"Reaching Every Student" with a Pyramid of Intervention Approach:
One District's Journey

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Abstract

This paper presents a description of ongoing work of an Alberta school district that is working to support and enhance effective inclusive practices that reach and teach every student. The district is implementing a Pyramid of Supports model that is built upon four critical elements: a belief in social justice and the value of every child, a commitment to inclusive education, an understanding of the power of teams, and flexible funding support. Three key areas of support are described: supports for positive behavior, differentiation of learning, and access to technologies and digital media. Emphasis is placed on the base of the pyramid or the universal supports that allow for the inclusion of all learners while recognizing the unique learning needs of each. In addition the district has focused on shared and distributed leadership through teaming. In reflecting on the work to date and critical next steps, the importance of policy direction that support systemic redesign of curriculum is discussed.

Précis/Résumé

Cet article présente une description des travaux en cours d'un district scolaire de l'Alberta qui travaille à soutenir et à améliorer les pratiques inclusives efficaces

qui atteignent et d'enseigner à chaque élève. Le quartier est mise en œuvre une pyramide de modèle prend en charge qui repose sur quatre éléments essentiels: une croyance en la justice sociale et la valeur de chaque enfant, un engagement à l'éducation inclusive, une compréhension de la puissance des équipes, et le soutien financier souple. Trois principaux domaines d'appui sont décrits: supports pour un comportement positif, la différenciation de l'apprentissage, et l'accès à des technologies et des médias numériques. L'accent est placé sur la base de la pyramide ou les supports universels qui permettent l'inclusion de tous les apprenants, tout en reconnaissant les besoins particuliers d'apprentissage de chacun. En outre, le district a mis l'accent sur le leadership partagé et distribué par équipe. En réfléchissant sur le travail à ce jour et les prochaines étapes critiques, l'importance de l'orientation des politiques qui prennent en charge la refonte systémique du programme est discuté.

> *The new challenge of inclusion is to create schools in which our day-to-day efforts no longer assume that a particular text, activity, or teaching mode will "work" to support any particular student's learning.*
>
> (Ferguson,1995, p. 281*)*

Ferguson's challenge, posted more than 15 years ago, is as relevant today as it was then. School districts across North America are seeking to provide appropriate educational supports for diverse learners in the context of high standards, increasingly diverse classrooms and the demands and opportunities of what has come to be coined "21st century learning." There is also a growing understanding of the impact of inclusive education not only on students but on society as a whole (Salend & Duhaney, 2007), that high-quality inclusive education is an issue of social justice and important to developing the human capital that is needed in today's societies. What has emerged is a growing preference towards empowering the classroom teacher with the knowledge, skills and supports to identify the authentic needs of students and to differentiate instruction to respond to those needs (Philpott, 2007). This move towards inclusive practices has not been without controversy. Several authors point out that without appropriate supports in place for students and teachers, including students with diverse needs in regular education classrooms may not be beneficial (Fore, et al., 2008; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

There has been a growing understanding that meeting the needs of learners, in particular learners that have been identified as having exceptional learning needs and/or disabilities is not about placement but about programming (Alberta Education, 2009; McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westling, 2013). In the recent past, programming for students with diverse needs has been thought of in terms of the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and what has been referred to as the cascade model (Weber &

Bennett, 1999). This model is based on the premise that students with disabilities will be placed in a variety of settings in keeping with their academic needs and/or abilities (Bunch, 2005). More recently there has been a strong movement towards supporting students' learning needs through the provision of a continuum of services (McLeskey, et al., 2013).

In order to move towards this new way of thinking about special and inclusive education, many school jurisdictions within Canada and throughout the United States and other developed countries have drawn heavily from various models associated with Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is a continuum-based process that focuses on access to high quality, evidence-based instruction, data-driven decision making, a tiered model of supports and a systems level approach to improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all (McIntosh, et. al., 2011). In addition, there has been increasing interest in adopting the principles of Universal Design for Learning as described by the researchers at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) at least across North America. A recent report published by the National Center on Universal Design for Learning discusses this growing momentum across the United States (Ralabate, et al., 2012). In Canada, a scan of the provincial education websites suggests that no fewer than 5 provinces mention Universal Design or Universal Design for Learning in provincial documents (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario & New Brunswick). With an emphasis on individualization and differentiation and the design of responsive learning environments, RTI fits well with the principles of UDL (Strangman, et al. 2006). Equally important, for an inclusive education system, RTI emphasizes the necessity for collective responsibility for the learning of all students (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2012). Evidence for the effectiveness of RTI with selected populations of students, the

limitations of this evidence and the challenges associated with implementation, with a

specific reference to the Canadian context, have been described in a recent article by

McIntosh, et. al (2011).

