

Four Ways to Accelerate Learning

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Educators are some of the most dedicated and hardest-working folks when it comes to serving their students, especially those who have fallen further behind due to unfinished learning during the pandemic. As a Grades K–8 teacher for years, I've tried many different approaches to intervention. But with the growing range of students' levels in today's classrooms and a mindset shift in how we address intervention, I wanted to offer some strategies I've learned from working with educators across the country in hopes that it can guide others.

The Importance of Grade-Level Instruction

Trying to teach students everything they've missed or haven't yet mastered is not the answer. There's not enough time in one academic year to teach two (or maybe more) grade levels' worth of standards, and denying students their current grade-level instruction to teach what was missed creates a never-ending cycle of below-grade level instruction.



[*The Opportunity Myth*](#), a groundbreaking 2018 study conducted by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), reported that most students—especially students of color, students from low-income families, students with mildly to moderately special needs, and English Learners—can spend up to six months per school year on work that is “far below grade level” in an effort to catch up. This not only robs students of the opportunity to learn the standards they need to succeed, but it also gives a false sense of security around their education. The study shows that while students succeeded in 71 percent of their class assignments, they were only meeting grade-level standards on 17 percent of those same assignments because so much of the work they were being assigned lacked grade-level rigor. That disconnect won't help these students down the road, even with the best intentions.

If you prioritize and place a few stepping stones out for your students, they can make some key jumps and get across the river, accessing grade-level instruction more quickly.

To put students who are not yet proficient on a path to proficiency, **here are four things you can do to support their academic growth and build their confidence.**

1. Provide Grade-Level Instruction to Your *Entire* Class

When content is thought to be too difficult for students, teachers tend to lean very heavily—sometimes singularly—on remediation. But if those students don't have opportunities to grapple with grade-level work, they are unknowingly being relegated to prolonged slippage. As reported in TNTP's research, when students are denied exposure to grade-level rigor, their progress can flatline and learning gaps only deepen. Scaffolding grade-level instruction for those who need access brings them up to the current grade-level standards instead of subjecting them to below-grade level learning.

2. Prioritize What's Critical

As you plan your intervention efforts for small groups or individual students, reach back only as far as your students need to go. Many well-intended teachers reteach too many skills from earlier grade levels, which is unnecessary for grade-level mastery of priority standards. To avoid this trap, focus on priority reading standards and key mathematics prerequisite skills—those critical concepts students need to master before building on them. Consider

preteaching essential prerequisite skills to connect students with what's coming in grade-level instruction. Then, by folding in instructional scaffolds, you can put all students on a path to grade-level proficiency.

Imagine students standing on one side of a rushing river. The side they are standing on is below-grade level instruction, and across the river is grade-level instruction. It would be possible—but take way too long—for a teacher to build a bridge with every single skill and concept those students need. But if you prioritize and place a few stepping stones out for your students, they can make some key jumps and get across the river, accessing grade-level instruction more quickly. (This analogy came from an educator in San Bernardino, California.)



3. Assess Less, Teach More

Today's assessments are not what they used to be. They've come a long way. With the availability of adaptive assessments, educators can get better data with less-frequent testing. And now, some assessments even provide instructional assets to challenge students as they grow. As a result, it's no longer necessary to test weekly the way we used to. Weekly testing can cause test fatigue and rob students of critical instruction time. Instead, you can use that time for focused instruction to help accelerate student growth. When you do assess, ensure you are collecting data that demonstrates students' strengths so you know how to build on those assets.

4. Leverage the Power of Small Group Instruction

Grouping students according to powerful diagnostic data for focused intervention is another strategy that can help all students participate in whole class grade-level instruction. However, be careful with programs that group students using an overall score. These are not dialed down enough to meet students' specific needs with precision. You'll want to group students based on shared needs and provide access to materials to help them access grade-level content. This allows you to focus on critical concepts to help your students succeed more quickly while also providing enrichment opportunities for those students who are ready to be pushed further.

Strategically planned small groups focus on critical concepts that prepare students appropriately for whole class, grade-level instruction.

The Future Is Bright

I know how challenging it can be to put your heart and soul into making a difference every day for your students and not having enough energy left for all the logistics. My hope is that these four strategies can help you narrow proficiency gaps quickly. Research from TNTP shows that when students who start the year below grade level have access to stronger instruction, they close gaps with their peers by six months. You can give that strong instruction to all your students! My colleague Elizabeth Bassford said, "The human mind wants to chew on something that is a little tough." I know we've all seen that perseverance and determination in our students. They will push themselves, and with you cheering them on and providing high-quality instruction, they will get exactly what they need.

About the Author

Brooklin Trover is a national director of content and implementation at Curriculum Associates. Before joining Curriculum Associates, Brooklin embraced *i-Ready* as a teacher and district leader. Her career began with 13 years as an elementary and middle school teacher. Her passion for working with fellow educators in support of student growth led to a five-year school district leadership position coaching and providing professional development.

Brooklin's passion for humanizing data-driven instruction at the district level has inspired teachers and led to gains for students. She is thrilled to continue her work with *i-Ready* on a national level. Brooklin holds an MA in Policy Studies of Language, Literacy, and Culture from San Diego State University and an MS in Reading from California State University, Fullerton.