Advanced Differentiation

Meeting the Needs of Advanced Learners in the Regular Classroom

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Who are Advanced Learners?

Advanced learners are...

... diverse! They may be students who perform above grade level in reading, writing, science, math and/or social studies; they may be exceptionally creative, possess remarkable leadership skills, or demonstrate an unusually strong ability and motivation to learn; they may be English language learners, or receive special education services; they may also be underperforming in one or more academic areas, requiring special scaffolds and supports.

Advanced learners are students from all cultural and socioeconomic groups who perform at, or show the potential for performing at an outstanding level when compared with others of same age, experience or environment. They have cognitive and affective needs that require a differentiated and challenging learning environment.

Advanced learners need...

- curriculum that has been adjusted to provide greater depth, complexity, novelty, and acceleration
- instruction that emphasizes the development of critical thinking, problem solving, inquiry, and scholarly habits
- challenges that develop persistence and self-efficacy
- opportunities to learn and work together with like-ability peers
- support in developing autonomous learning skills and executive functioning skills (e.g., organization, prioritization, etc.)
- social-emotional support
- opportunities to pursue interests, play, and make friends

Families can find out more about how MPS identifies advanced learners at http://talentdevelopment.mpls.k12.mn.us/advanced_learner_identification

Teachers can explore the many resources supporting identification at https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Assessment-and-Identification.aspx
In Minneapolis Public Schools, we believe that all children deserve to learn at a level that is challenging and rigorous. Yet, we are tasked with teaching standards-aligned content and must ensure that all of our students master essential knowledge, understanding, and skills. Our classrooms are diverse, and complex. Some students may require reteaching, additional practice, or alternative learning modalities. Others may master content quite quickly and demonstrate a need for increased challenge. Despite this fact, ensuring that all students master the core curriculum—our state standards—is our foundational responsibility.

Skillful differentiation provides advanced learners with opportunities to learn the same core as all other grade level peers, but with greater depth and complexity, increased intellectual demand, and sometimes at a faster pace. Adjustments to core curriculum that increase intellectual demand give our advanced learners opportunities to encounter challenge, growth, and success throughout the school day. Advanced differentiation provides the solutions needed to keep our most advanced students challenged in their areas of strength each and every day in the regular classroom.

Advanced learners need to be challenged all day, every day, not just once or twice a week through a pull-out program. When advanced learners are given opportunities to approach school learning at a challenging level, they develop self-efficacy, motivation to succeed, and healthy identity formation, not to mention academic growth. Furthermore, teachers can provide these learning experiences to advanced learners, even in our diverse, urban classrooms. To ensure this, teachers need specific skills and support (and time to develop and implement them) in order to effectively differentiate in the classroom.

In MPS we promote differentiated curricular resources, key differentiation strategies, and in-depth professional development opportunities to ensure that all of our schools are successful at meeting the needs of advanced learners. Here we will highlight the fundamentals of advanced differentiation, and invite you to explore and consider the many ways our classrooms are being impacted by these powerful techniques.
Advanced Differentiation starts with the core: the skills, knowledge, and understandings outlined by the Minnesota State Standards. Certain key strategies allow educators to adjust the intellectual demand of core content to meet the needs of advanced learners. Educators may adjust the core by:

✓ Using prompts to ask students to delve deeply into content; for example, by analyzing details, identifying patterns, and synthesizing rules
✓ Using prompts to ask students to grapple with greater complexity; for example, by analyzing changes over time or making interdisciplinary connections
✓ Asking students to use inductive or deductive reasoning to define, synthesize, analyze, etc.
✓ Applying critical thinking skills such as determining relevance, noting ambiguity, or judging with criteria
✓ Adjusting the process of a learning activity; for example, by making it more abstract, move at a faster pace, include additional facets, or by increasing the level of independence
✓ Asking students to think like disciplinarians by using authentic processes and developing authentic products, defining and applying the language of the discipline
✓ Participating in discourse, problem finding and solving
✓ Making generalizations and interdisciplinary connections via universal themes
✓ Applying authentic research skills

... And much more. Advanced differentiation is not a separate curriculum or pull-out program. Because its foundation is the core curriculum, advanced learners can participate in whole-class lessons as well as small group or independent work that has been adjusted to meet their needs.

Increasing Intellectual Demand
Classroom Teachers Meeting the Needs of Advanced Learners

Classroom teachers are called upon to meet the needs of many kinds of learners. From English language learners to students receiving special education services, our teachers face many complexities. Can they also successfully meet the needs of their advanced learners?

