods that are used to help motivate struggling writers.

<http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/differentiatingstrategies.html>

A site that provides explanations for various differentiation strategies.

<http://www.readingrockets.org/print.php?ID=154>

This site provides examples and strategies for differentiated instruction in reading.

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=615&g=2>

This site offers games and methods to encourage and motivate struggling writers.

<http://www.webmath.com/>

This mathematics website provides assistance with solving math problems.

Central Elementary School

The staff at an elementary school approached the tasks of implementing differentiated instruction in their school.

Central Elementary School was considered a failing school. Students were performing in the 30th percentile in reading, writing, and mathematics on state and district assessments. Forty-five percent of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch and 30 percent of students spoke English as a second language. After conducting a needs assessment and developing a school improvement plan, school leaders and teachers identified differentiation as a schoolwide instructional focus and embarked on a process to implement differentiation in the school.

Central Elementary School decided to develop a social studies unit through the use of tiered activities. The team used essential questions to provide guidance for inclusion of higher-level thinking skills in the curricular objectives, which covered content, learning process, and assessment. The content was delivered through three tiers of activities. Learning was differentiated according to the needs of the students through the use of texts of different reading levels.

Once the social studies units were complete, teachers wrote specific lessons to include in the units. Teachers collaboratively planned concurrent differentiated learning experiences for students based on a single instructional objective. For the school, the social studies units represented the first round of differentiated lesson planning and instruction. During the course of the year, each discipline in the regular curriculum was examined and revised to include differentiation. Differentiation became a focus of all instruction.

Teachers spent approximately four hours each month learning more about differentiation and making plans to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms. The professional development focused on identifying student strengths and weakness; systems to make the process of small, flexible group instruction manageable; and the development of leveled classroom libraries. This comprehensive staff development program was monitored closely and adjusted as needed. Teachers were given the tools and the support to be able to implement the concepts successfully. Each new concept was introduced, and training, modeling, and coaching were provided. Staff development occurred during biweekly grade-level seminars, monthly staff meetings, and weekly school or district staff development sessions.

From *“Closing the Achievement Gap With Curriculum Enrichment and Differentiation: One School’s Story”* (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008).

Recommendation 3: Instructional Rigor

Implement instructional strategies that increase opportunities for higher-order thinking, analysis and problem solving, and deeper content understanding while also encouraging high-quality instructional feedback between the teacher and students or among students.

LINK TO RESEARCH

Instruction that pushes students to engage in higher-level thinking leads to deeper learning for students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Pashler et al., 2007). Too often, particularly in schools where students are struggling, instruction focuses on lower level thinking skills, basic content, and test preparation. Teachers of struggling student groups or tracks usually offer students “less exciting instruction, less emphasis on meaning and conceptualization, and more rote drill and practice activities” than do teachers of high-performing or heterogeneous groups and classes (Cotton, 1989, p. 8). Yet this focus on basic skills does not necessarily improve student achievement.

Several research studies were completed from 1990 to 2003 “which demonstrated that students who experienced higher levels of authentic instruction and assessment showed higher achievement than students who experienced lower levels of authentic instruction and assessment” (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007, p. vii). These results included higher achievement on standardized tests (Newmann et al., 2001). It is also important to note that these results “were consistent for Grades 3–12, across different subject areas (mathematics, social studies, language arts, science), and for different students regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status” (Newmann et al., 2007, p. vii).

Teachers need to provide structured opportunities and time for students to take on higher level cognitive work (Tomlinson, 2003). In discussing the gradual release of responsibility model, Fisher and Frey (2008) state that “the cognitive load should shift slowly and purposefully from teacher-as-model, to joint responsibility, to independent practice and application by the learner” (p. 2). This process allows students to become what Graves and Fitzgerald (2003) call “competent, independent learners” (p. 98).

There are several steps to ensure that students are being asked to complete this type of intellectually challenging work, which increases test scores and improves performance on authentic assessment measures as well. Newmann et al. (2001) define authentically challenging intellectual work as the “construction of knowledge, through the use of disciplined inquiry, to produce discourse, products, or performances that have value beyond school” (p. 14).

Daggett (2005) agrees, stating that all students should be pushed “to achieve academic excellence, which ultimately boils down to applying rigorous knowledge to unpredictable, real-world situations, such as those that drive our rapidly changing world” (p. 5). Disciplined inquiry, which occurs in the classroom, requires that students “(1) use a prior knowledge base; (2) strive for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness; and (3) express their ideas and findings with elaborated communication” (Newmann et al., 2001, p. 15).

QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Doing What Works (Website)
<http://dww.ed.gov/>

*Organizing Instruction and
Study to Improve Learning*
(Publication)
[http://ies.ed.gov/
ncee/wwc/pdf/
practiceguides/20072004.
pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/20072004.pdf)

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

1. Cultivate schoolwide high expectations for students.

- Align instruction with the New York State P–12 Common Core Learning Standards. According to NYCDOE (2011), schools in New York City are set to have fully adopted the P–12 Common Core Learning Standards for students to take aligned assessments during the 2014–15 school year. These standards are internationally benchmarked and rigorous; they explain clearly what students at each grade level are expected to know and be able to do. Some schools were involved in pilot programs in 2010–11.
- Develop a shared understanding of instructional rigor through collaborative curriculum planning, design, and/or redesign. When developing or revising curriculum maps, identify opportunities for formative assessment tasks that encourage higher-level thinking for each unit of study.
- Through teacher collaboration, develop common student assignments that ask students to perform rigorous and authentic tasks.
- Through teacher collaboration, develop common student assessments that include rigorous and authentic summative assessment tasks.
- Monitor implementation of expectations through classroom observations, lesson plan review, and student achievement results on common formative assessments.

2. Provide professional development for teachers on instructional strategies that push students to engage in higher-order thinking.

- Provide ongoing professional development for teachers that describes the importance of pushing students to do higher-level thinking and provides strategies for how to do so. This training may be provided through ongoing professional development sessions and/or support of an instructional coach.
- Create clear expectations regarding how teachers should implement this professional development in the classroom (e.g., one strategy utilized each day as reflected in lesson plans, authentic assessments at the end of each unit).
- Identify how this professional development can be incorporated into scheduled teacher collaboration sessions.
- Monitor implementation of professional development through classroom observations, lesson plan review, and student achievement results on common formative assessments.

3. Develop examples of authentic intellectual work.

The following example can be used to help school leaders and teachers understand what authentic intellectual work might look like.

Examples of High-Scoring and Low-Scoring Measures of Authentic Intellectual Work

The research report *Improving Chicago's Schools: Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* provides examples of two sixth-grade writing assignments: one that scored high and one that scored low on measures of authentic intellectual work. The authors conclude each example with a commentary of why the assignment received the score that it did.

High Scoring Writing Assignment

Write a paper persuading someone to do something. Pick any topic that you feel strongly about, convince the reader to agree with your belief, and convince the reader to take a specific action on this belief.

Commentary

In this high scoring assignment, demands for construction of knowledge are evident because students have to select information and organize it into convincing arguments. By asking students to convince others to believe and act in a certain way, the task entails strong demands that the students support their views with reasons or other evidence, which calls for elaborated written communication. Finally, the intellectual challenge is connected to students' lives because they are to write on something they consider to be personally important.

Low Scoring Writing Assignment

Identify the parts of speech of each underlined word below. All eight parts of speech—nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections—are included in this exercise.

1. My room is arranged for comfort and efficiency.
2. As you enter, you will find a wooden table on the left.
3. I write and type.
4. There is a book shelf near the table.
5. On this book shelf, I keep both my pencils and paper supplies.
6. I spend many hours in this room.
7. I often read or write there during the evening...

Commentary

This assignment requires no construction of knowledge or elaborated communication, and does not pose a question or problem clearly connected to students' lives. Instead it asks students to recall one-word responses, based on memorization or definitions of parts of speech.

Reprinted from page 24 of *Improving Chicago's Schools: Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* by Fred M. Newmann, Anthony S. Bryk, and Jenny K. Nagaoka, available online at <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p0a02.pdf>. Copyright © 2001 Consortium on Chicago School Research. Reprinted with permission.

Further examples of authentic intellectual instruction, teachers' assignments, and student work can be found in the following source:

Newmann, F. M., King, M. B., & Carmichael, D. L. (2007). *Authentic instruction and assessment: Common standards for rigor and relevance in teaching academic subjects*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Education. Retrieved August 18, 2011, from <http://centerforaiw.com/sites/centerforaiw.com/files/Authentic-Instruction-Assessment-BlueBook.pdf>

Plainwell Middle School

Plainwell Middle School in Plainwell, Michigan, serves students in Grades 6–8. The school has had success in improving instructional rigor.

In 2005, Plainwell Community Schools implemented districtwide curriculum restructuring with professional development focused on using the research-based instructional strategies outlined in Robert Marzano's *Classroom Instruction that Works* (2003)....Some of the instructional delivery techniques that were adopted as part of this professional development include the use of nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts and the use of higher-order questions to elicit student explanations. Teachers find Marzano's strategies to be compelling, noting the evidence of a significant correlation between increased student achievement and the use of research-proven instructional techniques. This approach lays the groundwork for a shift in staff culture, moving away from the use of personal intuition to the use of empirical, quantitative data to inform decisions around teaching and learning.

In 2005, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School decided to adopt a new curriculum aligned with Marzano's strategies.... Interactive slideshows are used as a way to actively engage students in new content learning, letting them participate in lectures by touching, interpreting, and acting out historical images and events projected onto a screen. The curriculum also supports vocabulary instruction with graphic organizers that connect definitions with visuals to help students understand and retain key terms. Some teachers...have modified the workbook graphic organizers to create their own "visual dictionaries."

Higher-order questions are also used as an instructional technique through the new curriculum. Response groups are a structure that teachers use to facilitate small group discussion on controversial topics in history. Through a series of probing questions that require critical thinking and the use of evidence, teachers elicit student explanations that require analysis and application of historical information. Finally, students match up their decisions and viewpoints with actual decisions made in history.

