

Help struggling students to succeed

By Marjorie Nardini, MEd, and Lisa M. Phillips, MS, CCC-SLP

A wise teacher, William Ward, once said, "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires."¹ The question that remains is "How can we inspire our students to learn, especially those who struggle with increasingly demanding standards-based curriculum and content?"

As all students are required to achieve state-mandated standards, how can we assist these youngsters in making meaningful curriculum connections to facilitate the greatest achievement? If the quest is the instructional process and the goal is meaningful learning, then accountability is the validation that instruction has been successful. Everything that happens in the classroom must guide students toward the achievement of high standards, and state-mandated tests provide one form of accountability.

School personnel can use evidence-based practice to inspire students to become engaged in the instructional process.

The use of authentic assessment is encouraged in the classroom, but the final evaluation of the educational structure seemingly retreats to the paper-and-pencil test. As the curriculum becomes more demanding to meet the challenges of high standards and accountability, many students, especially those with special needs, increasingly struggle to succeed.

Consequently, more pressure is put on teachers to provide equal access to curriculum goals in ways that facilitate learning in students of varied abilities, temperaments and backgrounds. Instruction must be a combination of strategies, including differentiated instruction, multiple intelligences and backward design.

To make instruction more meaningful and effective for all students, teachers at the Crisafulli Elementary School, in Westford, MA, studied and implemented the principles of backward design, with input from the school speech-language pathologist.²

Unit planning begins with the "big picture." Teachers define the enduring understandings and essential questions that will inform instruction. Details of the lesson are preceded by umbrella questions. What do I want my students to know, understand, and be able to do? What are the essential questions of my lessons? How can collaboration with my colleagues and differentiation of curriculum content result in student achievement in my classroom?

This plethora of questions initiated the effort to help struggling students in the classroom. Fifth-grade teacher Marge Nardini, MEd, and school clinician Lisa Phillips, MS, CCC-SLP, developed the QUEST approach to teaching: Qualify the enduring Understandings and Essential questions via Successive collaboration and Thorough differentiation. This approach provides a structure to address students' difficulties with learning and motivation.

Historically, teaching has focused on providing facts that students must learn. The utilization of enduring understandings and essential questions require that the instructor provide the "file cabinet" for students to organize and establish associations in their learning.

Qualifying these enduring understandings and essential questions of learning is not an easy task. In fact, it is one that requires extensive collaboration, planning and time. While these elements often are in short supply, they are necessary to help all learners, especially the student who struggles, to work at their fullest potential and achieve.

The enduring understandings of a lesson establish a rationale for teaching the content.² For example, when teaching a unit on the New England colonies, the enduring understandings may include every citizen who lives in a democracy has an opportunity to participate in government, conflicts result from different points of view, and the economy of a region is related to its geography.

These understandings anchor the unit, establish a rationale for it, and provide a larger purpose for learning the targeted content.² This is the underlying principle for the backward design model of instruction.

The essential questions are designed to guide students toward attainment of the enduring understandings, which is what they should know, understand, and be able to do.

Essential questions about the New England colonies may be "How did conflict affect the settlement and growth of the colonies?" "How did the colonial governments contribute to the development of America's democracy?" and "How did the region's geography affect the New England economy?" These questions shape the struggling students' thinking about the "big picture," or

main ideas, of their learning.

Research supports that this backward design approach to instruction will encourage student motivation and facilitate meaningful, lasting learning.³

Collaboration and the implementation of a top-down approach proved to be an effective way to facilitate backward design learning at the Crisafulli Elementary School.

Collaboration extends throughout the instructional process, beginning with collaborative planning. The speech-language pathologist, special education teacher and classroom teacher consult weekly to construct lessons that meet the needs of all learners. They clarify lesson goals, essential questions and instructional methods; plan reinforcement activities based on readiness, interest and/or learning style; and identify students who will need clarification or encouragement.

In cooperative planning each professional comes prepared to participate and enhance the learning process. As a result, struggling students are both accountable and able to achieve the highest standards of learning.

Implementing a top-down approach is advantageous because students have the enduring understandings presented at the beginning of the unit/lesson, which is consistent with the backward design model. Students demonstrate a deeper learning, as smaller bits of information are added gradually to a larger theme that has already been stored.

Essentially, there are five overlapping layers within this program, listed here from broad to specific:

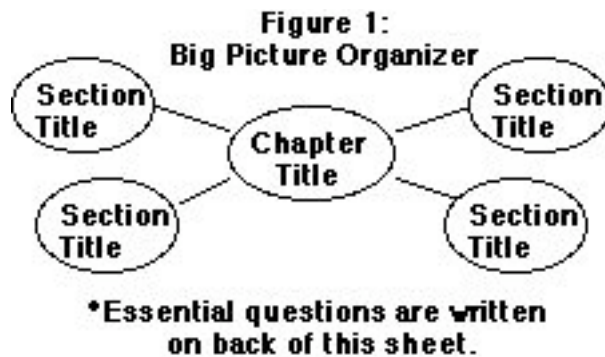
- ◆ create a big picture organizer;
- ◆ preview text;
- ◆ identify main ideas, supporting details and pertinent vocabulary;
- ◆ differentiate reinforcing activities; and
- ◆ assess understanding.

