Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's issue focuses on actions we can take when students don't learn.

When Students Don't Learn

Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

It is a reality as old and timeless as the institution of education. Some students learn quickly and easily while others struggle to master the content. In past decades, schools often separated students into "winners" and "losers." The winners were the students who excelled, were motivated, and who emerged from their schooling with stellar achievement records. Schools often touted their success by using these exemplary students as examples of the school's focus on academic excellence. The losers were often given labels such as academically unsuccessful, slow learners, unmotivated, and even handicapped. They were the children who could not keep up or who did not comply with the way schools did business. Their lack of academic achievement was often attributed to a lack of motivation, their unwillingness to work hard, or poor study habits. These problem children were often quickly and easily forgotten.

Although many educators have struggled with the frustrations brought about by today's accountability requirements, there have been some clear, positive benefits of the emphasis on achievement data and required academic improvement for all students. Students can no longer be shunted off in a corner where they are forgotten or neglected. Schools today fully understand that their mission is to educate all children, and, as a result, they must have practices in place to support students who struggle, need more time to learn, need different learning experiences or need alternative ways to demonstrate their learning. Thus, the focus in schools has shifted from complacency when students do not learn to a need to respond to a very important and necessary question in every school today:

What do we do when students don't learn?

Range of Possibilities
Responses to this question fall along a continuum of possibilities. At one end of the spectrum are schools that have not formally addressed the question at all and simply maintain the status quo in hopes that "the problem will take care of itself." Teachers in these schools adhere to the belief that failure should continue to be an option with students suffering the natural consequences. In these environments, there has been little or no schoolwide discussion of the question and teachers are left to their own devices to make instructional decisions. This "burying your head in the sand" approach is flawed on many levels. When the

question is not addressed or discussed, little or no change in instruction or assessment may ever occur, and students may succeed by luck or accident but not by design.

In other schools, the importance of the question has been brought to the attention of teachers but individuals are left to determine what steps to take when students do not show adequate academic growth. There is no schoolwide initiative, simply a casual focus on the need to do something. Moving along the continuum are the schools that have addressed the question publicly, have wrestled with possible solutions, and have held numerous problem-solving sessions to surface the practices which have the greatest promise to support student learning. In these environments, it is the responsibility of each teacher to put into place strategies and practices that will lead to greater student learning.

Further down the continuum are schools that have adopted schoolwide initiatives that provide support for any students who do not reach acceptable levels of achievement. These proactive approaches have titles such as "pyramid of interventions," "failure is not an option," and "collective self-efficacy." This type of across-the-board focus of responding to the question has the greatest potential to achieve the necessary improvement in student learning. In these schools, every teacher is on board and follows a specified approach to address the question. They do not leave student achievement and learning to chance or serendipity.

Successful Initiatives
I recently surveyed several principals to learn how they had addressed the question. Most had specific plans in place that were neither haphazard nor random. Their faculties fully understood the importance of having all of their students show academic growth.

Three of the schools had established Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and have had them in place for three or more years. Teacher collaboration was the hallmark in each of these schools. They also had in place a "Pyramid of Interventions" that they followed when students did not show progress. This approach typically included individual or small group instruction beyond the regular classroom provided by trained professionals. Students remained in these smaller environments until they showed mastery or noted improvement in the necessary skills or knowledge. Another component of some pyramids was a daily schoolwide support program (with such names as "Soar to Success" or "Lunch and Learn") where students would report to a designated location for remediation or reinforcement. Time for these support programs were carved out of the school day and usually lasted for approximately 30 minutes.

One school tested students and provided intense instruction to any students who were at least two years behind in reading and/or math by assigning these students to teachers who had proven track records for improving student achievement. In the majority of these cases, the school has seen improvement in student learning as measured by standardized test scores.

The principals at two schools believed that many successful practices were already in place. Each used the faculty meeting setting where teachers worked in small groups to discuss the question: **What do you do when students don't learn?** Each group had a facilitator and a recorder. The complete compendium of ideas generated by each group was compiled and shared with the entire staff. Strategies included providing one-on-one instruction, re-testing individual students, using pre-assessment data to plan units, and revising teaching methods to meet more student needs. See the document **When Students Don't Learn** at the end of this newsletter for an extensive list of strategies and directions for orchestrating such a faculty discussion.

Using the results of a faculty survey, one school found that the teachers understood the importance of differentiating instruction and were willing to provide multiple pathways to learning. The problem was that they did not all have adequate repertoires from which to choose and did not know how to appropriately

select from their repertoires to meet the needs of their students. Differentiation of instruction became the school's professional development focus throughout the next year. This job-embedded professional development included demonstrations of recommended teaching strategies by special education teachers, resource teachers, and instructional coaches. It led to widespread teacher use of carefully selected scaffolding strategies as well as the sharing of successful practices teacher-to-teacher.

True Professionals

In summary, schools that see their mission as educating all children fully accept their responsibility to do as much as possible to ensure that every student learns and succeeds. As professionals, they are unwilling to ignore failure, apathy, or passivity on the part of their students. In these schools, teachers and administrators talk openly about their challenges, resist the temptation to give up on selected students, and use assessment data to determine what next steps they must follow. They use their precious time to seek support and ideas from their colleagues and keep open minds about potential solutions to problems. They do not resort to finger pointing or finding blame when they encounter adversity, especially when students are not successful in showing academic growth. They understand that true professionals often struggle to find answers but they persevere in their quest to find answers to challenging questions. As Rick DuFour says, "Don't tell me you believe that all kids can learn – tell me what you're doing about the kids who aren't learning."

