

What is Differentiated Clustering?

At the beginning of the second-nine week grading period, students in grades one through four will exchange classrooms to participate with students of similar instructional needs for a 120-minute language arts block and a 90-minute math block. The language arts block will include daily instruction in the areas of reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary, phonemics/phonics, spelling, and writing. The Math block will include daily practice in computation, accelerated math activities, textbook assignments, and math problem-solving practice. We refer to this as differentiated clustering. (Note: The first grade differentiated clusters for math will begin in January. Accelerated math will also begin at that time in all first grade differentiated clusters.)

Why will students receive instruction in differentiated clusters?

There is a growing separation of skills that occurs at each grade level. Research indicates that in a typical first grade, there is a range of instructional levels that spans three years. Current data at Hickory Elementary indicates that the range of abilities in first grade is 3 years, in second grade it is 7 years, in third grade it is 5 1/2 years, and in fourth grade it is 10 years. These differing levels of ability make it very challenging for teachers to meet the needs of individual students. As much as a teacher tries to accommodate for the range of instructional needs of students in his or her classroom, teaching is focused most often on the middle group. As a result, the students who need a more enriched curriculum may not be challenged, and the students who need skill reinforcement may fall behind.

What is the objective for differentiated clustering?

In compliance with federal legislation, we want to be sure that NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND. The school is held accountable for each child's learning and the expectation is that all children will pass the minimum academic standards established by the State of Indiana. More importantly, we want to ensure that each student's learning is maximized to his/her greatest potential. Since the opening of Hickory Elementary three years ago, the percentage of students who have not passed the English/Language Arts and/or the Indiana Academic Standards for Mathematics has ranged from 9% to 14%. Students currently performing in the lower 15% of the grade level are considered to be at risk of not passing ISTEP. Students performing in the top three quartiles are considered to be progressing at an acceptable rate and we feel confident will pass ISTEP. We want to identify children early who are at risk and to provide interventions that will move them out of an "at risk" category. In essence, our goal is to meet the requirement of federal legislation.....100% passing.

How are the differentiated clusters determined?

The teachers, principal, and assistant principal have reviewed each student's past and present academic performance. We have analyzed data from the fall assessments, achievement test scores (ISTEP and TERRA NOVA), ACSC local assessments, and student academic portfolios. Attention has been given to students who were referred to summer school, students who have been motivated to complete extra assignments, and individual samples of student work. Additionally, consideration has been given to the independent, instructional, and frustration levels of students. Many hours and meetings have been devoted to data analysis, reviewing student work, and group discussions to determine the appropriate placement of students.

Will a student stay with the same differentiated cluster all school year?

Not necessarily. Differentiated clusters are determined by the teaching staff and school administration, and based on the analysis of academic data and performance in the classroom. The differentiated clusters will be reviewed by the teachers and administration at the end of each grading period. If the school believes that a student would benefit by participating with a different cluster, a change in assignment may occur.

Have you considered how the students might feel about the differentiated clusters?

An analogy that we have used in our staff meetings may best describe our feelings about the needs of students. Imagine that you have been placed in a physics class and are required to attend to instruction for five hours each school day and to accurately complete all assignments. For some adults in this class, the instruction may exceed their level of comprehension. They may tune out the teacher, feel lost, uninterested and as a result, may not be learning. Other adults may be able to keep up with the pace. They feel confident and comfortable in the class. For these adults, the curriculum is challenging, but not frustrating. They are able to learn new information. Still another group of adults may already know the information that is being presented, therefore they are not learning anything new. These adults may be ready for the advanced physics curriculum.

Students in elementary school have similar feelings and needs. Teaching is most effective when it is geared to the independent and instructional levels of students.

What materials will be used?

All differentiated clusters will use textbooks, resources, and materials for the current grade level or higher. The Indiana Academic Standards and curriculum will not drop below grade level for the differentiated clusters. We recognize that the Indiana Academic Standards are the minimum standards for our state and that no child will benefit from working below this minimum level. We also recognize that some students are capable of doing work and progressing at a rate that exceeds the minimum requirements. We want to challenge all groups to progress to their highest level. All differentiated clusters will use textbooks approved on the state and locally adopted lists, participate in the Accelerated Math program, be held accountable for mastering the core spelling words, and follow the assignments outlined in our school improvement plan for math problem-solving and writing. (Please note that our School Improvement Plan can be accessed from the Hickory School link on the ACSC website at www.avon.k12.in.us.)

How will report card grades be assigned?

The teacher who teaches the block to the student will assign the grade. In other words, the teacher who teaches the language arts block to your child will assign the grades for reading, language arts, and spelling. The teacher who teaches your child math will assign the report card grade for math. Report card grades will not be “weighted” but the report card will indicate if the child’s differentiated cluster is Developing (beginning grade level), Demonstrating (at grade level), or Extending (above grade level).

What about Science and Social Studies?

Social studies and science will be integrated throughout the school day. This means that students may be reading or writing about topics in these subjects, participating in studies in the computer lab, and/or receiving separate and distinct assignments in their homeroom classrooms. For students in grades one through three, the teachers will concur together to determine if the student’s performance in these subjects should be marked satisfactory (S), needs improvement (N), or unsatisfactory (U). Letter grades are awarded in fourth grade for social studies and science and will be determined by the team of teachers instructing the child, and entered on the report card by the homeroom teacher. The Indiana Academic Standards for social studies and science will be followed.

What about Art, Music, PE, and Computer Classes?

Students will attend special area classes with the homeroom class they were assigned to at the start of school. They will also go to lunch, recess, and attend all extra-curricular activities with their homeroom class.

Provided by Hickory Elementary, Avon, Indiana