

Intervention with Purpose:

Using Programs Built to Support Struggling Learners



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White Paper

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As we learn more about how learners differ and what could cause students to struggle academically, we also discover how learning material can be used to help every student reach their potential.

Some students will be able to stay in mainstream classrooms, using mainstream materials, for their entire academic careers. Due to a variety of factors, many others will need support somewhere along the way. Those supports have come to be called “interventions.”

In accordance with the term, interventions come with modern structures and strategies that help educators identify, organize, and support struggling students. Gone are the days where basic accommodations could be used in an effort to fill learning gaps.

Because of the need for constant monitoring and prescriptive learning paths, a school or district’s intervention strategies require materials and technologies that better reflect the needs of the struggling learner.

“*Using main-line curricula in an intervention setting is doing the learner a disservice.*”

Defining intervention

An intervention program is an intentional reorganization of the supports and services provided to struggling learners. These supports tend to be provided through a tiered system that assigns responsibilities and dictates services based on the performance of the student. These gaps in a student’s abilities can stem from language deficits, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, or simply an inability to master previously-taught skills.

The most popular academic intervention program in the US is Response to Intervention (RTI), which is often paired with an emotional support program such as the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). As more effort has been invested in the mission of intervention, schools and districts are now organizing their efforts as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.



Intervention programs are much more than lesson plans. In fact, in most settings, intervention calls for a reorganization of how struggling learners are identified and who carries the responsibilities related to supporting them. Collaborative decision-making is often employed that may include general education teachers, learning specialists, school counselors, district curriculum managers and others.

Common misconceptions are that intervention only occurs in small-group, special education settings away from the mainstream classroom, or that once students are identified for intervention that they will never again receive the same instruction as their peers. Both are false. The tiers established in most intervention protocols provide supports for a wide range of students, even some that are successful in other areas of their schoolwork.

Learning gaps can happen anywhere. Filling them quickly and efficiently can help all struggling students ””

Possible causes of learning gaps

“*The causes of learning gaps can range from serious learning or behavioral disabilities to language barriers to challenges stemming from a student’s socioeconomic status or health.*”

In the US, the public school system is expected to be statistically majority-minority by 2025—much of that increase coming from immigration. With those shifting demographics have come more students in need of language services. Their limited English proficiency naturally leads to learning gaps. Also, the country from which they are coming may have a significantly different school system than ours in terms of both resources and academic pacing.

Logically, students fall further behind in their schoolwork with missed class time. Student homelessness and transience is a growing problem that leads to skill gaps. The same can be said for homebound students, those who are often ill, and those who suffer a debilitating illness or injury.

If any of these situations have occurred in a student’s history and the learning gaps created were not filled, you can assume they have carried through to the present and will cause the student difficulties now and in the future.

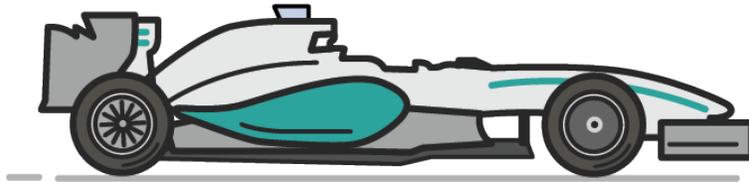
Approximately, 5% of students can be found at the highest tier. Many of the students will have some sort of disability that precludes even the possibility of joining or rejoining the mainstream curriculum. These students are often educated in smaller settings by specialists who can offer particular expertise and a more comfortable student-to-teacher ratio.

Of course, a student’s struggles can be more temporary. In fact, every student struggles at certain points in their career. The right intervention model can identify students who have simply fallen behind, and prescribe the best way for them to move forward before the effects of their challenges become more profound.

Making intervention more effective for every student

Once an effective intervention model is in place, the time comes to decide how those interventions will be implemented classroom-to-classroom. As is often the case in education, educators have a crucial impact. However, even the best teacher needs the right tools with which to support every student, no matter their current abilities.

The best teachers always strive toward differentiated instruction, but differentiation becomes more difficult when the goal is to fill learning gaps. There are simply too many students and not enough time. Unfortunately, the baseline materials teachers are using in their daily instruction were created to address the whole class, not the individual student. If anything, reliance on the adopted textbooks, workbooks and supplemental materials makes intervention more difficult.