While there is much discussion in the literature that would support a continuum of

services model, there are, as yet, few examples of such work being put into practice

(McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).   This paper will present an

example of one Canadian school district that is engaged in the process of building

pyramids of supports and interventions to actively create responsive learning

environments that are designed to support educators in reaching and teaching every child.

Case Study as a Guiding Methodology

A case study design was employed in order develop an in-depth understanding

and provide a useful description of the ongoing work of a school district that is changing

the way they provide supports and services to the diversity of students they serve. The

methodology developed in this analysis draws on the work of Merriam (1998; 2009), Yin

(2009) and Stake (1995). The methods and analysis is also influenced by the writings of

Pugach (2001), Brantlinger, et al. (2005) and Ferguson et al (1992) where the authors

discuss the use of qualitative case studies in special education and disability studies.

The description of the case presented here was compiled from data gathered from

a variety of sources over the past four years. Sources of data include:

- Case study analyses by the primary author exploring the district's interpretation

    and operationalization of the Universal Design for Learning framework (Rose &

Meyer, 2002) and the district's one-to-one laptop project (see Alberta Education

http://education.alberta.ca/admin/technology/emerge-one-to-

one/participants.aspx). Data gathered during this process included classroom

observation, interviews with teachers, interviews with students and review of

learning archives.

- Description of the district's work by key district leads, including primarily the

  second author who has been Director of Student Services for the past four years

  while a majority of the work described has been implemented. These descriptions

  were gathered through online open-ended surveys, through several focused

  conversations and in joint classroom observations during the 2009-10 school year.

  In addition individual descriptions were gathered via in person interviews and

  email correspondence during the 2010-11 school year.

- Analysis of key district documents including three-year education plans, district

  implementation manuals, and district reports to Alberta Education on related

  initiatives.

- Selected site visits that included classroom observations, interviews with school

  teams and interviews with school staff. These visits provided reflections on the

  process of initial implementation from school based educators at sites that were

  identified by district staff as being exemplary and/or early adopters of the

  elements of the district model.

The resulting descriptive case study illustrates an approach that seeks to connect

many initiatives currently discussed in the education literature and suggest an innovative

approach towards supporting meaningful, active participation by all students in the

context of inclusive 21st century learning environments. Further, the model that emerges

focuses on shared and distributed leadership that infuses the adoption of inclusive

educational practices across the district.

The District

Greater St. Albert Catholic School Division (GSACRD) is a publicly funded

Catholic school division located in and around St. Albert, Alberta a city of 60,138

(Municipal census, 2010) located on the outskirts of the provincial capital of Edmonton,

Alberta. It is the third largest Catholic school district in Alberta with 17 schools and an

enrollment of approximately 6,000 students in the 2010-11school year. The district serves

students in a sub-urban community and in more rural communities in central Alberta. The

sub-urban community is by Canadian standards wealthy and highly educated, having a

median income 64% higher than the Canadian average. Nearly half of the population has

a university degree. The rural community is somewhat more typical in social economic

and educational terms although still above the Canadian average. Issues related to

poverty, language and cultural diversity are not as prevalent in GSACRD as in many

districts across North America, however they do exist.

While there are definite demographic differences within GSACRD compared to

most districts in North America, the district profile includes a significant number of

students with diverse learning needs, including autism, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders,

Down syndrome, students with medical and physical disabilities and a large number of

students who have been identified with significant learning and behavioral challenges.

Due to the proximity to the city and the relatively low housing costs in the rural areas

there are a large number of children who are in foster care arrangements. GSACRD

reports approximately 14 % of students as being identified with special education needs as defined by current Alberta special education coding criteria. They have identified an additional six percent of students who, while not meeting the criteria for special education, require extra supports in order to be successful.

