



GUIDE

Supporting differentiation and intervention in today's classrooms



As educators, we know all children can learn. However, we are also faced with the harsh reality that some at-risk students progress through school without access to learning opportunities that are finely attuned to their individual needs.

Historically, it has been up to the classroom teacher to determine the next best action for all students—those performing at, above, or below grade level. In many cases, teacher decisions lead to positive outcomes and improved student learning. However, in other cases, struggling students continue to perform poorly without getting the support they need—not necessarily due to a lack of effort on the teacher’s part. This establishes a clear demand for strategies and tools that can help educators identify students’ needs more efficiently and systematically.

In this eBook, we discuss a few classroom tools available to educators and how they can be applied to differentiation and intervention.



Making sense of assessment tools

Assessment tools can help schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor their progress, provide evidence of their skills mastery, and support next-step planning discussions. The nature and intensity of interventions can be continually adjusted through the use of assessment tools and by monitoring each student's responsiveness to intervention. In addition, reliable assessment data provides the foundation for strategic programs like HMH Personalized Path, which takes that data and automatically places students into unique learning paths that meet their individual needs, whether it's adaptive practice or tailored interventions.

There are three main types of assessments that provide information that teachers and administrators can use to differentiate instruction and intervene, when needed.

Universal screening

High-quality interim assessments, such as MAP® Growth™ from NWEA®, can help educators identify those students needing additional support. Universal screening tools are administered two or three times per year to the entire student population. This provides immediate results for educators to determine whether their curriculum is meeting the needs of students. This is accomplished through the process of identifying current levels of readiness and by measuring growth between assessment windows. With any curriculum, research suggests that about 80 percent of students should be performing at grade-level benchmarks.

Interim assessments can also provide information about which content students are ready to learn independently for a personalized learning initiative and the content that they are ready to learn with instructional support from a teacher. This happens because interim assessments like MAP Growth identify students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the "sweet spot" where instruction is most beneficial. The ZPD is just beyond a student's current ability—or, the difference between what a child can do independently and what they can do with targeted assistance or scaffolding—thus, teacher-guided learning.

Progress monitoring

When students are identified as needing greater individualized or intensive interventions, they are provided with any number of targeted instructional strategies and supports. The key in finding success with these programs is effective progress monitoring.

Two types of measures can be used for progress monitoring: general outcome measures and mastery measures. A general outcome measure assesses a student's performance on general content knowledge or basic skills. A mastery measure offers a more specific assessment of skills within a learning progression. While the data from a general outcome measure will indicate if an intervention is ineffective and therefore needs to be changed, general outcome measures lack the ability to pinpoint what precisely needs to be adjusted.

Mastery measures, on the other hand, can directly assess specific student skills, showing a teacher not just that an instructional adjustment needs to occur, but also what that change should be to meet the needs of the student. Because mastery measures assess progress on specific skills, they become part of instructional intervention for students with learning challenges.

The sheer volume of skills that a student may need to master can often make mastery measures feel daunting. HMH Personalized Path addresses this concern by enabling highly efficient progress monitoring that combines a strong skills framework with adaptive practice and tailored intervention. This allows educators to pinpoint the precise skills a student's instruction is focusing on, while making assessment of these skills easier and faster. Personalized Path empowers educators with specific, up-to-the-minute data that can drive instruction, regardless of whether the teacher is focused on a student's area of challenge or advancement.



Formative practices

When it comes to gathering evidence of student understanding, minute-to-minute and day-by-day, there's a great classroom practice for the job: formative assessment. Formative assessment supports learning by encouraging the student to share what they know, or where they are experiencing difficulty with the teacher, so they can adapt instruction and learning together.

How can we apply assessment data to differentiate with flexible groups?

One of the benefits of getting assessment data is that teachers can use it for differentiation—and one way to differentiate is by creating flexible groups to support different learning needs. Here are four reasons data-driven flexible groups are a good idea.

1. Flexible grouping builds understanding

Collaborative groups do more than provide peer support for struggling learners. Collaboration stimulates conversation and teamwork, and provides the foundational experiences for the development of Theory of Mind. During the last decade, we have become more aware of the impact that Theory of Mind has on social interaction and background knowledge, both of which are critical for college and career preparation. The development of Theory of Mind also impacts reading

comprehension and critical conceptual knowledge—both of which are necessary for the understanding and application of academic content. When students work in flexible, collaborative groups, they broaden their schematic representation of the topic that they are discussing, thus formulating a broader lens from which they can analyze new material in novel situations.

In other words, they begin to see the topic not only from their viewpoint, but also from the view of others with whom they are learning. This experience, within itself, develops a Theory of Mind that allows students to increase their background knowledge regarding a given topic and their ability to solve problems by thinking critically about that topic.

