

# STRATEGIES FOR ENSURING



Bobby Moore, EdD

Over the last decade, a myriad of terminology has confused educators and left them questioning their moral purpose in education. Educators often heard words or phrases, such as closing the achievement gap, equality, equity, and excellence. Not only did these words confuse educators—worse yet, they mystified and baffled parents. I have had numerous conversations and debates with educators and

parents about the policies, practices, and intentions associated with these words and phrases. No wonder many schools struggled with coherence as well as the alignment of their strategies and practices to support struggling learners and enrich the learning of students who were proficient.

For years, many of our schools focused exclusively on closing achievement gaps, thinking this was equity. Perhaps the intention of the policies enacted across the country (to ensure equity for all students) was not to abandon the education of students who were mastering academic standards. However, because of the accountability system—heavily focused on punitive ratings for schools not closing achievement gaps and growing subgroups—this is exactly what happened.

Several years ago, I heard a speaker draw what I thought was a perfect analogy to what equity should look like. The speaker shared, “**Equality** is as if I loaded my truck with sneakers, backed up the truck to a school, and gave each student a pair of sneakers. **Equity** is not only giving each student a pair of sneakers but making sure they fit.” I always add the following statement to this analogy: **Excellence** is when you ensure each student has an opportunity to use those sneakers and not only run a mile but run it faster than ever before—and as fast as anyone else. You see, equity should not limit, hold back, or eliminate opportunities for any students. We can ensure equity and have excellence be the goal for every student.

When I was a fifth and sixth grade principal, we always pursued excellence *and* equity. Our building was in a rural district, and at the time, approximately 40 percent of our students came from poverty—and usually 25–40 percent were entering our building below grade level in math and/or reading. Our focus was not only to close the achievement gap but to have our students be as successful as any suburban district in the state. We allocated as many additional resources as we could and implemented specific strategies to ensure excellence and equity. I always felt we were successful as very few of our students would go on to seventh grade nonproficient in reading or math, and our achievement and value-added data always ranked among the best in Ohio. Our school received national recognition and was even honored to receive the OAESA Hall of Fame Award.

Below are our specific strategies to ensure excellence and equity.

## Extended Time for Reading and Math

By fifth grade, many schools may no longer prioritize both reading and math in their school schedule. We believed not all subjects were created equal, and if you prioritize everything, you have prioritized nothing. We felt that to ensure excellence and equity, we had no choice but to extend our periods to 90 minutes every day in both reading and math. We coached our teachers on how to use the additional time and keep students engaged in their learning. The additional time allowed our teachers to focus on high quality practices in the classroom without relying on homework. Most of today’s homework assigned by teachers do not meet the criteria of a “Gold Standard Practice,” that is addressed in Anders Ericsson’s (2016) groundbreaking book, *Peak*. Gold Standard Practice is a level above purposeful practice and is referred to as “deliberate practice.” According to Ericsson, deliberate practice must meet the following criteria:

- Is designed and overseen by a teacher or coach familiar with expert performance. In our building, only the literacy and math experts taught these subjects.
- Requires near maximal effort. Our teachers did not sit at the desk when our students practiced their work in class. Our teachers moved around the room and coached and conferenced with the students. Many students were pushed outside their comfort zones yet felt supported in their work.
- Involves specific goals and communicates success criteria. Our teachers posted the students learning targets each day and ensured that every student could answer the following questions: 1) Where am I going? 2) Where am I now? and 3) How do I close the gap?
- Requires specific and timely feedback. This is where homework misses the mark. Many researchers now conclude there is very little impact on learning by assigning homework. Our teachers understood the importance of giving students feedback while they practiced their work in class.
- Involves the student building on previous skills or modifying his or her previously learned skills. Our staff knew it was not formative assessment unless the student and/or teacher altered his or her practice after the feedback.

In fact, we decided to extend science and social studies to 90 minutes a day as well, while teaching them for only one semester. The reason we decided to extend the time for these two subjects was to engage our students with more hands-on or project-based learning and reduce their subject load to three core classes per day instead of four. We were pleasantly surprised with our social studies and science results. Despite only teaching each subject for one half of the year, the opportunity for hands-on learning and more extended

# EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

practice in the classroom produced some of the highest social studies and science data in the area.