In addition to these strategies, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School intentionally build review into daily lessons and assessments. Each day begins with a warm-up activity that quizzes students on a previous lesson.... When introducing a lesson, teachers also make sure to begin with a preview activity that they can refer back to when reviewing the material....

Curriculum restructuring at the middle school is carefully implemented to ensure success....First, a less-is-more approach is taken, allowing ample time for teachers to learn and practice a single strategy before moving on to another one. Also, teacher training is conducted by lead teachers...who model classroom techniques, lead guided discussions, and set periodic objectives for teams. Instead of a passive "sit-and-get" approach, teachers actively practice the strategies and report to their teams about their progress. Finally, administrators support the efforts by aligning observational classroom walk-through forms to match the professional development focus, keeping the strategies at the center of conversation about teaching.

Description excerpted from the from the *Doing What Works* website at http://dww.ed.gov/media/CL/OIS/TopicLevel/case_plainwell_71508.pdf. This information is in the public domain.

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Appendix

Transition Calendar

Educational researchers find that successful schools focus their improvement efforts on a few key areas. The transition calendar will help M.S. 571 develop and implement three key areas of focus that, if implemented with fidelity, will lead to a successful transition. As with all school closure processes, M.S. 571 should ensure that it has the support of its stakeholders (people who have an interest in the school, including students, parents, administrators, teachers, other school staff and volunteers, local residents and businesses, community organizations, and corporate partners) and the school leadership team.

During the 2011–12 school year, M.S. 571 may wish to utilize this transition calendar. The calendar can serve as a guide for implementing the specific action steps that should be taken each quarter to apply the recommendations outlined in this report.

	SUMMER	1ST QUARTER	2ND QUARTER	3RD QUARTER	4TH QUARTER
Instructional Rigor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align instruction with P-12 Common Core Learning Standards Develop a shared understanding of instructional rigor through collaborative curriculum planning, design, and/or redesign Provide professional development for teachers higher-order thinking pedagogy in the classroom and ways to differentiate Universal Design for Learning and/or Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate higher-order thinking practices into teacher collaboration time Monitor (administrators) higher-order thinking strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and review of student tasks and assessments Develop common assignments through teacher collaboration that ask students to perform rigorous and authentic tasks Develop common assessments through teacher collaboration that include rigorous and authentic summative assessment tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate higher-order thinking practices into teacher collaboration time Monitor (administrators) higher-order thinking strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and review of student tasks and assessments Monitor (administrators) implementation using student achievement results on common formative and summative assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate higher-order thinking practices into teacher collaboration time Monitor (administrators) higher-order thinking strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and review of student tasks and assessments Provide professional development for teachers higher-order thinking pedagogy in the classroom and ways to differentiate Universal Design for Learning and/or Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate higher-order thinking practices into teacher collaboration time Monitor (administrators) higher-order thinking strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and review of student tasks and assessments Monitor implementation using student achievement results on common formative and summative assessments Revisit curriculum maps (lesson plans) and formative and summative assessments, and adjust for 2012-13 Revisit professional development and adjust for 2012-13
Student Engagement		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise curriculum maps to reflect frequency and adolescent perspective topic being implemented per lesson and/or unit Provide professional development on the adolescent perspective to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Implement choice and student autonomy and leadership Make the curriculum relevant Make learning authentic Incorporate adolescent perspective into classroom observation tool (develop rubric) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor (administrators) adolescent perspective strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor (administrators) adolescent perspective strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and units Provide specific review of professional development on adolescent perspective to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Implement choice and student autonomy and leadership Make the curriculum relevant Make learning authentic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor (administrators) adolescent perspective strategies via classroom observations, lesson plans, and unit Determine the level of adolescent perspective occurring across classrooms (grade levels and departments) via observation rubric Based on rubric data, revise professional development and other supports for teachers (grades and/or departments)
Differentiated Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify professional learning opportunities, including scheduled collaboration time around differentiation and embed into schoolwide professional development calendar Revise curriculum maps to reflect differentiation of content, process, and/or product Establish a system of item analysis of assessments for student grouping within classrooms for instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze student assessment results to identify needs for differentiation Provide suitable materials and resources to support differentiation in academically diverse classrooms Revise unit plans and design lesson plans to reflect differentiation of content, process, and/or product Observe classrooms for effective implementation of differentiated instructional strategies, and provide feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze student assessment results to identify needs for differentiation Revise unit plans and design lesson plans to reflect differentiation of content, process, and/or product Observe classrooms for effective implementation of differentiated instructional strategies, and provide feedback Provide professional learning opportunities related to best practices in differentiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze student assessment results to identify needs for differentiation Revise unit plans and design lesson plans to reflect differentiation of content, process, and/or product Observe classrooms for effective implementation of differentiated instructional strategies, and provide feedback Provide professional learning opportunities related to best practices in differentiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze student assessment results to identify needs for differentiation Revise unit plans and design lesson plans to reflect differentiation of content, process, and/or product Observe classrooms for effective implementation of differentiated instructional strategies, and provide feedback Provide professional learning opportunities related to best practices in differentiation

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