

**When There's a Problem At School: Questions, Assessment,
and Evidence
Can Open the Door to Curriculum Differentiation**
by Dr. Jeanne H. Purcell & Dr. Deborah Burns

There isn't a day that goes by that one of us doesn't receive a phone call from one or two worried parents who have heard the "B word" spoken a little too often at their dinner table. You know the word we mean the one that children use when they start complaining that the assignments they receive at school aren't fun, interesting, or new. BORRRRRING.

Whispered, snarled, grumbled, or groaned; it sound the same. And, it makes you wonder. Are they complaining for the sake of complaining? Are they complaining because they don't want to practice something they need to learn; or because they erroneously expect that all of their life (and school) experiences should offer instant gratification? When is the "B word" a symptom of a real problem and when it is a symptom of unrealistic expectations?

The parents who listen to this dinner table talk, the ones who start wondering about why they hear the "B word" so often from their children, are often the same parents who make those phone calls. But for every parent who doesn't call, it's likely that there are at least ten others who sit at home and stew about it.

Parents, especially those with children who perform well on academic tests and receive good grades, often wonder about the match between their child's abilities and the grade-level curriculum. Like Goldilocks, they ask themselves whether their children's books and assignments are "too hard, too easy, or just about right." Sometimes, too, they wonder about the best way to approach a teacher or an administrator when they think that the grade-level curriculum might not be "just right" for their child. They ask themselves troubling questions about the credibility of their hunches, about how they will be perceived, and whether or not their concerns will be recognized and addressed.

This scenario doesn't represent a new problem. During the last 20 years, we've experienced it repeatedly, and from three different angles: as parents, as teachers, and as administrators. So, trust us. It's OK to make the phone call. It's OK to ask those questions. In most school districts, parents' questions and concerns are valued, perhaps even solicited. Go ahead and pick up the telephone. But remember two other vitally important issues will also have to be addressed: How do we, as parents and educators working together, determine whether the dinner table complaint is legitimate or just the typical grumbling of a child who doesn't want to work too hard at things she didn't choose to do? And, if the complaint does stem from a legitimate need, what do we do about it?

In the best case scenario, consider these four questions:

1. What evidence can we collect to identify the cause of my child's school complaints?
2. What is the reason for my child's complaints?
3. Are my child's complaints related to a mismatch between his/her current level of academic performance and grade level expectations? \
4. If there is a discrepancy, how will we address the problem?

These can frame the agenda for any future conferences, plans, and actions that might result from your first phone call to school. At all times, it is important to remember that although children's complaints can serve as indicators of a potential problem, these kind of data should be viewed as pieces of a puzzle yet to be solved. In order to clarify, and eventually rectify the situation, parents and teachers need to focus their hypotheses and impressions into specific questions or requests for school officials. These questions or requests can then serve as the focal point for all the data collection, conferences, decision making, and planning that may follow.

Questions like the following provide a much better starting place for investigating and solving potential problems than responding to your child's complaint with a phone call to the school that begins by saying, "I want my child moved to the next grade level, "or " My child needs a different teacher."

1. Does my child eagerly participate in learning activities?
2. What are your observations about my child's learning behaviors and attitudes?
3. How does my child's math or reading performance relate to grade level expectations?

Keep your request or questions as specific as possible.

Refer to the need or issue at hand and keep it in the forefront of all discussions at all times. Share your own data and observations and listen carefully, with an open mind, to the teacher's observations. Keep all discussions focused on the needs of your child and how they relate to the district's mission statement, grade-level expectations, or state laws and regulations.

Keep the conversation civil.

Whether you are quick to anger or one who lets a problem fester, neither hostility nor brooding ever solved a problem. Instead, practice constructive problem solving. Seek common ground. Use the the word gifted cautiously and prudently; in some places the term ³gifted² is perceived as an elitist phrase. Treat all parties with respect and dignity and expect and ask for the same treatment for yourself and your child. Above all, don't ask for information about or discuss other

students or teachers; it is considered unprofessional and can make others uncomfortable and wary.

Gather and analyze the appropriate evidence.

Before you attend a conference, gather and make notes about all your observations related to the problem. Saying something like, "My child is bored" probably won't cut it. Instead, document, describe, and elaborate whenever possible. Provide any evidence you can, again, without discussing or comparing your child to anyone else. Ask teachers or gifted education specialists for their observations and inferences. Value their expertise. Ask about what teachers are already doing to provide a challenging curriculum; it may be more than you think or were lead to believe. At least start with that assumption.

Preassessment: What is it?

If, instead, you discover that the teacher hasn't yet had the opportunity to collect any specific evidence about your child's academic strengths and needs, you might suggest a strategy that many educators refer to as "preassessment." Put simply, preassessment is a diagnostic technique that teachers use to get a handle on what a child already knows, understands, or is able to do before they begin a given school year or curriculum unit. The Monday morning spelling pretest that so many of us remember is a classic example of preassessment. There are two forms of preassessment: formal and informal. Formal preassessment uses inventories, tests, and techniques that have been created by educational researchers and specialists, used countless times, and are available commercially for purchase by interested teachers and administrators. Informal preassessments include teacher and parent observations, students' classroom or home performances, or a close analysis of a student's assignments and work products.

In some schools preassessment is a common practice used at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of a new academic unit. In other places the term is familiar, but the practice is not as common. If this is the case in your situation, you may need to provide a few helpful suggestions.

