## Programs in Practice: Differentiated Instruction: Begin with Teachers!

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### Abstract:

In Oakwood City School District, differentiation is—and has been for a number of years—our primary academic goal. Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that not all educators embraced the goal, as 35-year veteran Ron Givens [not his real name] exemplifies: "My knee-jerk reaction [to being required to differentiate instruction] was, 'You can't make me.' It was your standard, middle-aged, white guy rant." Since then, not only has Ron oriented his instruction toward differentiation and integrated differentiation strategies into his instruction, but he also has led professional development for his peers on using online simulations as a way to differentiate. What led to this impressive transformation, and how can we bottle it and sell it?

Supplemental materials are available for this article. Go to Taylor & Francis's online edition of *Kappa Delta Pi Record* to view the following free supplemental resources: the Differentation Rubric; the Differentiation Choice Board; and the Professional Performance Plan for Phases I and II.

**Keywords:** differentiation | instruction | professional development | differentiation strategies | implementation

### Article:

**Introduction**

In Oakwood City School District, differentiation is—and has been for a number of years—our primary academic goal. Perhaps it will not surprise you to learn that not all educators embraced the goal, as 35-year veteran Ron Givens [not his real name] exemplifies: "My knee-jerk reaction [to being required to differentiate instruction] was, 'You can't make me.' It was your standard, middle-aged, white guy rant." Since then, not only has Ron oriented his instruction toward differentiation and integrated differentiation strategies into his instruction, but he also has led professional development for his peers on using online simulations as a way to differentiate. What led to this impressive transformation, and how can we bottle it and sell it?

Ron's transformation took several years and involved a variety of pieces. These pieces—including participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and leading a "Pizza & PD" (Professional Development) session for colleagues—were woven, *by his choice*, into his evaluation process. Like differentiated instruction for students, Ron's evaluation process was differentiated to best meet his needs.

**Deep Implementation**

Most of us desire meaningful educational change that will increase student learning. Regardless of the change initiative and the research supporting it, for school-wide and district-wide changes to take root and effect improvements, implementation must be "deep" (Reeves 2009, 44):

> In fact, in surprising research, we found that for many change initiatives, implementation that was moderate or occasional was no better than implementation that was completely absent. Only deep implementation had the desired effect on student achievement.

In Oakwood, our Core Team, a group of teacher leaders and administrators that has been instrumental in the implementation of differentiation, has used Tomlinson's (2007) "fire and light" metaphor to identify strategies to ensure deep implementation. "Light" symbolizes efforts to beckon and draw teachers toward the change. Such strategies include professional development, modeling, celebration, and teacher leadership. Not all teachers, however, respond to being beckoned by the light. "Fire" strategies are, therefore, necessary for the few who resist change in the face of overwhelming data in support of the change.

"Fire" symbolizes the use of cognitive dissonance to help those who need to change to understand, through the presentation of data, that their current behaviors are less effective than the proposed changes (Aronson 1969). Cognitive dissonance makes it difficult for people to maintain status quo performance, because over time they come to realize that the status quo might not be what is best for students. We cannot avoid the "difficult truth that behavior precedes belief—that is, most people must engage in a behavior before they accept that it is beneficial; then they see the results, and then they believe that it is the right thing to do" (Reeves, 44). In other words, implementation precedes buy-in. Therein lies the necessity of "fire" strategies that make avoiding the change initiative and holding tightly to the status quo uncomfortable, if not impossible.

"Fire" strategies that help to increase awareness and create cognitive dissonance include differentiated supervision, providing "required choice" professional development, and aligning teacher evaluation to the change initiative. It is the last of these—aligning teacher evaluation to the change initiative—that serves as the focus of this article. While differentiation is the change initiative to which we have committed in Oakwood, our approach to teacher evaluation could be applied by collaborative leadership teams like our Core Team to myriad research-based reform efforts.

## Differentiated Evaluation

Like many districts, we use Charlotte Danielson's (2007) Framework for Teaching as the basis for the supervision cycle of pre-observation conference, formal observation, and post-observation conference. When teachers participate in this Phase I evaluation, as we call it, we evaluate them on Danielson's four domains of planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Teachers in Phase I go through this supervision cycle two times per year. As part of each supervision cycle, the supervisor is expected to look for and assess the teacher's implementation of differentiation, in addition to Danielson's four domains. Teachers new to the district participate in Phase I evaluation each year for three years, while more veteran teachers participate in Phase I every three years.

The years when teachers are not in Phase I, they participate in Phase II, which is evaluation based on individual teacher goals and is not part of the supervision cycle. Additionally, *all* teachers—those in Phase I and Phase II—are required to write at least one professional goal related to our change initiative of differentiation. The process through which teachers go to write their differentiation goals is *itself* differentiated and is described here in detail.