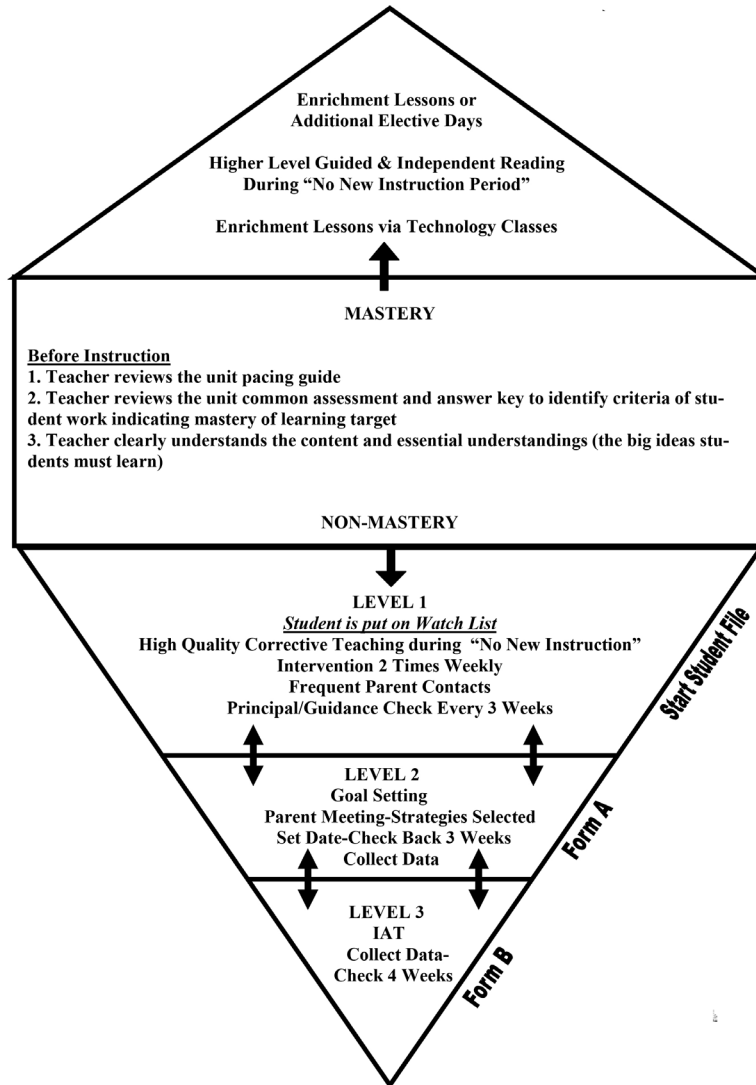
## Diamond of Success

To ensure equity for students, schools need to have highly impactful Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Support Systems (MTSS) in place. Our school went one step further and redesigned the once familiar inverted pyramid that every RTI program has seen to the shape of a diamond. We called this our “Diamond for Success.” At the heart of this diamond was tier 1 instruction, unpacking standards and designing assessments before instruction. The most important strategy in our model was teachers using formative instructional practices daily and consistently using their common assessments to monitor student learning. Instead of assigning a grade to a student after assessing, our teachers would identify our students as either 1) mastering material

or 2) “not yet.” The students who were mastering material would receive interventions on one side of the diamond that included differentiation in the classroom, and additional enrichment periods during the week. Those students identified as “not yet,” would receive interventions on the other side of the diamond, which included additional support in the classroom, up to seven additional intervention periods built into the school schedule each week by the content expert teacher, possibly additional services by an intervention specialist, etc. The beauty of this system was that throughout the year, different students—based on their strengths and abilities—experienced interventions from both sides of the diamond.

## Class-Size Reduction

There has been much debate on the impact of class size. John Hattie (2009) revealed in his meta analyses of more than 800 studies in educational research, that reducing class size has only a moderate effect (.21) well below the (.40) “zone of desired effect.” However, the Tennessee STAR study project, the largest class-size study ever



sizes of 17 or less. (Reducing class size also will have an impact on facilities. Several years later when I was a superintendent, we reduced the class sizes of all our K–2 classes with huge success. However, we had to renovate a brand-new building to create additional classrooms.)

Some educators who are focused on “equality” quickly referred to this practice as “tracking,” which, by the way, I am against. I reminded them that each student still had the same rigorous curriculum, same assessments, and same high expectations. We were ensuring equity by capitalizing on the possibility of an additional three- to four-month gain in learning.

## Matching Teachers and Students

We spent a great deal of time matching students’ interests, abilities, and dispositions to the appropriate teacher. Although we did not have an algorithm used by many of the dating and matching web-

conducted, found a much greater impact from smaller class sizes with an effect size of (.60) and above. The class size in this research was between 13–17 students per classroom. William’s (2006) research indicates that reducing class size is like providing three to four months of learning each year. Reducing class sizes has been reported to have an even greater positive impact on economically disadvantaged and minority students.

So, the question is not if reducing class size makes a difference, the question is whether it is worth the cost when so many other educational practices have greater impact for much less money. For example, using formative instructional practices in the classroom has been reported to be worth a nine month gain of learning for students. However, in our building we chose to leverage the research on class size and have our most struggling students in class

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sites today, we spent hours reviewing information, and having conversations with teachers from the students' previous grade level as well as with teachers from the students' upcoming grade level to ensure exchange of important information to better ensure a great match and fit between student and teacher.

I was fortunate to have a teacher who worked diligently to ensure every student was in an appropriate class and with a teacher that would be a great fit. We also had an advisor-advisee period every day where teachers worked hard to get to know the student and engage the family. Although not all parents are engaged, using strategies to try to engage the family are important in ensuring equity.

### Summary

Establishing excellence in equity means schools will do whatever it takes to ensure all students will learn at high levels by providing additional time, support, and resources necessary for success. Schools need to focus on what they can control and not on the influences out of their control (e.g., poverty, family engagement, etc.) to ensure their biases are not limiting factors for student success. These additional supports and resources must also not come at the expense of other children in the school.

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### About the Author

**Bobby Moore, EdD**, has spent more than 25 years in education as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. As president and CEO of EPIC Impact Education Group, he partners with schools and professional associations across the country to implement high-growth strategies, professional learning for leaders, strategies for creating high performing and positive cultures, as well as keynoting at conferences and school districts. Please contact him at [Dr.BobbyMooreed@gmail.com](mailto:Dr.BobbyMooreed@gmail.com) or follow him on Twitter @DrBobbyMoore.