

Creating Graduates Instead of Dropouts!
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When high school students are given textbooks they cannot read, they experience failure. Many have already experienced years of failure, frustration, and academic stress. A lot of blaming occurs: “She doesn’t pay attention.” “He doesn’t do the homework.” “She doesn’t try.” “He is lazy.”

The question is, “Who is the failure?” Almost always, the student is targeted as the failure. However, all American students are promised a free and appropriate education. Any student who is experiencing academic problems is allowed by law to receive accommodations, interventions, and any other necessary assistance that will help the student become academically successful. Surely, then, it is the educational system that has failed. The arrow of blame points directly to the school and the classroom teachers.

Every day, teachers are confronted with decisions regarding how best to educate students for whom regular instruction does not seem to work. For some students, accommodations are all that is needed to ensure success. Providing study sheets, more intensive daily reviews, and drills that target specific skills are examples of effective accommodations. Teachers are expected to incorporate hands-on activities and assignments that are designed for tactile and kinesthetic learners. Most students can “catch up” if they are given a few tutorial sessions.

What about the students who continue to struggle? Our responsibility as educators requires us to dig deeply into our bag of tricks to find just the right interventions for each at-risk student. Consulting with the campus administrator is the first step. It is helpful to collaborate with other professionals who have expertise in the area of concern. For example, if the student is experiencing behavior problems, a counselor, behavior specialist, or school psychologist may suggest helpful ideas or interventions. A colleague with a background in Special Education may contribute insight and useful ideas. Frequently, the school nurse is an invaluable resource, contributing information about vision, hearing, and general health. Other professionals may include the reading or math specialist, ELL specialist, speech therapist, social worker, or attendance officer. Most schools take a team approach to intervention and design a specific intervention plan to address an individual’s needs.

High school students reading at a grade 2/3 level have many hindrances to success. Typically, these students are more likely to have one or more handicapping conditions, such as a learning disability, emotional disturbance, mental retardation, or autism. They are more likely to have medical conditions such as ADHD, asthma, allergies, or diabetes. Many of these students have learned English as a second language. Many come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Family situations may not be stable. Some have legal problems. Low self-esteem developed over years of academic failure is common. For many students, all of these factors are relevant. For everyone in this population, dropping out of high school is a real possibility. It is our challenge as educators to provide these students the education that is rightfully theirs and the information they need in order to be successful in real life.

How can a general education teacher differentiate instruction for students who are reading at a grade 2/3 level? Just feeling the weight of a high school geometry textbook or skimming the pages of a typical biology book make one wonder if it is even possible!

Joe's Story

Joe is a wonderful, intelligent young man. I met Joe and his mom when he was a freshman. He was a very personable kid and an excellent artist. He was never a behavior problem, and everyone liked him. Joe always tried his best. He would work for hours on a single problem without giving up. Joe was identified as a Special Education student with serious reading problems. Luckily, Joe's teachers knew him from junior high school and knew that he was a serious student. They also knew that he had received extensive interventions in the past. High school presented Joe and his teachers with new and seemingly insurmountable challenges.

As a licensed specialist in school psychology and educational diagnostician, I was part of Joe's IEP team. Other team members included Joe, his mother, his teachers, and the principal. The team decided to place Joe in the regular curriculum with extensive accommodations, such as alternative assignments, shortened tests, highlighting main ideas in the texts, and individualized assistance in the classroom. Joe received resource assistance with the Special Education teachers. English was not spoken in Joe's home, but he only read English. Additionally, he was placed in a computer-assisted reading improvement program.

Joe was not able to be successful. The bottom line was that Joe simply could not read the textbook, no matter what the teachers did to make it easier for him. He could, however, grasp the concepts and discuss the subjects, so his teachers met again and added more accommodations, switched to an alternative text book, and added another reading program.

Joe was still not successful! His reading remained at a grade 2 level, and he was unable to read the modified textbook and the shortened tests. Undeterred, the IEP met team again and adopted a curriculum with a grade 2/3 reading level. Finally, Joe was able to read the content! He was able to work through algebra, biology, geometry, economics, and other high school subjects.

Joe was the first in his family to graduate from high school. He even went on to the junior college and majored in graphic arts.

There are some very valuable lessons to be learned from Joe's story. The first is to realize that high school students who have learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, emotional disturbance, severe dyslexia, or language acquisition problems aren't failing because they are lazy, oppositional, or inattentive. Typically, they simply can't read regular textbooks.

Second, students with serious reading problems are often excluded from the opportunities to learn advanced subjects, such as algebra, geometry, biology, government, and economics, because they cannot read the textbooks, supplemental materials, or the tests. They are stuck at a second-, third-, or fourth-grade level. Year after year, these students are given a never-ending supply of fourth-grade basic facts worksheets and similar handouts.

Finally, the most important message is that educators can create graduates instead of dropouts! Although it is not easy for teachers to find resources and texts that address grade-level standards written below third-grade reading levels, it is possible. There are specific components to identify in a curriculum in order to ensure success. Turning kids on, treating kids with respect, and teaching age-appropriate concepts are a few of the critical indicators. No more cute bunny pictures and babyish text that embarrass and offend most older students! These students need materials with a lot of white space, a large font, simplified vocabulary, short sentences, and real-life connections. Students with

very low reading skills can learn algebra, physics, economics, and other grade-level information. They benefit from high school content matter that is age appropriate and easy to read.

There is no magic, one-size-fits-all computer program, method, or curriculum that cures academic problems. Each student is different, and each intervention plan must be individually designed. However, competent teachers know that there is one key to success: Good teachers never, ever give up.

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