The Core Team, comprised mostly of teachers, developed this differentiated process as a way to help all teachers and administrators understand the expected changes so they can move toward them together. The process itself creates cognitive dissonance for some teachers, and these teachers initially push back against differentiation. Yet, experiencing an evaluation process that is differentiated to meet their needs is transformative. Because this process allows teachers to craft goals that are meaningful to them, differentiation itself becomes more meaningful. The dissonance between pushing against differentiation and yet experiencing differentiation in their own evaluation is resolved, and teachers become amenable to—and even embrace—differentiation.

## The Process

Prior to composing their differentiation goals, teachers are asked to complete a self-assessment using the Differentiation Rubric (see Figure 1). This two-page rubric—designed and continually modified by the Core Team—provides teachers guidance in identifying their Distinguished, Developing, and Basic areas in six domains (differentiating *for* INTEREST, READINESS, and STRENGTH [LEARNING PROFILE]; and differentiating *through* CONTENT, PROCESS, and PRODUCT).

## Figure 1.
### Differentiation Rubric (Page 1)

| DOMAIN | Distinguished | Developing | Basic |
|---|---|---|---|
| differentiating for . . . | | | |
| INTEREST | <ul><li>assesses student interests (e.g., interest inventory) and uses to inform instruction</li><li>consistently offers students choices for learning</li><li>promotes student interests beyond the classroom</li><li>makes connections between content and student interests</li><li>connects most content to real-world experiences/situations</li><li>consistently plans instruction around student interests</li><li>consistently uses flexible grouping based on student interests</li></ul> | <ul><li>has awareness of student interests</li><li>sometimes offers students choices for learning</li><li>develops student interests in the content area</li><li>sometimes makes connections between content and student interests</li><li>connects some content to real-world experiences/situations</li><li>sometimes plans instruction around student interests</li><li>sometimes uses flexible grouping based on student interests</li></ul> | <ul><li>lacks awareness of student interests</li><li>offers no choice for learning</li><li>expects students to be interested in content</li><li>makes no connections between content and student interests</li><li>makes no connections between content and real world</li><li>does not plan instruction around student interests</li><li>does not use flexible grouping based on student interests</li></ul> |
| READINESS | <ul><li>consistently uses pre-testing to diagnose student readiness and inform instruction</li><li>consistently modifies curriculum for student readiness</li><li>consistently uses flexible grouping</li><li>uses ongoing assessment data to offer intervention and enrichment/extension as needed</li></ul> | <ul><li>sometimes uses pre-testing to inform instruction</li><li>sometimes modifies curriculum for student readiness</li><li>sometimes uses flexible grouping</li><li>does some intervention and enrichment/extension</li></ul> | <ul><li>expects all students to have prerequisite skills (does not use pre-testing to inform instruction)</li><li>teaches to "the middle" (does not modify curriculum for student readiness)</li><li>does not use flexible grouping/ groups by "ability"</li><li>fails significant numbers of students</li></ul> |
| STRENGTH (LEARNING PROFILE) | <ul><li>consistently teaches to multiple learning modalities (visual, auditory, tactile)</li><li>consistently integrates students' multiple intelligences into instruction over time (e.g., intra-personal, inter-personal, logical/mathematic, verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic)</li><li>focuses and builds on student strengths</li></ul> | <ul><li>has awareness of student learning modalities</li><li>sometimes considers multiple intelligences when planning instruction</li><li>sometimes builds on student strengths</li></ul> | <ul><li>lacks awareness of student learning modalities</li><li>plans instruction without considering students' multiple intelligences</li><li>focuses on student weaknesses</li></ul> |