2. Flexible grouping promotes communication

When children work in collaborative groups, they learn to communicate with others. Effective communication means learning to listen as well as to speak. By interacting with their peers, children begin to understand content from various perspectives and how people with different experiences look at and solve different problems. Children that work in flexible, collaborative groups build the foundation for moving from one ZPD to another. They do this by incorporating the knowledge they gain from peer interaction into their own knowledge base.

3. Flexible grouping builds background knowledge

Having background knowledge means that children have a basic understanding of the large concepts that are contained within a set of academic skills. They may need a bit of scaffolding to put the knowledge that they already have with new content, but they are ready to learn the new content. Without background knowledge, it's harder for students to build new knowledge and understanding. New knowledge obtained without the appropriate foundational skills is often knowledge that is not “usable.” In other words, the child cannot connect the new content to existing content; therefore, they do not use the new knowledge for solving problems because they do not know how it fits into the big picture.

When children work in collaborative groups, they are using “learned intelligence” that they gain from their peers to add to their background knowledge. For example, children share stories from their experience about visiting a farm during an activity that is designed to compare

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and contrast farm life with city life. Children who have never had a farm experience can begin to assimilate this knowledge into their own background. This allows them to gain new skills more rapidly and more thoroughly—and it allows them to integrate the new content with their existing knowledge.

4. Flexible grouping impacts college and career readiness

The ability to apply existing knowledge to new and novel situations is one of the key skills that employers say they are looking for in the workforce. They want their employees to be able to think for themselves and solve problems when they arise. As children collaborate, they learn to work as a team. This means that they are working with others to solve a common problem. They are thinking critically about the content, and they are finding novel solutions to the problem. Teachers can use flexible, collaborative groupings to help students learn content knowledge from their peers, and as they do so, they begin to learn how to learn on their own. Flexible, collaborative groupings are therefore extremely powerful instructional tools.

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What are the key elements for effective interventions?

1. Align content to fill instructional gaps

When students are not responding to core instruction that is differentiated, it is often because they have a “gap” in their content knowledge. Educators may identify this as “lack of background knowledge.” Most multi-tier systems of support (MTSS) models specify that quality core instruction that is differentiated ought to satisfy the need of most students (approximately 80%). These models recognize that some 10–20% will need an intervention that is targeted to fill the “gaps” or misconceptions that have occurred in learning. For these students, something additional is needed to supplement their core instruction. This means there is a need for alignment between the content that is addressed in both core and supplemental instruction.

2. Focus on strengths to build foundations for new skills

When we focus on “struggling students,” it is easy to overlook their strengths. Therefore, we consistently ask students to work harder and longer on things that are difficult for them, rather than finding an area of strength that the skills can be scaffolded onto. If we look at students’ abilities, rather than their deficiencies, then we are likely to design instruction that provides success instead of failures. That is we are likely to design instruction that fills the “gap” instead of adding to it. But, how can we achieve this?

3. Identify gaps with assessment

A quality assessment “toolbox,” or one that contains a variety of tools that provide a comprehensive view of the student, can help improve the efficacy of interventions. This should include assessments that provide information regarding the student’s ability to master grade-level standards—as well as those that give teachers insight into whether students are performing below or above grade-level expectations. These tools need to be able to identify where the student is strong and where they need support. Personalized Path is one such tool that helps teachers drill down to the specific skills each student needs to learn.



4. Triangulate data—including summative data

Summative assessments provide educators with knowledge of how a student is performing on state outcome measures that are correlated to grade-level standards. Summative assessments are difficult to use for guiding instruction because they are generally done late in the year and are only focused on whether the student performed at grade level or not. These assessments can be used effectively during the triangulation phase of the data-based decision-making process because they provide clues to the consistency of the student's performance across environments and assessments.

5. Identify gaps and scaffold content with interim assessments that align to state standards

Another type of assessment that is necessary for a quality toolbox is an interim assessment. These assessments identify a student's current achievement level and their growth over time. Interim assessments help determine if there are gaps in learning that need to be addressed. MAP Growth is an interim assessment that provides a comprehensive look at what a student knows and what they are ready to learn, based on state standards, but not limited to the student's grade level. Not limiting questions to the student's grade level is the key to identifying what it is that the student knows and what they need to learn. When interim assessment goes beyond the student's current grade level, it has the potential to identify learning gaps that could have occurred and to find areas of strength to build on that can be used as foundational supports for scaffolding.

Interim assessments that do not provide information beyond current grade-level content cannot fully support quality, differentiated instruction because they do not identify the ZPD that detects the foundational knowledge to support scaffolding for new content.

6. Use formative practices to differentiate instruction on a daily basis

Formative instructional practices guide day-to-day instruction and are a necessity for a quality assessment toolbox. Formative practices are questions and tasks that teachers have students answer and do for the purpose of identifying misconceptions and the need for additional instruction regarding the specific content that is being taught. Formative practices can directly support and guide differentiated instruction within the classroom because it is a direct reflection of whether or not the student has understanding of the content that is being taught.