When Students Don't Learn

The ideas below represent the thinking of teacher groups who shared their ideas in response to the question: **What do I do when students don't learn?** The ideas are grouped in three categories: **Before Assessment, After Assessment, and At Any Time**.

Read through a section and discuss the suggestions listed there. After discussion, decide which ones you want to add to your practice. Place a check in front of the ideas that you want to add to your repertoire. Repeat the process with each of the three sections.

Before Assessment

The best intervention is prevention! When we take a proactive approach to set students up for success, little or minimal follow-up is necessary since students successfully demonstrate their learning the first time they are assessed.

_____ Provide extra help to selected students during available times such as before school, during lunch, or after school.

_____ Be proactive by providing a peer helper during in-class learning activities in order to support new learning.

_____ End instruction 10-15 minutes early. Allow students who understand the lesson to begin individual practice or group work; work individually or in small groups with students who may be struggling.

_____ Present new content in a variety of ways to meet different learning styles. For example, provide manipulatives, include lots of visuals, and allow for students to talk in pairs or small groups to process their learning.

_____ Offer materials at lower skill levels to match a student's beginning point. As the student makes progress, increase the level of the instructional materials.

_____ Employ cooperative learning strategies during instruction since some students can learn easier through peer-to-peer interactions.

_____ Have students establish specific learning/improvement goals prior to the next unit of study.

_____ Give students the opportunity to choose a different way to show what they have learned.

_____ Use formative assessment data to make instructional decisions so that you are able to clarify content and correct misunderstandings prior to administering the assessment.

_____ Encourage students to self-assess their comprehension of the content as new learning is presented.

When Students Don't Learn

_____ Tell students with specificity how to use their time to study for or prepare for the upcoming assessment.

_____ Vary the types of assessments that are administered to students (e.g., short answer, essay, performance tasks, etc.) in order to give students a variety of ways to show what they have learned.

_____ Provide specific and detailed feedback about what each student is doing right rather than what they are doing wrong.

_____ Establish peer tutoring sessions prior to testing to help students prepare for the upcoming test.

After Assessment

When students have been unsuccessful in demonstrating their mastery of content, it is vital that we take the time to analyze the assessment results and to determine the next steps. We should routinely make data-driven decisions by asking themselves:

- Which students may need additional support?
- Which students may require some tutoring, re-teaching, or one-on-one assistance?
- Which students may need an additional opportunity to reach mastery on the current content?

It is important to remember that the emphasis should be on learning and not just grading.

_____ Allow students to re-take assessments to correct errors or mistakes. Students often miss questions because they read them too quickly or make careless errors.

_____ Make it a regular practice to give students multiple opportunities on assessments to reach mastery level learning (e.g., 80% or above).

_____ Break down the skills or content on the assessment to determine where misunderstanding occurred after an assessment and use the data to provide follow-up support.

_____ Change roles. Ask the student to teach the content to you (in his or her own words) to determine where the breakdown in comprehension occurred.

_____ Make a copy of the students' test. Have the student make corrections in different color (for emphasis). Review the student's work and give the student credit for the corrected work.

_____ Return the assessment to the student. Have the student re-write missed questions in his or her own words, then answer the questions, and resubmit the test for credit.

When Students Don't Learn

_____ Complete an error analysis after the students finish an assessment to ensure that questions were clearly stated.

_____ Re-teach the incorrect or misunderstood content to students in one-on-one sessions and allow re-testing.

_____ Reflect on the unit just completed in order to determine what worked well and what may need revision in instructional delivery in upcoming unit(s).

_____ Have students write out their improvement plans in preparation for future units for both in-class behaviors as well as ways to improve study habits. (Written plans are more likely to be followed than simply "thinking" about how to improve).

_____ Build on mistakes or answers that are partially correct instead of emphasizing what the student(s) did wrong.

At Any Time

With careful planning, we can set our students up for success through day-to-day instructional practices, thus avoiding remediation or intervention. Many teachers never have to re-teach or re-test their students since the students are successful the first time when their learning is assessed. These practices are instructional, personal or motivational in nature.

_____ Build personal relationships with students so that they know and believe that you are invested in helping them achieve success.

_____ Enlist support from parents by letting them know with specificity how they can work with their child at home.

_____ Demonstrate through examples that it is the student's personal day-to-day work habits that will pay off when they are tested.

_____ Include opportunities for practice and repetition during instructional delivery to reinforce new learning and/or review prior learning.

_____ Check for student understanding on a regular basis during instruction using a variety of approaches (e.g., direct questions, white boards, summarizing techniques, etc.). Use the data from these checks to determine which students can work on enrichment while the teacher provides more direct instruction for students who may need additional time to learn.

_____ Provide students with specific and detailed feedback on their work so they know how to build on what they have already learned.

_____ Add to student confidence by pointing out where they have shown growth in specific skills and knowledge.

_____ Follow the three R's (Redo, Retake, and Revise) on a regular basis.

When Students Don't Learn

_____ Pre-assess student knowledge and skills prior to teaching a unit to determine which students may be lacking in basic skills or have gaps in their prior knowledge.

_____ Show your human side by acknowledging mistakes you have made or how you may have struggled with learning when you were a student.

_____ Develop examples to use during instruction that link the content to the lives of your students.

_____ Dispel the belief on the parts of some students that they are "stupid."

_____ Show your students that you are a life-long learner and that there is much that you can learn from them.