The skills and strategies that support advanced differentiation also underpin classroom teachers’ ability to meet the needs of many different learners in the classroom. By learning to teach students executive functioning and autonomous learning skills, teachers are freed up to focus on smaller groups of students at varying levels. By understanding how to design and support small group instruction, learning centers, and group investigations, all students attain greater motivation and engagement as learners. By practicing the skills of metacognition (thinking about thinking), all students learn to solve problems more independently. And by building rituals and routines that support small group instruction, all students benefit from flexible grouping with like-interest or like-ability peers.

In Minneapolis Public Schools we are training teachers across the district in talent development and advanced differentiation. As these teachers learn to purposefully bring small group instruction and independent learning into their classrooms, we have witnessed student achievement soar. Not only do our advanced learners show growth, but many other students benefit from receiving more individualized instruction as a result of differentiation practices.

Educators can read more about our year-long certificate in talent development and advanced learner education on our website:

https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx
Delivery of Instruction: Acceleration and Compacting

Curriculum Compacting

Some advanced learners know much of the content in a unit of study before that unit is taught. In fact, according to a nation-wide study, most advanced learners already know an average of 50% of the content being taught at the beginning of the school year (Westberg, et. al., 1993). Curriculum compacting has teachers assess what content students have already mastered in advance of a unit, and provide them with alternatives and new learning in its place. Curriculum compacting extracts only the parts of the core resources advanced learners need, making room for more challenging work.

Steps of Curriculum Compacting

- **Pretest** students on the learning objectives for a unit of study
- **Identify** students who have already mastered specific objectives
- **Group** students according to their mastered learning objectives
- **Design** appropriately challenging tasks for students who show mastery
- **Teach** your differentiated groups
- **Assess** students at the end of the unit using graduated rubrics

MPS Telescoped Math Courses

While many advanced learners benefit from the increased challenge and careful management of learning goals facilitated by curriculum compacting, certain students may need a more accelerated approach to learning in math. Rather than skipping a year in math, which has the potential to create gaps in understanding, telescoping allows for vigorously paced learning by rapidly progressing through three years of curriculum in two. MPS telescopes math courses starting in grade 4.

Parents can read more about math telescoping: [http://math.mpls.k12.mn.us/](http://math.mpls.k12.mn.us/)
Educators can read more about math telescoping: [https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/Math/Pages/Math-Acceleration.aspx](https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/Math/Pages/Math-Acceleration.aspx)
Educators can find resources for mathematically advanced learners in the curriculum guides under “Advanced Differentiation”: [https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/tl/Pages/Elementary-Guides.aspx](https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/tl/Pages/Elementary-Guides.aspx)
Tiering Lessons

Most agree that “one size fits all” curriculum cannot possibly meet the needs of every learner in a classroom. Teachers can use varied levels of activities, tasks, or assignments to ensure that students explore ideas at a level that builds on their prior knowledge or instruction. In doing so, advanced learners experience continued growth while focusing on the same learning targets.

A variety of strategies offer opportunities to “ratchet up” or tier tasks for advanced learners in your classroom. Like the prompts for depth and complexity, tiering offers a quick and effective method for redesigning a learning activity to increase the level of challenge. An advantage of tiering is that a teacher can quickly examine a core learning task, like the example below, and use one or more strategies to develop tiers that match different student needs.

Advanced tiers can be created by adjusting the depth, complexity, abstractness, number of steps, or degree of independence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Task:</th>
<th>Advanced Tier:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students make “A-B patterns” with colored tiles</td>
<td>Students identify examples of one-two patterns in nature, poems; and around the classroom. They should record them by drawing what they observe in their math journal and if possible label what they saw.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grouping Advanced Learners

Research from the field of gifted education shows that certain grouping practices positively impacts the achievement of our brightest students, and may also raise the achievement of all students school-wide. Grouping provides an efficient vehicle for challenging advanced learners and for providing them with a peer group, an appropriately trained teacher, and an effectively differentiated curriculum. Grouping practices also narrow the range of learners, supporting teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of advanced learners in a regular classroom.

Purposes of grouping advanced learners

All children do not learn in the same way and at the same pace. Instruction must be modified for students who already know the material or are capable of learning the material more quickly. The purposes of grouping are fourfold:

1. to ease the delivery of appropriately differentiated curriculum to advanced learners with similar educational needs
2. to facilitate the use of appropriately differentiated instructional strategies for advanced learners of similar educational needs
3. to facilitate addressing the specific affective needs of advanced learners
4. to allow advanced learners of similar abilities or performance levels to learn from each other

Many different models and practices for grouping have been studied across a diverse range of localities and school structures. Each school will decide which model(s) to employ.

