

Standard 5: Individualization of Instruction

*Reflective Essay*

This standard is an important extension of *Standard 4: Content Knowledge Instruction*. Teachers who struggle with adapting and modifying their instruction, student assignments, etc. are at a distinct disadvantage in helping students learn what they need to know. Today's classrooms typically include students with skills spanning several grade levels and a myriad of learning styles. This situation alone can make instruction a challenge. Add this to cultural and behavioral complexities and classroom management, and teaching a lesson can feel like climbing a mountain.

Principals cannot not be experts in every area of the education process due to its enormity. However, they must be knowledgeable about where to direct teachers, how to connect them with resources, and provide relevant training in this area. A myriad of approaches can help teachers with this process. I am partial to Rick DuFour's (2003) use of professional learning communities as an avenue for quality student learning. He suggests that teachers focus very specifically on understanding what they want children to learn. Using this mapping type process then leads them to determine measurable outcomes that indicate learning. Professional and collegial collaboration also provides teacher groups with support in addressing situations in which students do not learn or demonstrate the desired objective.

Individualization of instruction is best professional practice across all subjects. This differentiation of instruction acknowledges the contextual nature of development. It is particularly important to approach this thoughtfully when it involves students with special education support needs and low achieving students. Educators are aware now

more than ever that teaching cannot be approached as ‘one-size-fits-all.’ Extensive research has documented real achievement differences (Burkhardt, 2006). Girls and boys learn differently. Disparate achievement patterns have also been documented in different socio-economic and cultural subgroups. Addressing these needs must be tailored to the specific student population in a classroom or school. This is why I feel strongly about the use of professional learning communities as a primary or umbrella approach to planning for differentiation of instruction. Other specific strategies, interventions, and materials will fall under the global approach of working closely with fellow teachers. This type of methodology is powerful because small groups of teachers know one another’s style, they know the students, and they can contribute unique points of view towards the goal of successful student learning.

#### *Related Artifacts*

Several of my course work products are relevant artifacts to this standard. In a paper about the use of data in the instructional process (artifact – Data Paper), I talk about the application of professional learning communities as a framework for encouraging a shared stakeholder point of view regarding learning. Hord (1997) describes this approach as a powerful framework for structuring process change. Teacher’s professional performance is enhanced when the focus is shifted to improved student learning rather than on instruction.

A particularly salient example of my understanding of individualization of instruction comes from the Rosa Parks Supplementary Budget Presentation. This study looked specifically at issues related to the achievement gap. Our paper talked specifically about the strategy of using collegial and professional development to review assessment

data and plan for student learning. This process is absolutely necessary in order to individualize and/or differentiate instruction for students with a wide array of learning support needs.

*References*

Dufour, R. (2003). Building a Professional Learning Community. *The School Administrator*; May, 2003.

Hord, S.M. (1997). *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Burkhardt, G. (2004). NCREL's Position Statement on Closing the Achievement Gaps. Retrieved April 25, 2004, from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory at <http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0103/haycock.html>.