Students are introduced to the big picture first. Gradually, that big picture is broken down into main ideas and related details. Important information related to the enduring understandings and essential questions then is reinforced and assessed. Students in an inclusion classroom commented that using this method helped them to better understand the content.

This framework of learning focuses attention on the overarching aspects of a

lesson. Research supports that priming helps to establish similarities between new information and previously established memory "files."⁴ With repeated exposure to this model of priming, struggling learners become more independent in extracting big ideas from texts, literature and other sources.

The initial step of this technique requires the student to complete the first page of a graphic organizer, including chapter title and section headings. (See [Figure 1](#).)



In the second step of the top-down approach to learning, students actively engage in previewing given material. This layer of the process is really a continuation of the first step, in that the overall goal is to facilitate deeper learning of enduring understandings and main ideas. At this phase the struggling student, with intermittent teacher assistance, should generate questions—either oral or written—about the content or participate in introductory activities to establish prior knowledge.

Students also may share their understandings with peers and/or read available summaries to enhance their previously established memory files. During this second step, the teacher presents pertinent essential questions that will drive instruction. Students use this information to complete the second page of the graphic organizer.

In the third tier of this program, the student utilizes the content to extract main ideas, supporting details and pertinent vocabulary to record on the second page of the graphic organizer. (See [Figure 2](#).) Initially, direct instruction and guided practice are required because much discussion is needed to learn to correctly identify the main idea and relevant details.

**Figure 2:
Section/Chapter Organizer**

Vocabulary

Main Idea: What is the author saying about the topic?

Supporting Details

To assist struggling learners, content may be presented using one technique or a combination of strategies, such as direct instruction, partner reading and/or group exploration. Ultimately, only essential information that relates to the main idea is included in the graphic organizer. An important goal of this step in the top-down approach is to assist students in distinguishing quality information from sheer quantity.

To progress toward maximum academic growth, students must experience the curriculum content in a variety of ways. This is the purpose of the reinforcement step. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, "Successful teaching requires two elements: student understanding and student engagement."⁵

The integration of differentiated activities allows the educator to craft didactic opportunities to involve students in their learning and to meet individual academic needs. Interesting, engaging and content-related tasks are designed at varied levels of difficulty to challenge learners appropriately.

Scaffolding is provided as needed to encourage students to stretch toward higher goals. Activities that provide a variety of groupings and modalities heighten student interest and involvement. Differentiation in this tier of the approach allows teachers to help struggling students master concepts and realize their potential.

The final phase of the top-down approach is the assessment of student understanding, which should be both ongoing and authentic. With ongoing assessment via dip-sticking, classroom discussions and/or student work portfolios, for example, the teacher can document student understanding and growth over time. Ongoing assessment can improve teaching and learning by providing timely feedback to students.⁶

Teachers also can determine if learning is transferable to alternate perspectives through ongoing and authentic assessments. Consider the following example of authentic assessment. In lieu of having students identify all the metaphors in a story, teachers ask them why the author used such metaphors and what effect these comparisons had in the story. This engages students in demonstrating deeper and more realistic applications of a literary device.

Although ongoing authentic assessments are critical to enhance student learning, the paper-and-pencil test also is of great importance. During these components of assessment, students must composite their notes from the top-down approach to integrate enduring understandings with supporting details.

In addition, they must demonstrate an understanding of essential questions that stem from the overarching understandings of the respective lesson. This final component is necessary for students to learn and practice skills represented on state-mandated testing.

The backward design structure of this approach allows the struggling learner initially to grasp main ideas of the content and gradually to integrate more specificity into learning as he or she progresses through the facets.

When being introduced to children, these concepts can be compared to the zooming capabilities of a camera. Zooming inward enables the individual to carefully analyze and scrutinize precise details within the field of vision, while zooming outward allows the person to view the entire environment and background.

Children who struggle with learning require personal connections prior to the introduction of curriculum concepts and lessons. They then can facilitate more meaningful applications to the material being covered.

The goal of education is to provide quality instructional programs that challenge each learner to stretch toward the maximum potential.

To achieve this goal, educators must inform their teaching by investigating and implementing research-based strategies and techniques, such as differentiation, backward design and authentic assessment.

Educators also must be collaborators who share, experiment, encourage, and solve.

The learning community at the Crisafulli Elementary School strives to achieve high educational standards and levels of performance. Teachers in this

community are encouraged to be life-long learners through professional development programs provided on site.

This allows school personnel to use evidence-based practice to inspire students to become engaged in the instructional process. Scaffolding and academic support are determined by student need so all may access the learning standards.⁷

References

1. Ward, W. (2000). Teaching quotes page. Accessed via www.teachingheart.net/tquotes.htm.
2. McTighe, J., Wiggins, G. (1999). *Understanding by Design Handbook*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
3. McTighe, J., Seif, E., Wiggins, G. (2004). You can teach for meaning. *Educational Leadership*, 62 (1): 26-31.
4. Richards, R. (2003). *The Source for Learning and Memory Strategies*. East Moline, IL: LinguiSystems.
5. Tomlinson, C. (1999). Reconcilable differences? *Educational Leadership*, 58 (1): 28.
6. Valencia, S. (1997). Understanding authentic classroom-based literacy assessment. Accessed via www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/litass.
7. School Advisory Council. (2005). Inclusion at the Crisafulli School. Westford, MA: Crisafulli Elementary School.