Parents can read more about services for advanced learners at: [http://talentdevelopment.mpls.k12.mn.us/](http://talentdevelopment.mpls.k12.mn.us/)

Educators can read more about grouping advanced learners at: [https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Grouping.aspx](https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Grouping.aspx)
Advanced Differentiation in the MPS Curriculum Guides

Talent Development and Advanced Learner Education has developed resources within the grade level curriculum guides to ensure that teachers have the tools and resources they need to challenge advanced learners throughout the school day. In reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, teachers will find a vast array of advanced options for small group instruction, parallel projects, independent study, and group investigations. Because these resources have been aligned with the core learning targets and apply research-based methods for challenging advanced learners, they can be used as-is or adapted based on teacher expertise or student need.

Teachers can find resources for advanced differentiation in the curriculum guides: https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/tl/Pages/Focused-Instruction.aspx

Families can read more about curricular resources for advanced learners on our website at: http://talentdevelopment.mpls.k12.mn.us/

Many of these resources include explicit instructions for implementing with advanced learners. However, we offer training to support teachers in the use of these advanced differentiation resources. Educators can find information on these training opportunities at: https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx
Instructional Strategies

Minneapolis Public Schools promotes specific instructional strategies to differentiate core curriculum for advanced learners. The next few pages outline these approaches for increasing intellectual demand. Find out more about the research support for these methods by searching the database at the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT):

http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt/
The Prompts for Depth and Complexity

These symbols represent prompts that are used to grapple with content in sophisticated ways. Some of these prompts ask students to go deeper, to think more complexly, or apply a powerful combination of both. MPS teachers and advanced learners will see these prompts appear throughout the advanced differentiation materials in the curriculum guides. Teachers who complete the certificate in Talent Development and Advanced Learner Education learn to teach these prompts to their students and design differentiated tasks with them.

The prompts for depth and complexity provide a simple way to ratchet up the challenge of core curriculum for advanced learners without needing a separate curriculum. Since their development in the 1980’s, these tools have been used in schools and districts throughout the world and have 30+ years of research supporting their continued applications.

By simply adding one or more of these prompts to a learning task, students’ approach to the work is significantly altered. For example, if the core curriculum asks students to “identify causes of the civil war”, by adding the prompt for “multiple perspectives”, advanced students can be asked to research and identify multiple perspectives on the causes of the civil war, thus greatly increasing the complexity of the task. There are innumerable ways to combine and connect these prompts to core curriculum.
Thinking like a Disciplinarian

Intellectual demand and challenge are often increased by asking students to think like a professional from a specific field of study. In the real world, scientists are not simply “scientists”, but rather anthropologists, ethnobotanists, phrenologists, geophysicists and so forth. These disciplines represent a specific set of skills, mind sets, vocabulary, and product-development techniques that are unique and challenging. This form of differentiation allows students to put to use academic skills and knowledge in real-world contexts.

Learning tasks are made deeper and more rigorous when students research, identify, and synthesize the knowledge, understanding, and skills of a disciplinarian. Tasks and projects that have been adjusted using this strategy can also allow students to discover new areas of interest or to pursue known affinities. Advanced learners who have a fascination with space exploration can approach a particular study as an astronomer would. Students interested in poetry can approach social studies content through a poet’s lens and with a poet’s set of skills. The content we teach in schools is inherently interdisciplinary because professions in the real world are. These disciplines requiring specific applications of reading, writing, math, and so forth. “Thinking like a Disciplinarian” provides students with opportunities to integrate knowledge, understanding and skills across content areas.

Even simple tasks can be made more rigorous by asking students to approach the task as a given disciplinarian would. For example, our social studies core curriculum requires that students “define needs and wants and explain their similarities and differences.” Advanced learners are challenged by being asked to think like an economist. Rather than identify needs and wants, the task asks students to define scarce resources that qualify as either needs or wants, make predictions about the long-term availability of those scarce resources based on survey data, and create rules about correct use of resources according to their categories (needs vs. wants).

Thinking like a disciplinarian is a powerful strategy because it provides opportunities to pursue work that is both personally interesting and highly challenging.
Socratic Seminar

“Socrates described himself as a stingray, whose role it was to perplex. He made the claim that before someone can come to know something, one must first realize what one doesn’t know. The essence of Socratic questioning is to cause students to stop and think, to realize that something is more complex than at first appeared.”

