

Putting Problem Solving to Work in Your School

Building Capacity to Support
Good Teaching and Maximize
Impact on Achievement

Keysor Elementary School – Kirkwood, MO
314.213.6120

Amber Lane, Special Education Teacher

amber.lane@kirkwoodschoools.org

Melissa John, Teacher/Math Specialist

melissa.john@kirkwoodschoools.org

Bryan Painter, Principal

bryan.painter@kirkwoodschoools.org

Marilyn Swinehart, Special Education Teacher

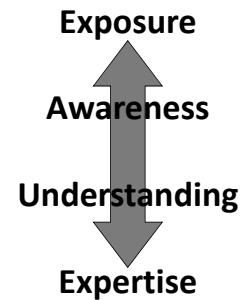
marilyn.swinehart@kirkwoodschoools.org

<http://www.kirkwoodschoools.org/keysor/>

<https://twitter.com/keysorpride>

Goals for this Session

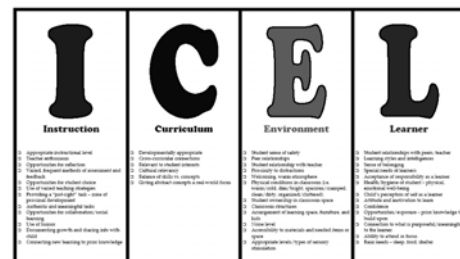
- Review Keysor’s Journey – Where we’ve been, where we are, and where we may be going
- Identify issues relevant to your settings that will help you realize the full impact that problem solving can present
- Explore logistic possibilities – including the effective use of data, that can enhance your problem solving work.



What is Effective Problem Solving?

- An avenue toward understanding student needs and how to support learning
- A process that encourages collaboration
- A journey we take as individuals and as schools...and we’re all going to be in different places on the journey
- A mindset, a philosophy, a habit – that is part of good teaching.

Problem Solving Starts with ICEL



Possible Results of Problem Solving

- Shared commitment to the success of individual students
- Greater capacity within the school to meet student needs
- Collaborative conversations that raise the level of instruction for all students
- Smarter, more purposeful questions

All that being said...

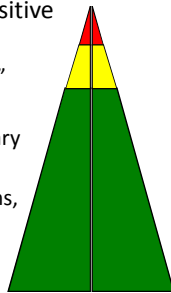
Having a problem solving process in place is only one step toward systemic achievement for all students.

The problem solving process may not yield desired results without

- Capacity building among staff
- Structures that support problem solving work.

Keysor's Journey

- Several years of work with Positive Behavior Supports (PBS)
 - Understanding of “the triangle”
 - Commitment to Universals, Secondary Supports, and Tertiary Interventions
 - Framework for solving problems, specifically around behavior



Evolution of Care Team

- Care Team was viewed as a step toward special education referral
- Merging of Care Team, Behavior Support Team, and Literacy Support Team...three separate groups with similar goals, often working to support the same kids
- Problem solving through an ASSIST process with a goal of meeting kids' needs – not getting a special ed referral.

Who owns the problem? Who is the solution?

- Students with IEPs – a gradual movement away from “take and fix” mentality
 - With push-ins and co-teaching, teachers began to accept more ownership in the achievement of kids with IEPs
- Non-IEP students with reading, math, behavior concerns – varied knowledge base, skills, confidence, and commitment.
 - Widespread pull-out supports (i.e. Reading Recovery, Title I Reading, READ 180)

What we had going for us

- Exceptional regular ed and special ed teachers
- Teacher leadership among regular ed and special ed staff
- Shared commitment to student achievement and school improvement
- Staff, resources, district support

Informal Data Collection

- Review of data we had on readers
- Teacher ID of kids who required yellow-level (Tier II) and red-level (Tier III) supports in order to meet reading benchmarks
- Review of instructional reading time for struggling readers vs. green-level (Tier I) readers

What did we learn?

- For many struggling readers, intervention was replacement instruction, especially in grades 2-5
- Roughly 1/3 of all struggling readers had less minutes of instructional time in reading than those already at grade level
- Many had significant “down time” during reading blocks – not reading and not receiving direct instruction.

