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One Student at a Time

Making individualized instruction the standard

By **David V. Hicks**

I oversee the education of more than 11,500 students in a family of 10 schools spread over three continents—North America, Europe, and Asia—but 35 years in education has taught me that there's an irony in getting preoccupied with numbers: It's best to forget how many students there are and focus on just one at a time.

This concentration on the individual is nothing more and nothing less than the natural goal toward which we all strive in one way or another as educators. Whether we're in a strong economy or, as now, in an anemic one, we need to educate each student as an individual, meeting his or her specific needs to prepare for whatever academic and life challenges lie ahead.

I was thinking about this the other day as I considered how much private and public schools have to teach one another, and it occurred to me that what our college-preparatory schools provide for each of our students is in many ways the ideal extension of the individualized education program that public schools already provide for a small subset of their students.

Of course, we're not talking about the exact kind of plan that's mandatory for special-needs children in public schools, but the general intent is the same: We systematically identify each student's strengths and weaknesses to create customized instructional strategies that individualize learning and boost achievement.

Over time, as we've refined the "personal learning plans" that are now among the core tools of teachers and administrators at our schools, we've focused on eight key elements. They're imperatives for individualized education to be successful on any scale, and we recommend all of them to our public school colleagues:

- **Basing plans on relevant metrics.** Our personal learning plans are predicated on the thinking and problem-solving skills that adults need on the job, in the home, and as citizens of a democratic society. We use testing to track individual students' progress year by year.
- **Training teachers in the interpretation and use of relevant data.** Teachers should be trained to be academic diagnosticians capable of identifying students' specific strengths and weaknesses. It's encouraging that more attention is being paid to assessing individual student performance; public schools in particular have been quick to adopt strategies such as "response to intervention," or RTI, to identify and support struggling students. It remains surprising, however, how few teachers in either public or private settings are ever given their classes' test results, much less trained in how to interpret and use those scores to improve and individualize instruction.
- **Developing detailed plans and specific strategies.** Our teachers are taught how to write narratives and develop personal learning plans based on each student's performance on assessments, as well as on classroom observations. This focuses the teacher's attention upon a student's individual needs and puts the teacher on the side of the student. It helps teachers understand that, like it or not, their students' work is a reflection on them.
- **Keeping plans current and relevant.** Personal learning plans aren't for burying in a file drawer. We update each plan based on classroom performance and assessment results at least three times a year.

- **Involving students.** In our schools, students are expected to set personal goals based on their own understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Students conduct portfolio reviews in which they lead discussions with their parents and teachers. This is a powerful way for students to think about the work they have done as part of the portfolio process and has proven a powerful way to help them identify their own strengths and weaknesses, make an honest self-assessment of their progress, and take responsibility for their own learning.

- **Enlisting family support.** Each student's plan should be shared with parents, so they can complement the attention their child is receiving in the classroom with similar strategies at home. Regular parent conferences reinforce this support in our schools and help extend the power of the classroom.

- **Differentiating in all subjects.** Unless teachers are skilled in differentiating instruction and are committed to creating appropriately challenging learning activities for their students in all subjects, the promise of teaching one student at a time will ring hollow. Drama, for example, may not seem like a prime opportunity for individualized instruction, but it can be an ideal context. Students who are still developing key math skills may be assigned the task of tracking expenses, for example, and responsibility for revising scripts might be given to those who need to focus on writing.

- **Affirming the importance of teacher-student relationships.** Focusing on one student at a time is what the best teachers have always intuitively done. While there's been debate in some quarters about the need for low pupil-teacher ratios in every class, small class sizes do not guarantee an individualized approach. Nor do larger class sizes, within reason, preclude this approach.

The good news is that virtually every public school already does some of these things for some students. Some schools, especially those struggling to meet state proficiency targets, extend these strategies beyond those for whom IEPs are mandated to other students who need academic help.

Given the rapidly changing demands of the workplace, individualized instruction is really something that should be afforded to all students. As we've all heard countless times, in the global economy of the 21st century, we're preparing our children for jobs that haven't yet been invented. Given that reality, individualized education isn't just something that works in the classroom; rather, it's excellent preparation for the careers of the future.

Now may not be the rosier time for education as a whole, and it may seem an odd moment to speak of educational ideals when so many educators are being forced to cut their classroom offerings to the bone. But now may be the very time, with class sizes growing and teachers being laid off across the nation, when



—Jonathan Bouw

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When funding is tight, it tends to narrow the range of what we view as possible, not only in day-to-day practice, but also in how we plan to educate the next generation of students. We can't look to the horizon with our heads hung low. Now is the time to keep uppermost in mind what the ideal education is, even as we work harder than ever to realize that ideal.



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