

Differentiation and Standards

- As you read the following article, highlight or underline important passages.
- What benefits of differentiated instruction does the article mention?

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Standards and Curriculum Differentiation

Curriculum differentiation needs to be the partner of a standards-based initiative, said Deborah Burns, curriculum coordinator for the Cheshire (Conn.) Public Schools and a member of ASCD's Differentiated Instruction Cadre. "If we don't bring the two together as quickly as possible, people are going to get worried—and rightfully so—that standards mean the same thing as standardization," she said.

Burns recommended a tool called the "ladder" for differentiating instruction.

When planning a standards-based unit, teachers should literally draw a ladder, she advised. Then they should label the rungs from bottom to top by asking themselves: What is it that *all* the kids in my room already know? What is it that *some* of them already know? What is it that *few* of them know? What is it that *none* of the kids knows going into this unit? Teachers can use preassessment to answer these questions, she said.

(Some teachers discount the need to preassess, Burns noted. "When someone says, 'I know my kids; I don't need to preassess,' what that really means is, 'I know what the average kid in this room is capable of, and that's what I'm teaching to.' However, standards won't help promote higher achievement if we keep targeting only the average kids," she asserted.)

For example, let's say a teacher is preassessing for the standard *The student will use the scientific process to answer everyday questions*. The teacher

might discover that every student in the class already knows what an experiment is; some students know how to pose a hypothesis; a few students know how to control a variable; and none of the students knows the difference between an independent and a dependent variable. By writing these varying levels of content knowledge on the rungs of the ladder, the teacher can create a developmental rubric for measuring progress with regard to that standard, Burns explained.

"The important thing is to have a decent baseline and a high ceiling," she said. "I doubt that can be done with only three levels to your rubrics. You'll need four, five, or six, depending on the heterogeneity in your student population." The goal should be for all children to move up at least one rung on the ladder, she emphasized.

Once students' prior knowledge has been determined, teachers need to reflect on how they can differentiate their instruction, asking themselves: Should I use different methods with different kids? Should I address different content with different kids? How will I manage it and how will I organize it?

"If I can find each student's zone [of proximal development] through preassessment," Burns said, "and get to know them and respect them as individuals—and not get mad that they're making life difficult for me because they're not all the same—then I have the mind-set that would allow me to approach differentiation."

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