Planning for Year One of RtI

(Spring before 2007-2008)

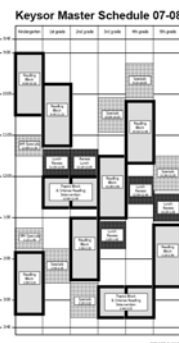
- Teachers ID Tier II & Tier III students in reading, math, and behaviors
- “Retreat” with interventionists to survey school-wide needs and consider options for supporting kids and teachers
- Commitment to using CBM data to inform problem solving and interventions
- Changes in master schedule

Creating a Schedule

- Willingness to abandon or change some programs and services
- Recognition that interventionists cannot create a schedule that adequately meets the needs of students AFTER teachers have developed their own schedules
- Review of research and a commitment to 90-minute Tier I reading blocks for all

Creating a Schedule

- A commitment to push-in supports in ALL classrooms during reading block
- A commitment to additional 45-minutes of intensive instruction for those in most critical need
- District agreement that kids requiring additional reading support must be freed of some academic expectations.



Which led to...

- A master schedule that included lunch, recess, specials, AND
- A 90-minute reading block for each grade level
- A 45-minute intensive instruction/topics block for 1st-4th grade

Keysor Journey...Year One (08-09)

- Building-wide focus on literacy supports, prevention, and intervention
- Focused roles and responsibilities among interventionist core team
- Baby-steps in collaborative work in classrooms to support all students, including those with Tier II & Tier III needs.

Keysor's Journey...Year One (08-09)

- Curriculum-Based Measurements (CBMs)
 - Screening three times a year for all students
 - Monthly monitoring for Tier II (yellow)
 - Weekly monitoring for Tier III (red)
- More student-centered conversations around data, teaching, and interventions
- Shared knowledge about, responsibility for individual students and their achievement.

Ongoing Work - Intervention Team

- Regular meetings, conversations, learning
- March Reflection Retreat
 - Celebrating successes, examining challenges
 - Reflecting on individual strengths, needs – plus those of teams and school community
 - Begin planning for future
- May Planning Retreat
 - Scheduling, data-based decisions, teaming

Ongoing Work – Whole Staff

- Sharp learning curve – CBMs, data analysis, co-teaching and collaboration
- Adjusting instruction, focus on using time well, attention to “strengthening the core”
- Ongoing analysis of data, problem solving
- Reflection, buy-in to schoolwide structures
- Communication internally and with families.

Keysor Journey...Year Two (08-09)

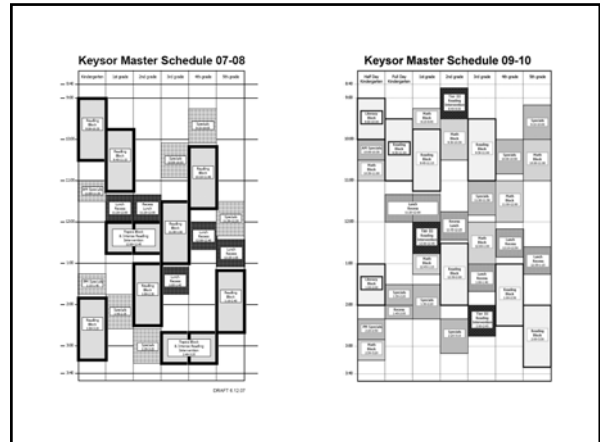
- Changes in master schedule, developed with teachers
- Purposeful attention to core curriculum, especially in reading and math
- Increased communication with parents
- Focus still on reading - growing attention to math, writing, and language skills
- Increased understandings about CBMs, more structured analysis/use of data

Keysor Journey...Year Two (08-09)

- Growing focus on diagnostic assessments, particularly for students identified through benchmarking
- Special education eligibility through RtI
- Increased focus on fidelity of programs and supports – documentation
- Piloting Tier II/III support of behaviors
- Use of Standard Treatment Protocol
- Adjustments in staffing to fill needs

Keysor's Journey...Year Three (2009-10)
Where Are We going?

- Deliberate focus of resources – 2nd grade out
- New schedule, developed with teachers
- Certified math specialist in place
- Diagnostic work to understand student needs
- Special education eligibility added for math
- Focus on Tier II/III support of behaviors
- Targeted language, writing supports
- Continued communication, documentation



Keysor's Journey...Year Three (2009-10)
Where Are We going?

- Continued emphasis on strengthening core instruction, differentiating to meet needs in core
- Interventionists will gradually increase coaching roles to support teacher growth
- Capacity building so all teachers know all students and have the skills/confidence to meet the learning needs of all kids
- Schedule, teams in place – Interventionists ready to be in classes, supporting kids and teachers on Day One.