The District's Approach to Pyramids of Support

The Pyramid Model of Support/Intervention is a visual metaphor to illustrate the continuum of supports and interventions provided by GSACRD. The base of the pyramid represents strategies/interventions/supports beneficial for the vast majority of students in the district. Universal supports are based on the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and includes expecting and valuing diversity, access to differentiated learning (instruction and assessment), use of emerging and assistive technology and supports for positive behavior. It is believed that appropriate provision of universal supports/interventions will meet the needs of most learners. A much smaller number of students will require a more targeted approach which may include flexible grouping, supplemental instruction, additional practice opportunities, and/or behavioral support plans. These students may or may not meet Alberta Education's criteria for special education coding. Currently, under provincial regulation students who meet these criteria require an Individual Program Plan (IPP). As a supplement to the IPP process, three schools within GSACRD are piloting the Inclusive Education Planning Tool[1], a new digital resource that moves away from deficit-based IPP goals by focusing on identifying

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[1] See: http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/inclusion/capacity/planning.aspx for more information on the Inclusive Education Planning Tool.

strategies that will better meet the diverse learning needs of all students within a specific

classroom.

There are also students in the district with extensive learning and behavioral

needs who require a high level of intensive/individualized supports such as one-to-one

assistance from an educational assistant for part or all of the day, alternative placement,

or services from multiple agencies through a "wrap around" process.
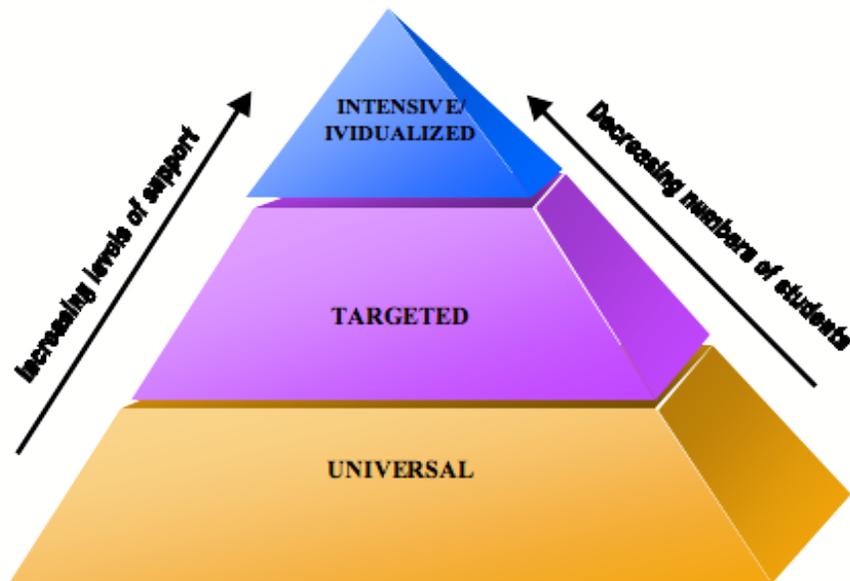
The metaphor of the pyramid also illustrates that higher levels of support are

ineffective without a solid base. The greater the focus on enhancing universal and

targeted interventions/support the less likely students will require the more intensive form

of intervention. In addition, just as one would start at the bottom of a pyramid before

attempting to climb to the top, intervention typically starts with universal

support/intervention before moving to targeted or intensive supports/interventions.

Supports for Positive Behavior

The pyramid of behavioral support that the district is in the process of implementing is based on a framework outlined in *Supporting Positive Behavior in Alberta Schools* (Alberta Education, 2008). This resource presents an integrated, tiered approach that describes supports and strategies at the universal (school-wide), classroom (focused) and individual (intensive) level that are intended to improve behavioral outcomes. The framework draws extensively from Positive Behavioral Supports (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Sugai, 2007). Positive Behavioral Supports is a core component of a comprehensive RTI model, shares many of the components and structures of academic RTI and is supported by a large and growing body of research (McIntosh, Goodman & Bohanon, 2010).

School wide *universal* supports that are being implemented at GSACRD begin with an expectation that ALL staff are responsible for developing and maintaining a safe and respectful school climate. Selected components of evidence-based classroom management practice are focused on regularly and systematically across district professional development activities. Beginning with campus level expectations, schools choose themes around which to develop a plan for school-wide effective behavior supports. Through a coaching model the jurisdiction is also working toward district wide implementation of a set of procedures that have been found to support pro-social classroom behavior and minimize disruption caused by inappropriate behavior (Spricks, Knight, Reinke & McKale, 2006),

Some students need more targeted behavioral supports.   Examples of these *targeted* supports would be providing classroom observation and consultation, providing individual or group work with students on social skills instruction, increasing self-regulation, emotional expression and problem-solving skills and developing friendships.