Because formative practices are directly related to whether or not the student understands the content, they can also serve as progress monitoring for interventions at the various tiered levels. While there are many different strategies and tools available to support formative instructional practice, the process itself does not need to be complex or time-consuming. The key is finding a few strategies that work best for teachers and students. And today, it's even easier to implement some of these formative assessment strategies because there are digital tools and websites to help you. The idea is to use formative assessment tools in the classroom and to connect the data from those "mini" assessments to instructional adjustments.

7. Monitor progress with measures aligned to standards

Progress monitoring is the data that is collected regarding a student's progress in relation to a specific goal. It helps to direct future goals and interventions that will support the student's progress. Because progress monitoring is focused on closing gaps in learning, it must begin with a direct correlation to state standards that are grade appropriate for the student. Assessment tools should directly link discrete skills to grade-level content strands. Progress monitoring tools that do not directly link to grade-level content standards are much more difficult to interpret and identify as having direct impact on closing gaps. Progress monitoring tools that are loosely correlated to grade-level content also have the potential for focusing on the student's deficits, rather than their strengths, when building new skills.

How can we support individualized learning without creating a lot of extra work for teachers?

In a typical classroom today, you'll find a wide range of learning needs, with students across Tiers 1, 2, and 3 all needing different types of support and opportunities. Differentiating instruction for such a diverse group is a tall order for teachers who already feel there aren't enough hours in the day. Giving teachers a structural support system to meet this challenge is the overarching purpose of HMH Personalized Path, which leverages assessment data and technology to achieve the following four key goals:

1. Precisely place students into unique learning paths

The essential first step for students is to take the MAP Growth interim assessment, which accurately pinpoints their RIT scores and learning needs. Based on that data, HMH Personalized Path then moves seamlessly to automatic placement of students into learning

paths that are just right (not too easy, not too hard) for their current level of ability. The process is automatic but teachers retain control and can override MAP Growth recommendations as they see fit. Student assessment data is seamlessly integrated into the HMH Ed platform, and teachers can keep close watch on students' progress in Waggle, Read 180 Flex, and Math 180 Flex—the adaptive practice and intervention programs at the heart of Personalized Path.

2. Support students to work at the peak of their ability

To ensure that students are kept in their own zone of proximal development—the instructional “sweet spot” described above—HMH Personalized Path continually adapts to their evolving performance and progress. At the same time, teachers enjoy robust reporting and other support tools to help them close the gap between students' current capacity and their ability to meet grade-level standards.

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3. Provide resources that support true learning and skill development

Giving students a skill to practice is one thing, and keeping them motivated to persist in skill-building and continuous growth is quite another. The resources that HMH Personalized Path provides are rooted in research around personalized best practices, adaptive technology, and instructional strategies based on the science of how kids learn. Wherever students are in the MTSS or RTI learning tiers, HMH Personalized Path has a pathway that will feel relevant to them and help them grow.

For Tier 1 students, the platform offers adaptive practice powered by Waggle®—an animated, gamified, and multilingual experience that engages students in ongoing practice that's both challenging and engaging. Waggle provides adaptive, targeted skill practice for students at all proficiency levels, rewarding academic proficiency and positive learning behaviors to foster a growth mindset in all students.

For students in Tiers 1 and 2, Math 180 Flex and Read 180 Flex offer evidence-based interventions that give students systematic instruction and practice of foundational skills with the ultimate goal of helping them achieve the proficiency they need to return to Tier 1 instruction. Math 180 Flex builds algebra readiness and foundational skills, while Read 180 Flex provides targeted instruction in foundational literacy skills, such as phonics and fluency, as well as a wide range of reading topics designed to build vocabulary, fluency, knowledge, and comprehension.



HMH Personalized Path is designed to work as a unified system, offering teachers a comprehensive and time-saving way to manage instruction that is not only more likely to improve student outcomes, but also more likely to be sustained over time.

How do we gauge success?

Teachers use multiple measures that include assessments, student classroom performance, and observations to identify what students are ready to learn next and which students might be falling behind.

- Universal screeners make it possible to identify early which students are at risk of falling behind
- Data-based decision-making leads to more accurate targeting of students' areas of challenge and skill gaps
- Evidence-based interventions, coupled with progress monitoring, identify progress and areas for adjustments
- Instruction is validated by a growth assessment that is linked to instructional standards

With appropriate tools and strategies in place, it is possible for teachers' focus to move from intervention to prevention. The good news is that many districts and schools are moving in that direction to support student learning.

MAP Growth and Personalized Path can be powerful tools for administrators and teachers looking to inform their ability to support learners and close achievement gaps. Learn more about our assessment tools at [NWEA.org](https://www.nwea.org).



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HMH's award-winning curriculum to simplify
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