That is Keysor's story...so far.

Let's learn about
your story.

Examining capacity and
structures within your own
school or district

Maximizing the Impact
of Problem Solving

In addition to a problem identification and problem solving process, key structures must be in place

- Agreement on the Big Ideas
- Solid Core Instruction
- Quality, Purposeful Assessments
- Supplemental Instruction
- Intensive Instruction

Agreement About the Big Ideas

- Essential curricular concepts, skills, and understandings for all learners
 - Is there agreement on these big ideas within and throughout curricular areas?
 - Can teachers articulate these big ideas?

Solid Core Instruction

- Universal, Tier I instruction for all students (green-level teaching)
 - Is your core instruction meeting the needs of roughly 80% of the students in your school?
 - Is there an ongoing commitment to strengthen the core instruction in your school?

Quality Assessments

- Screening
- Diagnostic
- Progress Monitoring
- Mastery

- Do you have all four types of assessment in place? For each instructional area?
- Are the assessment data being used appropriately?
- Do the data inform instruction?
- Are the assessments research-based?

Supplemental Instruction

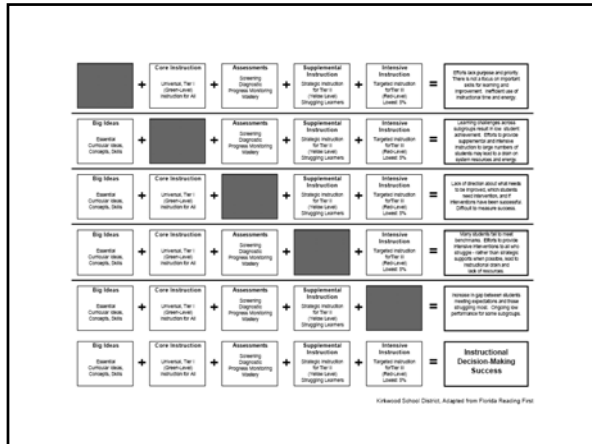
- Strategic instruction for Tier II struggling learners (yellow-level teaching)
 - Is there additional, purposeful instruction available for the 20-25% of students who need more than core instruction?
 - Are these interventions research-based?

Intensive Instruction

- Targeted instruction for Tier III struggling learners (red-level teaching)
 - Is there additional, intense instruction available for the 5% of students who need more than core instruction and more than supplemental instruction?
 - Are these interventions researched-based?

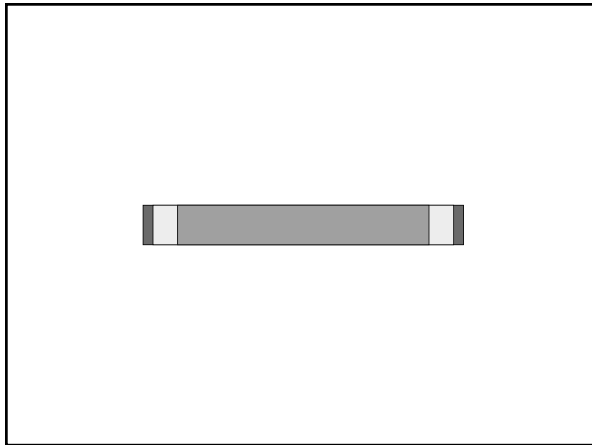
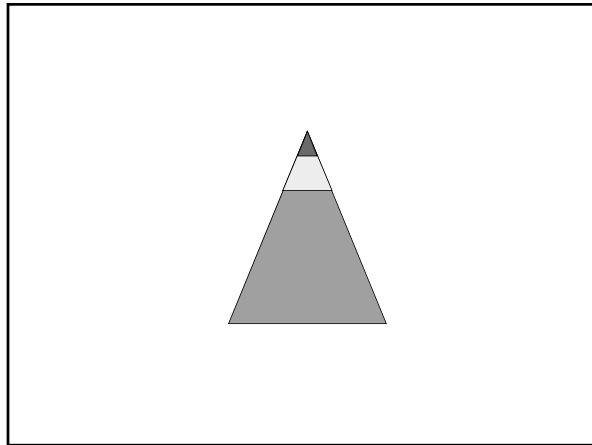
Five Structures that Support Problem-Solving

But what happens if you don't have all five structures in place?