During the current year, work is being done to establish standard protocol, evidence-based targeted interventions at each school. There are also target supports available in the area of academic, grief and loss, temporarily divided families and general coaching for emotional behavioral challenges. The development and implementation of these interventions involve the support of school staff with specific expertise and experience in PBS. At the school level this may include the school counselor and Learning Support Facilitator in addition to the classroom teacher. The District's Coordinator of Diverse Learning Needs and Positive Behavior Support Facilitator are also available to provide consultation and coaching to the school teams.

At the "top" of the pyramid of Supports for Positive Behavior, are supports for students with more complex needs manifested in disruptive and/or potentially harmful behavior those with critical issues such as neglect or abuse, and those who need more intensive or long term counseling. Key members of the learning team from each school have received intensive team-based training in developing positive behavioral support plans based on functional behavior assessment. When student and/or family needs extend beyond those typically addressed within the school environment the school has the option of referring the student to a "wrap around"[2] process. The wrap around process places the student and the significant adults in his or her life at the centre of the process (Alberta Education, 2008)). Wrap around processes, coordinated by a District psychologist bring to the table community services which, depending on student and family need, might include: Mental Health Services, Community and Family Support

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[2] See http://education.alberta.ca/admin/crossministry/wraparound.aspx for more information on Wrap Around Supports.

Services, Family Supports for Students with Disabilities, law enforcement and other

services as required.

Differentiation of Learning (Instruction and Assessment)

Teachers plan for classroom diversity by adjusting instruction, not expecting

every student to learn at the same pace, in the same way or with the same amount of

instruction.

Designing lessons and activities that are engaging for each student and which

address varying levels of ability and needs, requires deliberate, thoughtful planning at the

outset of the lesson design process. Just as architects plan buildings from the blueprint

stage with accessibility for all in mind, so too can teachers plan for ALL learners to have

access to the same essential understandings (or key concepts) of a lesson. Planning for

diversity starts with a *belief* that every student can succeed and that *failure is not an*

option (Edyburn, 2006). This belief is followed by a *process* that is undertaken by

teachers to gain knowledge about *who* the individual learners in their classes are, in order

to develop a class profile of the strengths, needs, interests, and readiness of the students

in the class. By developing a class profile and individual student profiles when necessary,

the teacher is able to select effective teaching and learning strategies and interventions to

maximize all students' achievement. Within GSACRD this is most evident within those

schools that are utilizing the Inclusive Education Planning Tool. This provincial digital

tool is in the pilot phase and is currently limited in terms of grade and subject level. In

addition to the using the provincial tool, there has also been increased use of data walls

and other strategies for developing learner profiles at the school and classroom level within the district.

Universal interventions are intended to be available to every student in every classroom. Within an inclusive education system when a student demonstrates need for additional supports and interventions in order to learn, targeted supports and in the case of the few students intensive/individualized interventions are provided in addition to the universal supports. As an example, programming for students who learn concretely or who are cognitively delayed would begin with supports and interventions that are important for all students. First, a focus on universal strategies such as a positive nurturing environment that is language-rich, visual strategies, tying new learning to experience and background knowledge, checks for understanding, providing multiple means of representation, expression and engagement and emerging technologies. If a student does not demonstrate success following the implementation of universal strategies, targeted interventions are provided. These would include direct teaching in 1:1 or small group situations, breaking routines or tasks down into small sequential steps that are visually illustrated, modeling of social and friendship skills, multiple examples, explicit strategy teaching, alternate assessments and assistive technologies (text-to-speech, picture support, tiered websites, etc.).

Students with more complex or significant needs would be provided with more individualized or intensive supports. These may include intensive instruction including one-to-one instruction mediated or delivered by the school's Learning Support Facilitator or an instructional assistant. Supports at the top of the pyramid, intensive supports, typically also involve professionals from regional consulting services teams who have

specific expertise in areas of augmentative communication, vision, hearing and/or curriculum modification. An example of such supports in the district would be contracting vision specialists to work with the school team to develop specific programming for a student learning Braille or contracting speech language pathologists with expertise in augmentative and alternative communication to work the school team on supporting a student who cannot meet her communication needs in the classroom with her natural voice. Supports at the top of the pyramid often include direct services by district staff with the support of other professionals contracted by GSACRD to develop and support appropriate interventions.