Keymath, published by American Guidance, is an example of one such diagnostic preassessment. Gifted education specialists in many school districts use it to get a better picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses across the various strands within a grade-level math curriculum. It is most commonly used in grades K-6 and can be very helpful in deciding which math strands should be enriched or accelerated, since each item on the test is keyed to a specific math learning objective.

Another helpful preassessment technique is called an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) or a Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Most of these inventories contain graded word lists and paragraphs that students read to the teacher, orally and silently. Later, students are asked a series of factual and inferential questions about the passage to gauge their comprehension of the reading

material. Normally, students read progressively more difficult lists and passages until they reach their "instructional" reading level. In the case of gifted education students, this level can be two or three years above their grade level.

Using Preassessment to Make Decisions About Curriculum Differentiation

Later, after the teacher has had an opportunity to share preassessment results with parents, he or she can use the data to identify the degree to which a student's performance is different from the expectations for the average child at that grade level. For example, a first-grade teacher, using a spelling pretest that focuses on spelling patterns commonly taught in all three primary grades, might discover that two or three of his students can spell words and use word patterns typical of much older students. As a result, the teacher and parent may decide to "compact" the first-grade spelling program and provide acceleration or extension opportunities that allow the child to pursue his or her own writing interests during the time commonly reserved for spelling instruction.

Preassessment data help parents and teachers decide whether or not to differentiate the grade-level curriculum.

By differentiate, we mean offering curriculum at a deeper or broader level to those students who already have more prior knowledge when they entered the class or begin a particular curriculum unit. Teachers often differentiate by reducing their use of large group teaching and learning activities. Instead, they often form small groups of students with common interests, reading levels, math strengths, or writing instruction needs, and provide instruction and learning activities that are different from the teaching and practice activities offered to other students in the class. Put another way, preassessment can be used by teachers to increase the match between the curriculum and students' learning needs.

Preassessment: Why start there?

Is preassessment and the resulting curriculum differentiation important in today's classrooms? The answer to this is a resounding "yes!" First, the one-size fits-all curriculum no longer meets the needs of the diverse students who populate our classrooms. Students vary widely with respect to interests, motivation, prior knowledge, learning-style preferences, and learning rate. We must preassess students in order to accommodate their varied learning styles, preferences, and levels of prior knowledge. While few parents would expect a teacher with 25-35 students to provide a completely individualized program for their child, preassessment and differentiation within the grade level is feasible and necessary for small groups of young people.

Second, we believe preassessment and differentiation, properly addressed, can increase student achievement, motivation, and effort. Preassessment data and the resulting careful diagnosis by a classroom teacher can ensure that all students work on challenging activities and assignments that honor their skills and abilities.

Preassessment is also a critical preliminary activity for teachers because it takes much of the "guess work" out of teaching. Teachers who use preassessment have an accurate picture of students' current levels of understanding. A well-defined starting point further assists teachers because it illuminates what teaching and learning lessons should follow. When pretesting data highlight what some students already know and are able to do, teachers are free to move these students into new and enriched content or more advanced material. Eliminating familiar material saves valuable instructional time for both students and teachers. Likewise, preassessment can be used to detect students' misconceptions and weak areas. When noted, teachers can then provide supplementary instruction to correct or strengthen these learning areas.

Preassessment Formats That Parents Can Use

Although it would be useful to have commercially designed, formal preassessments accessible at every grade level and in all subject areas, these kinds of diagnostic tools aren't always available. Instead, teachers and parents often find that informal assessments like conferences, concept maps, reading logs, drawings, performances, journal entries, and work samples provide data that can be just as useful as the information provided by published preassessments.

Parents can make a valuable contribution to this preassessment effort by saving assignments from the current or previous school years and creating a "portfolio" that clearly demonstrates their child's academic accomplishments and current levels of performance. Summer reading logs, math problems completed at the kitchen table, audiotapes of the child's oral reading, or discussions about a book read at home, can all be powerful evidence to share with teachers at conference time.

Developing Powerful Alliances Between Parents and Teachers

We know that many parents of high-achieving students are wary of asking for something different for their child. Instead of "jumping in" and making a request without concrete evidence, we suggest that both parents and teachers begin with a discussion about the kinds of evidence that can be gathered to identify a child's learning strengths and needs.

After this preassessment information has been collected and analyzed, it's time for a follow-up parent-teacher conference. During this conversation parents and teachers can review the data and use it to drive important decisions about acceleration or enrichment in one or more subject areas. Later, both parents and teachers will need to engage in some open-ended brainstorming to figure out how to manage any differentiation in students' books, assignments, grouping arrangements, or activities that might result from the realization that this student needs more challenging content. If the preassessment evidence does indicate a need for curriculum differentiation, we encourage parents to offer their help,

whenever possible, with the differentiated assignments and homework that may result.

Are all teachers using preassessments at the beginning of the school year or before they teach curriculum units? We hope so! Not only does the use of this practice increase the match between students and the curriculum, but it can also reduce the amount of time it takes to cover the core curriculum. Equally important, the information from these assessments can be used to begin powerful conversations between teacher and parents. With curriculum objectives and preassessment data in hand, teachers and parents can determine a young person's talents and abilities and plan an effective educational program at home and at school.

If your child's teacher is not yet using preassessment, why not "jump start" the differentiation process with a suggestion to collect and discuss such information? It is a reasonable request, and the data can become the centerpiece of subsequent dialogues that are both meaningful and productive for all involved.

Dr. Jeanne H. Purcell is state director for gifted and talented education in Connecticut, where she works collaboratively with professional organizations and parent groups. Dr. Deborah Burns is a curriculum coordinator for the Cheshire Public Schools in Cheshire, CT.