-Michael Strong, The Habit of Thought

Socratic Seminar is a process for engaging students in discourse and inquiry. Just as Socrates taught by perplexing his students, the Socratic Seminar process demands that participants question everything from their own perspectives to the authority of the author. Students inquire into perspectives inherent in and around “texts” of all kinds: a piece of literature, essay or speech; a work of art or musical composition; a primary, historical document; a mechanical model; a mathematical concept.

Through Socratic questioning, students examine these “texts” multiple times to uncover layers of meaning. Inherent in this process are skills of annotation, generalization, and synthesis of ideas. Students prepare to participate in seminars by practicing this layered approach of inquiring into texts.

During the actual seminar, students sit in a circle on the same level with the teacher or leader. They may come prepared with questions relating to the text to ask their group, or they may come prepared to answer an overarching question based around a universal concept or theme. Throughout the seminar, students respond to each other by asking further questions about interpretations of texts, by agreeing and disagreeing with perspectives, by offering counterexamples, and many other strategies for maintaining logical, intelligent discourse.

When teachers engage advanced learners in Socratic Seminar, they provide an opportunity for students of like-ability to practice critical thinking and sophisticated discussions together. Students are also able to engage in complex texts at their advanced reading level and to have discourse about challenging themes. While it is particularly powerful as a tool for differentiation during the reading workshop, it can be used in any subject to offer opportunities for verbalizing critical thinking.
Independent Study and Group Investigations

While most teachers devote some time in the year to informational writing, independent study and group investigation are models that allow advanced learners to engage in authentic research in areas uniquely suited to their interests and instructional preferences. Packing a double punch by developing both cognitive (critical thinking) and affective (autonomous learning) skills, this model is ideally suited for students who require significant challenge. Likewise, the model works well as a parallel project for advanced learners during units of study that involve basic skills of research, such as informational writing units.

In the independent study model, students do not choose “all-about” topics of study, but rather real-world unanswered questions about which there is current controversy. For example, students do not study the general subject of “dinosaurs”, but rather could investigate the controversy surrounding a much debated question: What caused the dinosaurs to go extinct? Because research is driven through the lens of inquiry and unanswered questions, students are required to weigh the pros and cons of competing theories, and to make judgments based upon the preponderance of evidence, logic, and credibility of sources.

This type of learning can be woven throughout the school day or can parallel a unit of study (e.g., during social studies or writing workshop). Teachers work with students to develop these research projects with the eventual goal of students taking responsibility for developing, conducting, and reporting the findings of the research.

MPS provides teachers with many tools to support students’ development of critical thinking skills. Through independent study, students design supporting research questions using keywords at three different levels of cognition: factual comprehension, analysis of sources, and evaluation of multiple sources and/or perspectives (e.g., theories or schools of thought).
Educators often talk about the big ideas that overarch units of study. These “big ideas” or generalizations are used to investigate established principles and to ensure students come to understand essential truths about a subject. Universal theme takes this concept to its outer limit by asserting that truths overlay not just one subject, but all content. These themes form the foundation for all learning. Based on Aristotelian thought, this differentiation strategy encourages students to make interdisciplinary connections through one or more universal themes such as:

- Change
- Conflict
- Power
- Relationships
- Patterns
- Structure
- Systems

It may sound complex, but asking students to first define, and then identify the presence of a universal theme in a lesson can be accomplished successfully as early as preschool. For example, one of the universal themes, patterns, has an almost overwhelming presence in early childhood and primary grades math. Human beings are natural pattern seekers. Ask a young child to give you an example of a pattern, and chances are he or she can build one out of blocks or identify the repeating words in a favorite picture book like Go Dog, Go!

In school, the universal theme can be woven throughout the day as students name, identify, debate, and analyze its presence in math, literature, grammatical structures of language, scientific investigations, and social studies. Universal theme has an almost immediate effect on content by elevating it from a skills-based level to one that is more abstract and intellectually challenging.
Problem Based Learning

Traditional curricula used in schools require students to learn basic concepts and skills through teacher-directed modeling and didactic instruction. However, advanced learners thrive when given opportunities to find and analyze problems, create their own solution pathways, and evaluate their problem solving process. Problem Based Learning (PBL) provides just such opportunities for advanced learners while addressing the same core concepts and skills as traditional curriculum.