Think of it as though you are driving a car with a simple puncture in a tire. Yes, the car is still moving, but it is becoming more difficult to drive with the tire in its current state. That will only get worse as more air escapes. With a simple puncture you probably do not need to replace the tire; you just need a patch. Once the gap is filled, the tire will drive just as you expect.

You just need to provide teachers with patch kits. ”

You want materials that can diagnose learning gaps where they exist and help the student receive the right “patch” at the right time. Once that is accomplished, your curricular materials—the existing tire, if you will—will continue to work well into the future.

Content and capabilities of effective intervention programs

The right intervention programs and systems can be the difference in academic success for students in need of them. But first, who are those students?

To begin, your intervention program needs to be able to identify struggling students and pinpoint where they are in their academic progress. You should be able to integrate existing data from interim and state assessments. The system should also provide its own quick checks of understanding throughout the student's time with the program. It is in this way that learning gaps can be identified as soon as possible.

When the data is accumulated, it is now time to prescribe a path forward using lessons and materials that engage students of all abilities and learning styles. There should be direct instruction of the topics leading up to the learning gap so students do not become frustrated with a lack of progress, activities that apply knowledge and allow students to practice their developing skills, and immersive experiences that make students want to use the program.

While students are accomplishing these lessons, the system should be in a state of constant formative assessment in the background, ready to modify the learning path as needed. This makes the intervention as efficient as possible.



But intervention systems should supplement the instruction provided by educators, not supplant it. Your intervention program needs to provide a wealth of reporting based on the data it has been gathering, present it in an understandable fashion, and provide teachers the ability to modify a student's instruction as they see fit.

Research has shown that intervention instruction is most effective when it is presented in a way that is fundamentally different from how the student was originally taught—in both method and material. The ways the brain accumulates knowledge can be mercurial at times, so varying methods and materials can help the student better connect the missing skills with the topic with which they are struggling.



A working model: how using both products can provide the best experience for every learner

It can be easier to see the difference between the services your existing materials are providing and what is possible through a comprehensive intervention program if we work through some ways in which schools may employ such tools in their classrooms.

Schools with established intervention protocols often employ periodic assessments such as NWEA MAP Growth or Renaissance Star to measure students' grade level progress. It is from these results that a student is identified as needing tiered support.

Early in the school year, a student is identified as requiring Tier 2 support in reading according to the school's RTI protocols. They are roughly one grade level behind pace.

In some schools, certain tiers of support call for a co-teacher to provide individualized help during class while the student remains in their mainstream classroom. In others, that student would be pulled out during reading for differentiated instruction. More commonly, however, the student's mainstream teacher will have to find a way to reach that student through differentiation (while also differentiating for the other 20-25 students in the room).

Using the assessment data, the teacher decides to group students based on reading ability. The intervention program prescribes a learning path that will guide the student through lessons that will fill the student's learning gaps. Meanwhile, classmates are either working on their own learning gaps or receiving further practice during reading time.

These prescribed lessons feature varied activities that are both engaging and rich for the student while delivering instruction in ways that address each student's personal learning style. It is important that this content is delivered in a way that differs from the instruction the student has already received, as that will simply repeat methods that have already been proven to be unsuccessful for this student.

When the unit is completed, the system assesses the student to confirm mastery. With a positive result, the student has filled one learning gap. A steady progression of this success will mean the student can move toward grade-level instruction more efficiently.

Although deeper and more plentiful learning gaps may exist for other students, especially as the intervention program is applied in other tiers of your model, this student's gap was remedied and reassessed in a matter of minutes. As the student was identified as Tier 2 early in the school year, there is a distinct possibility that they can reach grade-level content in time for end-of-the-year testing.

At the minute level, there are as many intervention strategies as there are students who need them. Traditional educational materials are not equipped for that truth. When building your intervention program, make sure the solution that you choose has:

- Timely formative assessment to identify and diagnose learning gaps on a minute level
- On-target direct instruction that follows the student's individual learning path rather than the curriculum for the whole
- Thorough reporting to help educators make informed decisions about upcoming instruction

An intervention program built around these factors ensures that instead of a regression to the mean, your school or district can see improvement of the whole. ”

About the Author

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