## Figure 1.
### Differentiation Rubric (Page 2)

| DOMAIN | Distinguished | Developing | Basic |
|---|---|---|---|
| differentiating through . . . | | | |
| CONTENT | <ul><li>adjusts content based on all students' needs to meet standards</li><li>varies teaching and stretches content every year</li><li>provides intervention and enrichment as needed</li></ul> | <ul><li>adjusts content based on some students' needs to meet standards</li><li>varies teaching slightly from year to year</li><li>provides some intervention and enrichment</li></ul> | <ul><li>does not adjust content based on students' needs</li><li>teaches virtually the same way every year (the content does not change even though the students do)</li><li>does not provide intervention and enrichment</li></ul> |
| PROCESS | <ul><li>consistently uses multiple methods of grouping students</li><li>uses a variety of instructional practices (e.g., cooperative learning, direct instruction, project-based learning, inquiry, questioning)</li><li>adjusts rate of instruction and re-teaches as needed</li><li>provides students multiple and varied opportunities to practice skills (e.g., in class and homework)</li></ul> | <ul><li>sometimes uses different methods of grouping students</li><li>varies instructional practices at times</li><li>adjusts rate of instruction and re-teaches at times</li><li>provides students some opportunities to practice skills</li></ul> | <ul><li>primarily groups students homogeneously by "ability" (uses only one method of grouping students)</li><li>primarily relies on lecture/direct instruction (does not vary instructional practices)</li><li>does not adjust rate of instruction and/or re-teach</li><li>provides primarily skill and drill homework for practicing skills</li></ul> |
| PRODUCT | <ul><li>consistently uses a combination of formative and summative assessments</li><li>consistently uses a combination of informal and formal assessments</li><li>uses a variety of assessment strategies (e.g., pencil/paper tests, performance assessment)</li><li>student evaluation is based on standards</li><li>consistently provides students multiple opportunities to show what they know and provides students some choice</li><li>consistently allows/provides continued assessments to promote student mastery</li></ul> | <ul><li>uses more summative than formative assessments</li><li>sometimes uses a combination of informal and formal assessments</li><li>sometimes varies assessment strategies</li><li>student evaluation is based on standards and other criteria (e.g., effort or conduct)</li><li>sometimes provides students multiple opportunities to show what they know</li><li>sometimes allows/provides continued assessments to promote student mastery</li></ul> | <ul><li>uses summative assessments exclusively</li><li>uses formal or informal assessments exclusively</li><li>student evaluation is based largely on criteria other than standards (e.g., effort, neatness, conduct) and not clearly tied to standards</li><li>uses primarily one form of assessment (pencil/paper tests)</li><li>tests for a concept/skill one time (does not allow/provide continual assessment)</li></ul> |

From this assessment, a teacher selects a Basic or Developing area as the focus for his or her differentiation goal. For example, a teacher may have identified herself as Developing in differentiating through PROCESS by varying her instructional practices *at times*. She aspires to move to the Distinguished level for PROCESS by *regularly* using a variety of instructional practices (e.g., cooperative learning, direct instruction, project-based learning, inquiry, questioning). She might even wish to focus particularly on inquiry. This, then, becomes her Performance Goal.

So, the goal is written. But how is it met? What steps are taken to make progress toward meeting the goal? Writing a meaningful Action Plan can be a daunting task for anyone, which is why the Core Team developed—and, again, continually modifies—the Differentiation Choice Board. This tool provides teachers with a variety of choices through which they can engage in *Ongoing Professional Development* in or out of the district, *Collaboration* with their colleagues, and *Visitation* of other classrooms or environments beyond their own four walls. Teachers are required to select at least one option from each of the aforementioned categories to develop their Action Plan. Because this Choice Board is itself an example of differentiation, teachers are also permitted to create their own option that fits the purpose of the specific category.

To continue with our example, our hypothetical teacher might choose to participate in a PLC that is focused on effective inquiry practices (Ongoing PD), she may decide to work closely with a colleague who is a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) Fellow to develop inquiry-based units for her students (Collaboration), and she might arrange to visit with a teacher at the regional STEM school who integrates inquiry into all content areas (Visitation).

The last category of the Differentiation Choice Board, the *Method of Evaluation*, gives teachers the opportunity to choose how they will share with others what has been learned. Because the teacher in our example selected a goal that many teachers can relate to, she might choose to share her findings at a faculty meeting. This makes her individual goal beneficial to the entire faculty.

Phase I and Phase II teachers combine their Performance Goal (from the Rubric) with their Action Plan and Method of Evaluation (both from the Choice Board) to form their Professional Performance Plan. Early in the fall semester, all teachers meet with their supervisor to discuss their proposed goals. Some teachers bring to these meetings a rough idea of what they want to do, and their supervisor helps to flesh it out. Other teachers bring a polished Professional Performance Plan. At the end of the school year, teachers share with their supervisor evidence of meeting their goals. This evidence is helpful to administrators in writing the teachers' final evaluations for the year, especially for Phase II teachers. The evidence also helps administrators to understand where they need to provide additional supports.

The district offers support to teachers in the development of their goals in several ways. Core Team members lead a segment on the process at a faculty meeting and use their own goals as examples. From our district Web site (www2.oakwood.k12.oh.us/~cia/CIA/Differentiation_Goal.html), teachers can access a video podcast that demonstrates the process in its entirety and walks through a sample goal. In each building, Core Team members lead after-school "Pizza & PD" workshop-style sessions during which teachers can write their goals with the help and support of Core Team members and their fellow colleagues.