Access to Technologies and Digital Media

Today's technologies facilitate differentiating lessons to address the diversity in classrooms. A2010 special edition of *Learning Disability Quarterly* presented a series of articles which focus on how educators can further integrate technology through the RTI framework. Of particular relevance to the work of GSARD are the articles by Basham and his colleagues (2010) that discuss RTI and UDL, and the article by Smith & Okolo (2010) that consider technology integration within the context of effective instructional practices. The district has embraced many of the ideas proposed by Smith and Okolo as they have worked to consider technological supports as fundamental to their pyramids of supports approach.

At the base of the technology pyramid are the typical tools that many jurisdictions would employ.

Students have access to word processing, spreadsheets, and presentation software. In GSACRD, however, the base of technologies is far more extensive and growing every day. There is a district wide license for *Read Write Gold* software. The literacy supports such as text to speech, word prediction and talking word processing are available to any student in the district on any computer in the district. These tools help to reduce barriers including decoding of text and to the production of text for a number or students, including those with identified learning disabilities. The district predominantly uses Macintosh computers. Students and staff are encouraged to use the Universal Access features in the operating system and well as other built in supports such as text-to-speech to have text read aloud, *Garage Band* to create audio files, and *iMovie* to create digital media. Every classroom in the district has an interactive white board. Many classrooms are equipped with sound field systems.

Electronic text is in wide use. The district accesses the digital textbooks from the provincial repository[3] and is creating its own repository of e-text novels for use by students with perceptual disabilities. Text is only the beginning. Audio files are also in common use in classrooms across GSACRD at the Junior and Senior High levels. Many teachers use tools such as *Audacity* to create audio files of assessments for students to listen to on their iPods or other mp3 players. Teachers in GSACRD have access to multimedia learning resources including *Discovery Education* and a wide array of learning objects and digital media from LearnAlberta.ca (www.learnalberta.ca), an online portal to myriads of digital resources that are directly linked to the Alberta programs of study.

Of course, digital media requires digital devices. GSACRD has found that putting pods of computers into classrooms or schools allows access to be available and *ordinary*. When students with special education needs were provided with individual laptops, many rejected using these tools despite the fact that they might use them to overcome barriers. They perceived that the laptops identified them as having special needs. Providing class sets or roaming carts of laptops for general student use, allowed the special needs of students to become less apparent. With this model students who were refusing to use technology supports have been likely to do so as they are less likely to be viewed as being 'different'. In GSACRD, students are also encouraged to bring their own devices into class (be that iPods, iPads or laptops) so that they can access content and show what they know in ways that are most familiar and comfortable for them. This is another way that clearly supports personalized learning. The district also has devices on hand so that

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[3] For more information on the Alberta Provincial Repository of authorized student textbooks see
http://education.alberta.ca/admin/technology/atl/resources/digitalrepository.aspx

students who do not have their own devices will not be excluded from access to digital

learning opportunities.

While the scope of *universal* technology supports is broad, there are some

students who need more specialized technologies. In some instances the district has found

that struggling writers need word prediction software other than what is provided by

Read Write Gold or that some students require graphic supports in addition to text-to-

speech. These then are provided as targeted technology supports. There are a few

students in the district who need very specialized complex systems of technologies to

actively engage in their education. These students typically require specialized

communication systems and alternative access to computers. These students' technology

needs are the most challenging to provide and support. Utilizing the SETT Framework as

a guiding process[4], district specialists, including the Learning Technology Coach, work

in collaboration with external agencies to provide access to the appropriate technology

and expertise.

This widespread use of assistive and emerging technologies has substantially

changed the learning environments of GSACRD, and the culture. In fall of 2010, the

district launched a pilot at one of the Junior High Schools, 'Power Up2 Learn' where

every student was encouraged to use a handheld device on a daily basis, in every class, to

engage in their learning. While it is not possible to establish a direct link to the use of

technology, achievement results on provincial tests have shown a slight increase since the

implementation of the pilot and the numbers of disciplinary issues associated with student

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[4] The SETT Framework is a process that helps school teams gather information on the
Student Environment and Tasks with their educational context to help understand what
Tools may be necessary to help the student succeed. See http://www.joyzabala.com for
more information on the SETT Framework.

owned hand held devices have been minimal. These successes have encouraged other

middle and junior high schools to adopt more open approaches to the use of student

owned devices for instructional purposes.

Implementing the Pyramid Model

The pyramid of supports model is built upon a strong foundation based upon a

belief in social justice and the value of every child, a commitment to inclusive education,

an understanding of the power of teams, and the adoption of a flexible funding model,.

