

# Differentiation FAQ Guide

## Waterloo Community Unit School District

2007

“The fact that students differ may be inconvenient,  
but it is inescapable.”

TheodoreSizer

When someone hands you a glob of kids;  
they don't necessarily hand you a matched set.”

Carol Tomlinson

Take a look at our WCUSD5 mission statement: *Our mission is to provide educational experiences for the total development of each student so they can become well-adjusted citizens, making positive contributions to society.* If we are to educate and challenge each student in our charge, then we have to be prepared to teach each student in our charge, recognizing that all children who enter our school buildings are not identical, and that individual students may bring along unique levels of prior experiences and knowledge, advanced learning abilities and/or learning disabilities.

When differentiating curriculum and instruction for *all* students, teachers need to develop curriculum that considers how to meet the needs of advanced learners, middle level learners, and students who are slower learners. Differentiation should improve learning for all students.

### What elements of curriculum can be differentiated?

1. **Content** - facts, concepts, generalizations or principles, attitudes, and skills related to the subject, as well as materials that represent those elements. Content includes what the teacher plans for students to learn, and how the student gains access to the desired knowledge, understanding, and skills. Examples:
  - Using manipulatives with some, but not all, learners to help students understand a new idea
  - Texts or novels at multiple reading levels
  - Whole-to-part and part-to-whole instruction
  - Reading buddy arrangements
  - Reteaching some students, exempting students who demonstrate mastery
  - Texts, computer programs, tape recorders, videos as a way of conveying concepts to varied learners
2. **Process** - how the learner comes to make sense of, understand, and “own” the key facts, concepts, generalizations, and skills of the subject. Often referred to as “activity.”
  - Provide varied options at differing levels of difficulty or based on differing student interests
  - Different amounts of teacher and student support for a task
  - Give students choices about how they express what they learn during a research exercise
  - Providing options for expressing what they understand. For the same study unit, students could have options such as creating a political cartoon, writing a letter to the editor, making a diagram

3. **Product** - items a student can use to demonstrate what he or she has come to know, understand, and be able to do as the result of an extended period of study. For example, a portfolio of student work, exhibition of solutions to real-world problems, end of unit project, complex and challenging paper-and-pencil test.

- Allow students to design a product around essential learning goals
- Express what they know in varied ways
- Varied working arrangements (working alone, part of a team)
- Varied types of resources in preparing the product
- Product assignments at varying degrees of difficulty to match student readiness
- Wide variety of kinds of assessments
- Rubrics of quality

“I am always eager to learn, but I do not always like being taught.”

Howard Gardner

What student characteristics should teachers be aware of when planning to differentiate instruction?

1. **Readiness** –students vary in readiness and therefore require different levels of difficulty. Examples:

- Adjusting degree of difficulty of a task to provide an appropriate level of challenge
- Adding or removing peer coaching
- Use of manipulatives
- Presence or absence of models for a task
- Making the task more or less familiar
- Varying direct instruction by small-group need

2. **Interest** – aligning key skills and material for understanding from a curriculum segment with topics or pursuits that intrigue students

- Using adults or peers with prior knowledge to serve as mentors in an area of shared interest
- Providing a variety of avenue for student exploration of a topic or expression of learning
- Providing broad access to a wide range of materials and technologies
- Giving students a choice of tasks and products, including student designed options
- Encourage investigation or application of key concepts and principles in student interest areas

3. **Learning Profile** - address learning styles, student talent, or intelligence profiles

- Flexible spaces and learning options
- Presenting information through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modes
- Work alone or with peers
- Choice of competitive, cooperative, and independent learning experiences
- Balancing varied perspectives on an issue or topic
- Authentic learning opportunities in various intelligence or talent areas

(Adapted from *Leadership for Differentiating Schools & Classrooms*  
by Carol Ann Tomlinson, 2000)

## How are other school districts implementing differentiation in the classroom?

The following description of differentiation strategies was developed by the Grosse Pointe Public School System. More information is available on their website:

<http://www.gpschools.org/ci/diff/diffhome.htm>

### **What Is "Differentiation"**

A BIG word for a simple concept: providing instruction that meets the differing needs of all students, through the following measures:

- **Providing multiple assignments within each unit**, tailored for students of different levels of achievement, interest, and/or learning styles. For example, students with advanced reading levels use material that is on the same topic, but more difficult, challenging or complex.
- **Allowing students to choose**, with the teacher's guidance, ways to learn and how to demonstrate what they have learned. For example, in a unit on Ancient Greece, some students might write a play illustrating what they have learned; others might create a mural.
- **Permitting students to opt out of material** they can demonstrate they know and to progress at their own pace through new material. For example, students who have mastered certain math concepts may be permitted to move beyond that material; students who need more time to master a subject area are permitted to move at a slower pace.
- **Structuring the class assignments** so they require high levels of critical thinking but permit a range of responses. For example, students may be asked to speculate on the nature of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, explain cause and effect, justify their ideas, and anticipate alternative viewpoints.
- **Having high expectations for all students** allows teachers to provide instruction aimed at a high level of understanding; all students are expected to achieve at optimal levels.
- **Implementing flexible grouping strategies** that cluster students by achievement in a particular subject area, interest, learning style, personal choice, and ability.
- **Creating learning centers** with activities geared to different learning styles, levels of thinking, levels of interest, and levels of achievement
- **Providing students with opportunities to explore topics** in which they have strong interest and find personal meaning. For example, individual and small-group investigations of real problems are an option for students who have mastered curriculum goals or an activity for all students.

## Where can I find additional helpful resources on differentiation instruction?

- <http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/differentiating.html>
- [http://www.frsd.k12.nj.us/rfmslibrarylab/di/differentiated\\_instruction.htm](http://www.frsd.k12.nj.us/rfmslibrarylab/di/differentiated_instruction.htm)
- <http://www.rockwood.k12.mo.us/departments/curriculum/diff/index.htm>
- <http://www.wilmette39.org/CD39/>
- <http://www.weac.org/kids/1998-99/march99/differ.htm>

“Schools are like airport hubs; student passengers arrive from many different backgrounds for widely divergent destinations. Their particular takeoffs into adulthood will demand different flight plans.”

Levine, 2002