## Why Does It Work?

We attribute our district's success with a differentiated evaluation system to several factors. First, choice is an intrinsic motivator (Deci and Ryan 1985), and this system promotes choice and empowers teachers through choice. Second, through this system, we are modeling the very change initiative—differentiation—that we are implementing. In other words, we are *walking the*

*walk* and not just *talking the talk*. Third, teachers are often more likely to embrace the leadership of their peers than they are to embrace administrative directives. Thus the role of the Core Team in leading our change initiative and helping to design the evaluation system is crucial.

Fourth, the goals help to keep the administrative team focused on the same priorities as the teachers, and that has increased the effectiveness of the administrators in providing support for teacher growth. Further, the use of both "light" and "fire" strategies supports deep implementation. Last, the aforementioned support given to teachers makes their success with the evaluation system more likely.

**Benefits of This Process**

During their final goals conference with their supervisor as well as through their selected means of "sharing out" their work, teachers get to showcase the progress they have made on their goals. These opportunities galvanize teachers toward the change initiative and empower them by honoring their growth and the hard work they have done.

Because teachers' goals are based on self-determination, teachers often surprise us—and themselves—with the marvelous things that they do. For example, Oakwood Junior High English/language arts teacher Kelly Giles [not her real name] took an online course about differentiation. Her participation in that course inspired her and led her to the idea of developing a user-friendly tool for other teachers that would introduce them to the differentiation strategies from her course that she found compelling. Kelly shared:

> I wanted a quick resource to help with daily instruction that would incorporate differentiation. I want differentiation to be an integral part of my teaching—as much as breathing is to living—all day, every day, every class period.

After conversations with others, she drafted a flip booklet that could be shared with departments and given to new teachers hired into the district. By providing the flip book to new teachers, we are not only equipping them with a user-friendly tool for implementing differentiation strategies, but we also are communicating to them the importance of—and our commitment to—our change initiative of differentiation. This is one example of how a differentiated supervision process allows teachers to take charge of their own learning and accomplish great things.

Importantly, we have seen the benefits of our change initiative in our student achievement data. Our most recent district average ACT composite score of 26.3 is the highest in the district's history. Further, our ACT composite average has modestly, but consistently, increased over the last four years. Our most recent state test data shows that on all 28 measures, Oakwood met or—most often—exceeded our "similar districts'" percentage of students passing the tests *and* percentage of students scoring "above proficient." This is the second year in a row—and the only years ever—in which we have attained this. Our most recent value-added data shows that the district achieved "above expected growth" on our state's value-added metric. Value added is a measure of student growth or progress over time, as opposed to a single point of achievement. In other words, Oakwood students' growth over time is greater than the statistical target.

We must be cautious, however, about attributing our growth and improvement to our change initiative of differentiation alone. As we know, correlation is not causation, and there are often multiple factors at play that are difficult to control for in social science research. That said, differentiation has been the only district-wide academic/achievement-oriented goal for the past five years, and it has been the main academic goal for each of our buildings. Although we cannot say beyond a shadow of a doubt that our growth and improvement are due to differentiation, we are confident that differentiation is the main impetus behind our improved data.

**Areas for Growth**

As administrators, we have learned that we each approach the evaluation process differently. Some of us require that all four elements of the Choice Board be written into one differentiation goal, while others allow for multiple goals as long as the result is that all elements of the Choice Board are addressed. Some of us spend the lion's share of the final evaluation write-up speaking directly about the teacher's degree of completion and success on his or her goals, while others focus more broadly on the teacher's effectiveness and subsume that individual's work on the goals as part of the bigger picture.

Conversations about these differences have led the administrative team to focus on teacher evaluation as the topic of our Administrative PLC this year. Through our PLC, we will read about, learn together, discuss, and ultimately revise our evaluation practices to be more consistent and more effective as leaders.

Accountability should be a two-way street, and we need to be accountable to our teachers for effective administrative performance; the differentiated supervision process gives us the data we need to reflect on our practice and change as needed. Indeed, our administrative PLC has been studying Kim Marshall's *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation: How to Work Smart, Build Collaboration, and Close the Achievement Gap* (2009) to analyze and critique our supervision and evaluation practices.

**Conclusions**

To influence teacher effectiveness and student achievement in positive ways, it is important to align teacher evaluation to the change initiative. Clearly defining and communicating nonnegotiable expectations is an imperative initial step in the process. Furthermore, complete buy-in from the staff cannot be expected prior to implementation of these expectations. Remember Ron from the beginning of this article? It was *his choice* to participate in a PLC and *his choice* to lead a "Pizza and PD." He chose those activities within the *required* framework of the Differentiation Choice Board.

Ron's transformation is noteworthy, and he credits the PLCs he has participated in with changing his attitude and making him feel "less threatened and more inclined to try" differentiation strategies. Ron exemplifies the power of using teacher evaluation to promote educator effectiveness and to achieve deep implementation of a change initiative.

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