These elements represent an ongoing evolutionary process within the district. Over the

past twenty years, GSACRD has looked to the research on inclusive education and

actively worked to put this research into practice. Most recently, in the past five years, the

opportunities and challenges that present in 21st century learning environments have

been the catalyst for supporting the formation of new types of teams and new models of

funding.

The district has a strong core belief in the capability of every learner. Social

justice teachings are permeated throughout academic teachings. The language of the

district mission focuses on the whole child and the value of *each*. The expectation that

every child is valued, is welcomed, and is nurtured by the school community is clear and

pervasive.

Committed to Inclusive Education

GSACRD has a long history of inclusion and has strived to support students with

special needs in learning with peers in regular classrooms in neighborhood schools.

Currently, the district retains only three sites, all at the secondary level, where students

with significant developmental and cognitive differences are congregated for varying

portions of the day, with the remainder of the time spent in regular classes, or in

community settings. This represents less than 5% of the 768 students that meet

provincial criteria for coding as a special education student. As the number of

congregated sites has been reduced emphasis has shifted from "programs" to

programming that is delivered regardless of setting. These efforts have been recognized

by the provincial Ministry of Education. GSACRD is one of twelve out of the 64

districts in the province that have been recognized as an agent of change in the Ministries

mission to move to a more inclusive education system. In addition, two of the district's

schools were recently recognized with National Inclusive Education Awards.

It's about Team!

The model of tiered supports is seen across most areas of district work including

the organization of teams to support inclusive educational practices. There are multiple

levels of teams at work, starting with the Learning Services Team (LST) at the district

level. The formation of this team began with a merger of the Student Services (Special

Education) Instructional Technology, Curriculum and Religious Education teams in

2005. The success of this merger resulted in other departments coming together to

support the collective work of the district. This collaboration between traditionally

separate departments is seen as essential to increasing access to the curriculum for all

students. This team is led by the Assistant Superintendent of Learning Services and

includes 10 other members -- the Director of Student Services, the Director of Learning

with Technology, a district principal with responsibilities for curriculum and leadership

development, Consultant for Religious Education and Christian Family Life, Coordinator

of Diverse Learning Needs, Coordinator of Technology, Math Coordinator, Coordinator

of Distributed Learning and a Technology for Learning coach.

As mandated in the district's three-year education plan each school must have a

learning support team. Through collaboration and shared expertise this team has the

primary responsibility for identifying and meeting the diverse academic and

behavioral/emotional needs of students. The composition of the learning team may vary

from school-to-school, however, members include the school administrator(s), the

Learning Support Facilitator(s), counselor, Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

(AISI)[5] lead teacher, technology lead teacher and, where appropriate, a Success Coach.

These teams are provided with focused professional development and collaboration time.

An inclusive model necessitates having a staff member in a school who can

collaborate with regular teachers as they are planning for diverse learners. At the level of

the school team this is the Learning Support Facilitator. Originally called Special

Education Support Facilitators, in 2003 the name was changed to denote the fact that they

supported teachers in maximizing learning for all students, not just those with special

education needs. Based on multiple factors, each school has an LSF allocation reflective

of the needs of the school.

Developing and Supporting the Work

Professional learning activities focused on developing effective school learning

teams is critical to the model. Increasingly, members of the learning team attend in-

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[5] See http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx for a description of the AISI program as
described by Alberta Education.

services and workshops delivered by the Learning Services Team and outside experts as a team. This approach facilitates both shared understanding and responsibility for the learning of all students. A key component of the professional development provided by the district is the at-the-elbow support provided to individual teachers and/or school-based learning teams. Learning Support Facilitators, selected members of the Learning Services team, and a divisional educational assistant who focuses on resources for diversity work side-by-side with classroom teachers. Other members of the Learning Services Team meet on a regular basis with targeted school-based teams to assist in the development of student-centered meeting processes. Brief focused learning activities centered on core elements of the model are a key component of Learning Support Facilitator, Counselor and School Administrator meetings.

