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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

The Need for SPEED

Criteria for Designing Effective Pyramids of Intervention

“What happens in our school when a student does not learn? We consider this question to be the fork in the road—the one question more than any other that will demonstrate a school’s commitment to learning for all students and its progress on the road to becoming a PLC.” -Whatever It Takes

Are you overwhelmed trying to meet the needs of every learner in your school? When students struggle, do your teams struggle with how to help? Principals often ask for help in designing effective ways to provide students with more time and support. The desire to help all kids learn created the need for criteria to guide the development of appropriate pyramids of intervention; it created the need for speed.

The SPEED criteria were developed as a guide for designing appropriate pyramids of intervention. The acronym stands for **S**ystematic, **P**ractical, **E**ffective, **E**ssential, and **D**irective. We have learned that when schools develop pyramids of intervention that meet the SPEED criteria they create ownership on the part of the faculty, meet the needs of individual learners, and maximize the school’s available resources.

The SPEED Criteria

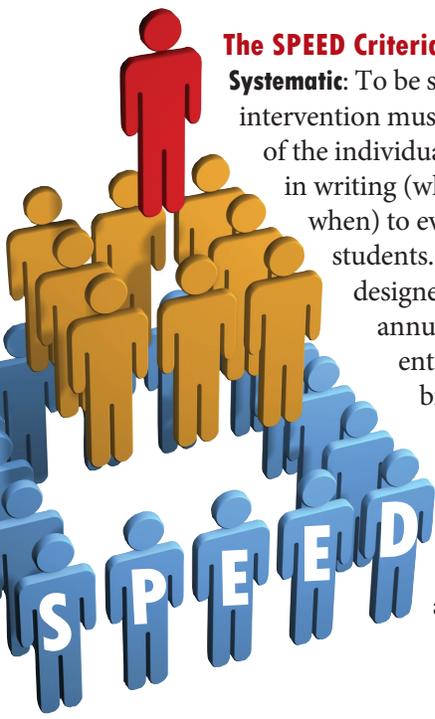
Systematic: To be systematic, a pyramid of intervention must be schoolwide, independent of the individual teacher, and communicated in writing (who, why, how, where, and when) to everyone; the staff, parents, and students. Every school in District 96 has designed a brochure that is revised annually and made available to parents at the start of each year. The brochure describes the *system* of interventions in enough detail that when students need more time and support to learn, teachers and parents know exactly what is available, what needs to happen

based on data, who can provide the instruction and when in the school day it can be offered. (To view copies of intervention brochures visit www.district96.k12.il.us.)

Systematic and schoolwide pyramids of intervention provide tiered instruction of increasing time and intensity to support struggling students. Effective pyramids begin with differentiated classroom (core) instruction and increase in time and intensity based on learner’s needs. The vast majority of resources are allocated to the core curriculum, as helping all learners initially will surely limit the number of students who need interventions later.

Practical: To be practical, a pyramid of intervention must be affordable given the school’s available resources (time, space, staff and materials). Intervention plans don’t need to cost a lot of money nor do they have to come in a box. Instead, teams need to *first* think about how to use or reallocate existing resources to fully utilize what is already available.

Time is one of a school’s biggest resources and the daily schedule represents an opportunity to maximize the impact of interventions. Rick and Becky DuFour suggest that teachers consider three questions when thinking about their schedules. First, do we believe it is the purpose of our school to ensure all students learn to high levels? Second, do we acknowledge that students learn at different rates with differing levels of support? And finally, have we created a schedule that guarantees students will receive additional opportunities to learn through extra time and support in a systematic way, regardless of who their teacher might be? If the answer to these questions is ‘yes’, the schedule can be reorganized to create time during the day when every available person becomes part of the pyramid of interventions.



At Woodlawn and Twin Groves Middle Schools, a 30-minute intervention block is built into the school day. The intervention block represents dedicated and protected time that guarantees students access to more time and support. Teams decide which students will participate in which interventions at the beginning of each week based on formative assessment data. This embedded time during the school day is a sacred time during which interventions are provided to students who have gone through a problem-solving process.

Effective: To be effective, the pyramid of intervention needs to be accessible, available and operational early enough in the school year to make a difference for students. This component of the SPEED criteria rejects the traditional notion that schools wait for a student to fail before we intervene. Intervention plans should have flexible entrance and exit criteria designed to be responsive to the needs of students.

DuFour et. al. define the goal of an *effective* pyramid of interventions as providing additional time and support as necessary until “students demonstrate they are ready to assume greater responsibility for their learning. The focus is on gradually weaning the student from the extra time and support as the student becomes successful in classes. The interventions then serve as a safety net if the student should falter, but they are not intended to be a permanent crutch.” (*Whatever It Takes*) This goal is only possible when the faculty has developed clear criteria that move students from one tier to another until the student has demonstrated mastery and eventually exits from the intervention.

Essential: To be essential, the pyramid of intervention must focus on the essential outcomes of the district’s curriculum and be targeted at a student’s specific learning. Using data, teachers regroup students based on the identified outcomes to provide the appropriate intervention focused on the specific area of need for that group of learners. At Kildeer Countryside Elementary School, the Math Lab provides target-aligned support to help students master specific skills using a prescription sheet completed by the collaborative team.

After discussing the results of formative assessments, teachers are better able to provide targeted time and support. According to Guskey, effective interventions possess three essential characteristics: 1) they present concepts differently, 2) they engage students differently, and 3) they provide students with successful experiences. (*Formative Assessment: The Contribution of Benjamin S. Bloom*, 2009) It is critical that teacher teams collaboratively identify es-

sential standards and analyze assessment data together in order to purposefully plan and target their instruction.

Directive: To be directive, a pyramid of intervention must be mandatory – not invitational – and a part of the student’s regular school day. At Willow Grove Kindergarten and Early Childhood Center teachers use the very beginning of each school day to deliver specific interventions to specific students while the remainder of the students focus on “welcome work” that extends and reinforces their learning. Students are not able to opt out, and parents and teachers cannot waive students’ participation in the intervention programs. Learning is not an optional activity and school leaders must remain resolute in their responsibility to respond when students don’t learn.

As DuFour has suggested, “It is disingenuous for any school to claim its purpose is to help all students learn at high levels and fail to create a system of interventions to give struggling learners additional time and support for learning.” (*Learning by Doing*) In District 96, we took that message to heart and embraced the SPEED criteria to insure our pyramids of intervention were on target when answering the question, “How does our school respond when student’s don’t learn?” ■

During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.

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Resources

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How a professional learning community responds when kids don’t learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: a handbook for professional learning communities at work™*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Guskey, T. (2009). "Formative assessment: The contribution of Benjamin S. Bloom."