

## Differentiated Instruction

### The Question:

“We want to move forward with differentiated instruction (DI) in our school. How do we proceed?”  
(Secondary principal)

### The Answer:

Understanding these five essentials is key to successful DI:

1. What is DI?
2. Why differentiate?
3. Respond by differentiating
4. Key features
5. Five questions to ask in the classroom

### 1. WHAT IS DI?

Differentiated instruction is:

- effective instruction that responds to the learning preferences, interests and readiness of individual learners;
- an organizing structure or framework for thinking about teaching and learning;
- not individualized instruction, rather, a response to varying student needs that provides a balance of modelled, shared, guided and independent instructional strategies.

“(Differentiated instruction) is understanding that there are many ways to learn, recognizing that some students learn differently than others, and providing those students with opportunities to learn in ways that work best for them.”

*Karen Hume, 2008*

### 2. WHY DIFFERENTIATE?

- To help all students learn. Differentiating our instruction allows us as teachers to grow in our ability to “read our students” and then to adapt our practice so we effectively teach all students.
- To increase student motivation and achievement. When our students receive the appropriate levels of

challenge and support, they are engaged and motivated, and their achievement improves.

- To connect with adolescent learners. We can forge strong connections between our subject and our students, and that improves student learning.
- To help adolescents become independent learners. When students find out about themselves as learners, they become more independent, and when they work as responsible members of a community, respecting and affirming the diversity of others, discipline problems decrease.
- To increase teacher satisfaction and efficacy. Some of the enthusiasm and pleasure we feel in teaching is renewed when we work creatively and efficiently.

“The heart of school improvement rests in improving daily teaching and learning practices in schools, including engaging students and their families.”

*Ben Levin, 2008*

### 3. RESPOND BY DIFFERENTIATING

- Use appropriate, evidence-based strategies for instruction, assessment and evaluation.
- Use structures or ways of organizing that facilitate student learning.
- Provide choice, respectful tasks, a shared responsibility for learning and flexible learning groups (key features of differentiated instruction).



#### 4. KEY FEATURES:

1. *Flexible Learning Groups*: provide students with opportunities to work in a variety of groups over time that are based on student readiness, interests and learning preferences.
2. *Choice*: provides students with personalized opportunities to connect with their prior knowledge, interests and learning preferences. This allows for a sense of ownership, self-motivation and a commitment to their own learning.
3. *Respectful Tasks*: are engaging, promote high expectations and optimal achievement for all students and are assessed using the same assessment criteria.
4. *Shared Responsibility for Learning*: develops when students are supported in developing the knowledge and skills required for them to self-assess and learn independently.

#### 5. FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK IN THE CLASSROOM

Use the following questions to guide decision-making when planning instruction to meet the learning needs of our students. Ask these questions with your teachers.

1. How can classrooms be set up for differentiated instruction?
2. What elements of the learning environment can be differentiated to help all students learn?
3. How can we differentiate the ways we can help students learn new concepts?
4. How can we differentiate the ways we assess student progress towards their learning goals?
5. How can we differentiate the ways that students demonstrate what they understand and can do?

These questions help to focus our thinking when planning a differentiated approach—for a single instructional activity, a lesson or an entire unit.

The Differentiated Instruction Framework for Teaching and Learning (see diagram) captures the variety of elements, including strategies and structures that constitute a differentiated approach to instruction, assessment and evaluation.

#### DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION RESOURCES

Order Ministry resources through Service Ontario Publications ([www.publications.serviceontario.ca](http://www.publications.serviceontario.ca)) or find them on the EDU GAINS website ([www.edugains.ca](http://www.edugains.ca))

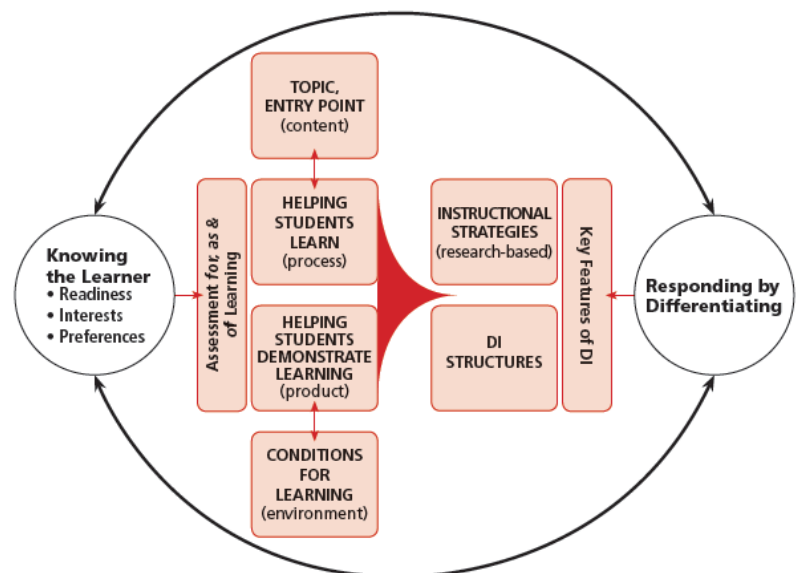
Student Success Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Strategy Resources, Grades 7–12, include:

- *Reach Every Student through Differentiated Instruction Brochures*
- *Student Success Grades 7 & 8 Differentiated Instruction Educator's Package (2007)*
- *Differentiated Instruction Grades 7 & 8 Educator's Package Enhancements*
- *Student Success Differentiated Instruction Educator's Package (2010)*
- *Secondary Differentiated Instruction DVD and Facilitator's Guide (2010)*
- *Differentiated Instruction Teaching/ Learning Examples*

#### REFERENCES

Hume, Karen (2008). *Start Where They Are: Differentiating for Success with the Young Adolescent*, Pearson Education Canada: Toronto, ON.

Levin, Ben (2008). *How to Change 5000 Schools: A Practical and Positive Approach for Leading Change at Every Level*, Harvard Education Press: Cambridge, Mass.



The Differentiated Instruction Framework for Teaching and Learning