Resourcing the Pyramid

The district discovered that use of a traditional allocation system based exclusively on meeting diagnostic criteria presented a significant challenge to the development of a continuum of intervention based on need. GSACRD has approached this challenge by developing a "levels of support" model that identifies indicators and recommended supports at four levels across six domains of functioning; behavior, cognition, academic, physical,vision, and hearing . While the pyramid of supports itself is conceptualized around the three tiers discussed so far, when looking at resource allocation, a fourth level was found to be necessary. The four levels of resource support were developed as a pragmatic way of moving to a needs and supports based allocation model while complying with provincial requirements related to special education

identification. The first of these levels refers to ideal functioning within the context of high quality instruction – the universal base. The remaining levels add supports in a cumulative and incremental fashion based on demonstrated need for fewer numbers of students. In order to best identify resources in an appropriate manner the district found that the middle tier of the pyramid needed to be further divided to two levels of resource allocation as there was a group that required more than targeted supports but would not be in need of the kinds of intensive supports required by students with the most complex needs. Therefore, the second level of the pyramid includes those students with support needs that are not captured within the current coding system giving these students access to targeted supports. Similarly, the levels of support provided within the system for those students who are identified as requiring a special education is informed by need rather than determined strictly on the basis of diagnostic severity. Together this information is used to support programming and to develop a school profile of need that is used to inform the allocation of resources such as levels of paraprofessional and professional supports including LSF and counselor time.

Until the current year funding to support these resources came from two sources. The first source is a block funded grant based on historical estimates of the number of students with severe disabilities within the division. In addition, however, a significant proportion of funding (approximately 14%) has been accessed through the base instructional grant. This grant is provided to all school jurisdictions on a per pupil basis. The total amount of funding far exceeds the amount generated by the typical allocation provided for special education students meeting diagnostic criteria. The use of a large portion of finite funding not specifically targeted towards students meeting criteria for

special education is premised on the fact that these resources are intended to meet the

needs of all students, including those that may be left out of a categorical-based model.

Is This What Universal Design for Learning Looks Like?

Universal Design for Learning has been described an approach to designing

instructional methods and materials that are flexible enough from the outset to

appropriately support learner differences (Rose & Meyer, 2000). UDL thinking shifts the

focus from attempts to try and "fix" the student(s) to attempting to "fix" the curriculum

and the environment. In Universally Designed Classrooms diversity is expected and

valued for the opportunity it provides to imagine and design dynamic learning

environments where teachers can effectively and efficiently respond to the needs of all

their students. While there has been much written about the promise of UDL, there have

been as yet few examples in the literature on what UDL looks like in practice (Edyburn,

2010; Edyburn, 2008). While UDL may appear to be a relatively straight forward idea

accomplished by planning based on the three principles of UDL as put forward by Rose

& Meyer (2002), in reality it may be more complex than was initially recognized

(Edyburn, 2010). In embracing the UDL philosophy and the RTI approach, it appears

that the work GSACRD may be understood as an example of what UDL may look like in

practice.

In their chapter on applying Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom,

Coyne, Ganley, Hall, Meo, Murray and Gordon (2006) outline steps in applying UDL to

identify and remove barriers in the curriculum. These include: planning for diversity,

instruction that supports diverse learners, materials that support all learners, increasing

student engagement and technology. These steps are clearly reflected in the work of this district to date. GSACRD has planned for diversity with their pyramid of supports model. The district has taken significant steps toward building a wide, universal base expecting that students will need multiple means of representation, action and expression and engagement to be successful. Through this process there is increasing recognition that instruction and assessment needs to be differentiated and in some cases specialized in order to reach every learner. Through the Learning Support Facilitator model and district professional development activities there is a direct and systematic effort to support teachers in interpreting learning goals based on the programs of study and providing them with the tools and resources to let students demonstrate success in the programs of study, active engagement and participation in learning for every student in indeed possible and practical. The supports for positive behavior provide flexible means for teachers to engage students, even those who may find more rigid environments to be a place of threat not a place of learning. And technology is key. Providing technology to students in this district is now seen through the lens of UDL. In their recent district technology plan they state it this way: *Universal Design for Learning is not just one more thing to do, but rather becomes the framework that provides a way to make various approaches to educational change more feasible by incorporating new insights on learning and new applications of technology* (St. Albert Catholic Schools Technology Plan, 2006-09, p. 3)

Next Steps

Sprick, Booher and Garrison (2009) note that it is insufficient to build the ideal structure, unless students are linked to that structure. It is equally necessary to insure that teachers and administrators view the structure as sound and supportive of both teachers

and staff. The leadership team at GSACRD isquick to point out that it is at the beginning

stages of this educational transformation. The district has embraced a vision of an

inclusive and effective education system and has set about putting in place a structure that

supports that vision based on common elements underlying UDL, Supporting Positive