In PBL, students are presented with an ill-structured or “messy” problem, rather than a clear problem with an obvious solution method. These problems are always real world and often pulled from current or historical events or issues. They contain many elements that raise new questions and prompt students to conduct research and investigations. Examples of ill-structured problems include:

- Designing architectural structures on a budget
- Resolving environmental hazards
- Solving crimes using a real-world set of clues
- Inventing new objects to solve a unique problem
- Investigating ambiguous historical events, such as how the pyramids might have been built or what happened to the lost colony of Roanoke

In PBL, the teacher plays a more facilitative role, allowing students to drive their own learning. Rather than developing lessons from which students learn a specific objective, the teacher guides students through a problem solving process in which they determine significant questions, collect important resources, prioritize or delegate tasks, and evaluate solutions either as a team or independently.
Scholarly Habits and Complex Thinking

In addition to mastering content knowledge, understanding and skills at a challenging level, advanced learners need opportunities to develop metacognitive skills: those “learning to learn” habits that support a student throughout their academic career and lead to more independence in scholarly pursuits. In order to facilitate the development of metacognitive skills within our advanced learners, we emphasize explicit instruction around habits of mind known as “intellectual traits”. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Intellectual humility** or recognizing when one’s own perspective or background knowledge is limited
- **Fair-mindedness** or considering multiple points of view without prejudice
- **Intellectual autonomy** or learning to think critically and arrive at one’s own conclusions rather than blindly following the beliefs of others
- **Intellectual persistence** or doggedly pursuing understanding or insight despite a high level of challenge
- **Intellectual courage** or the willingness to investigate ideas that intimidate us, as well as stand up for insights that go against the grain

In order to apply these and other scholarly habits, students must also develop complex thinking skills. Sophisticated thought is required of scholars who maintain these ideals; students must learn complex thinking concurrently with the development of scholarly habits. Such complex thinking skills include:

- Prioritizing
- Relating
- Noting Ambiguity
- Differentiating fact from opinion
- Substantiating solutions
- Identifying and defining problems
- Interpreting
- Redesigning

It takes time for such traits and skills to fully mature, but the process for advanced learners must begin at an early age in order to ensure holistic development of our academically talented students. Our teachers help nurture these habits in students by providing opportunities for self-assessment and reflection, goal setting, and learning opportunities to apply these traits and skills. Many of the other curricular models outlined in this pamphlet are ideal vehicles for incorporating the development of scholarly habits and complex thinking skills into our students’ daily learning experiences.
Making Advanced Differentiation a Reality in the Mixed Ability Classroom

Teachers with advanced learners in their classrooms need more than just the resources and skills to make learning more challenging for advanced learners. They need the routines, procedures, habits, skills, and an environment that enables small group and individualized instruction. Although we know there are times throughout the day when working with the whole class all at once is appropriate, in order to truly meet the range of learning needs, effective differentiators work smarter to set up classrooms that promote this sort of learning.

Rituals and routines are critical. Students must understand from the very first day of school how to behave and operate in a differentiated classroom. This means training students to be more on task and autonomous at times by providing choice and by practicing procedures. Rituals and routines in a differentiated classroom must free up the teacher to focus on smaller groups, rather than striving to manage all students all the time.

Formative assessments must be used throughout units of study so that teachers can adjust the level of challenge for students according to their ever-changing readiness. Simple exit and entrance slips, quizzes, and quick conferring sessions can help teachers adjust their level of differentiation reflexively. Formative assessments also allow more flexible groupings so that all students’ needs are met.

Autonomous learning and executive functioning skills must be explicitly taught. All students need skills, resources, and strategies for staying on task and persisting through challenge when the teacher is working with another student or group. Furthermore, teachers can incorporate these practices into their professional toolbox, making a differentiated classroom a reality. The professional development programs offered by Talent Development and Advanced Learner Education equip teachers for success. Find out more at: https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx
Resources for Families:

- Talent Development & Advanced Learner Education: Find out about identification, services for advanced learners, and talent development in MPS at http://talentdevelopment.mpls.k12.mn.us/
- Focused Instruction in MPS: Read about Minnesota standards-aligned curriculum and assessment for all K-12 programs at http://tl.mpls.k12.mn.us/ focused_instruction
- Davidson Institute for Talent Development: Information and research database for parents and families on meeting the needs of advanced learners. http://www.davidsongifted.org
- MCGT: Local organization providing support and information for parents of advanced learners. http://mcgt.net

Resources for Educators:

- Professional Development in Talent Development and Advanced Differentiation: https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx
- Advanced Learner Identification background and resources for MPS educators: https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/TalentDevGiftEdu/Pages/Assessment-and-Identification.aspx
- Advanced Differentiation Resources in the Curriculum Guides (click "Advanced Differentiation" under "Instructional Approach" on unit templates): https://staff.mpls.k12.mn.us/Depts/tl/Pages/Curriculum-Guides.aspx
- MEGT: MN Educators of the Gifted and Talented: https://sites.google.com/site/megtwebsite/
- NRC/GT: National research center on gifted and talented: http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/