Behavior and RTI. However, none of these elements have been implemented fully or

with fidelity. In order to have truly achieved the vision of reaching every learner and

creating accessible universally designed learning environments the District has identified

that the following areas need to be more fully addressed:

1. *Solidify the base of the Pyramid, the "Universals".*

There is work to be done to understand what should be in the base of the pyramid

in all areas. Are the universals identified to this point indeed what needs to be in the

base? What is missing? What other areas might need to be considered? Insuring that the

use of evidence-based practice is indeed universal is critical. Recently the District has

drawn heavily from various models associated with Response to Intervention (RTI) to

identify what should be a "universal" practice that is supportive of every student. There is

much work to be done to insure every school and classroom has these foundational pieces

necessary to eliminate barriers to literacy, numeracy and fully realized social

participation for every student. A commitment to improving core instruction, including

the critical elements of differentiated instruction and assessment for learning is included

in the District's three-year education plan, and is also a focus of the District's Alberta

Initiative for School Improvement project.

2. Focus on planning for diversity versus addressing one student at a time.

There is still a tendency and a need to focus student need versus curriculum change. The overall approach is still often focused on accommodation and reaction than accessibility and anticipation. Some of this is related to policies and practices outside the scope of the district. For example, Canadian copyright legislation does not currently allow digital versions of text to be provided to all learners. Currently students must have an identified perceptual disability in order to use the digital versions of the provincial textbooks, although this is changing with recent provincial textbook authorizations. Approved accommodations for provincial assessments is policy that promotes the idea that the student characteristics, not the mode of assessment, is what needs to be addressed. Until the time that the curriculum is universally designed (programs of study, resources and assessment) and resourced for the diversity of learners, teachers will continue to be pushed to not only differentiate, but also adapt, modify and accommodate for student differences. For truly accessible learning, planning at all levels will need to continue to embrace the power of diversity.

3. Continuing to work to bring everyone on board.

While there is strong support for the work at the district level, some schools and staff are just beginning this journey. The strongest support for this work is in elementary classrooms and more recently in the new Junior High 'Power Up2 Learn' initiative. Achieving consensus and shared practice across all grade levels and schools is more complex and requires sustained and highly focused efforts.

4. Gathering the data to inform intervention and to provide evidence of

effectiveness.

Is this approach making a difference? How do we know it and how can we show

it? At present, the measures of success are more summative in nature and include the

Canadian Test of Abilities: Fourth Edition (CAT-4), the provincial achievement tests at

grades 3, 6, and 9 and the diploma exams at grade 12. Other measures that the district and

the province are tracking with interest are the rates of high school completion.

Traditionally GSACRD has done well in these areas, however, there is a recognition that

other types of data, taken on a regular basis, will be needed to assess the responsiveness

of learning environments and the effectiveness of interventions. As mentioned, many

district schools are using repeated measures of reading and math achievement to

construct data walls, however the district recognizes the need to enhance the use and

utilization of various assessment strategies to inform ongoing instruction and to

demonstrate the effectiveness.

Looking to the Future

The success of efforts to provide students with access, participation and

progress hinges on how the curriculum is conceptualized, designed and implemented

(Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2005). In Alberta, the conceptualization and design

of curriculum and the education system in which it is implemented is in the hands of the

province. The work of the district requires the support of the province, just as the work in

the classroom requires the support of the district. At present, Alberta is the process of

wide scale re-visioning of special education entitled, Setting the Direction for Special

Education[6]. This work has the potential to proactively design a learning system to

recognize and respond to variability and diversity by ensuring that educators, schools,

and school authorities have the support they need to develop and deliver an inclusive

education system. For school districts this process has created a policy climate that

allows for and is conducive to change. GSACRD is an example of one of many school

districts within the province that has taken advantage of this opportunity to refine and

restructure the delivery of programming.

At the provincial level this re-visioning means that programs of study, resources,

assessment processes and accountability mechanisms will need to change. Change from

the retrofit model that currently exists where students are accommodated for and

materials and the assessments are adapted to meet their needs to a model where diversity

is expected and planned for at the design stage. In addition, as a regulatory body the

province will need to insure that a redesigned system, based on the aspirational ideal of

inclusion, is demonstrably more effective than the traditional special education.

Efforts of school districts to be innovative and proactive are dependent on policy

frameworks that align current practices with the development of the ideal of the single

inclusive and effective school system. Initiatives such as the re-visioning occurring in

Alberta are hopeful signs that such an ideal may be realized.

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[6] See http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/settingthedirection.aspx.

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