Reviewing our previous conversations about capacity building and structures

Does this information inform your work?



Where will your journey take you?

- Where are you now?
- What questions do you have?
- What are your needs?
- What is next for you and your building?

Capacity to Support the Problem Solving Process

Please consider how each statement reflects work in your building to support student achievement.

1	Efforts to support student achievement lack purpose and priority. There is not a consistent focus on important skills for learning and improvement.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
2	Inefficient use of instructional time and energy is evident in classrooms, among grade levels, and/or across our school.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
3	Learning challenges are evident across subgroups of students, resulting in low student achievement.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
4	Efforts to provide interventions to large numbers of students often leads to a drain on school resources and teacher energy.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
5	There is a lack of direction about how to support student achievement and which students need interventions.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
6	It is difficult to measure whether interventions have been successful, across the school or even with individual students.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
7	Many students in our school fail to meet academic and/or behavioral benchmarks.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
8	Efforts to support large numbers of students with intensive interventions yield mixed results and require extensive teacher energy, time, and resources.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
9	There is a widening gap among students who meet expectations and those who struggle most.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
10	We struggle to support students who are well below academic and/or behavioral benchmarks.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always

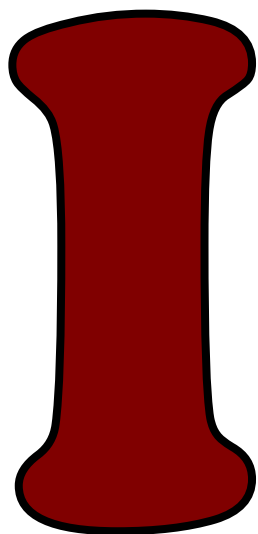
A	Classroom teachers are confident they can meet the needs of students who require low or high-end strategic supports (struggling learners and gifted students).	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
B	Classroom teachers have necessary skills to meet the needs of students who require low or high-end strategic supports (struggling learners and gifted students).	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
C	Classroom teachers and intervention specialists (i.e. special educators, literacy specialists, gifted teachers) share responsibility for the achievement of all students.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
D	Classroom teachers and intervention specialists (i.e. special educators, literacy specialists, gifted teachers) are knowledgeable about learning strengths and needs of individuals who require interventions.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Capacity to Support the Problem Solving Process

Please consider how each statement reflects work in your building to support student achievement.

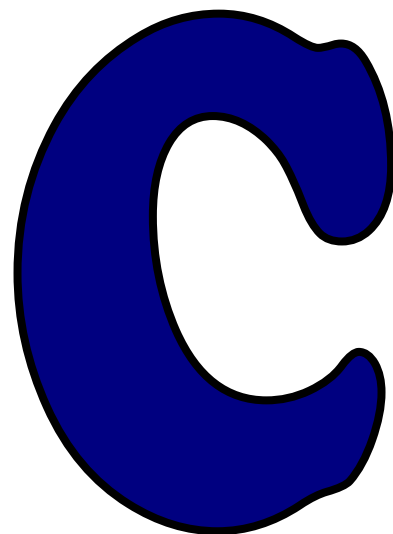
1	Efforts to support student achievement lack purpose and priority. There is not a consistent focus on important skills for learning and improvement.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
2	Inefficient use of instructional time and energy is evident in classrooms, among grade levels, and/or across our school.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
3	Learning challenges are evident across subgroups of students, resulting in low student achievement.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
4	Efforts to provide interventions to large numbers of students often leads to a drain on school resources and teacher energy.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
5	There is a lack of direction about how to support student achievement and which students need interventions.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
6	It is difficult to measure whether interventions have been successful, across the school or even with individual students.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
7	Many students in our school fail to meet academic and/or behavioral benchmarks.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
8	Efforts to support large numbers of students with intensive interventions yield mixed results and require extensive teacher energy, time, and resources.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
9	There is a widening gap among students who meet expectations and those who struggle most.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always
10	We struggle to support students who are well below academic and/or behavioral benchmarks.	Almost Never	At Times	Not Sure	Often	Nearly Always

A	Classroom teachers are confident they can meet the needs of students who require low or high-end strategic supports (struggling learners and gifted students).	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
B	Classroom teachers have necessary skills to meet the needs of students who require low or high-end strategic supports (struggling learners and gifted students).	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
C	Classroom teachers and intervention specialists (i.e. special educators, literacy specialists, gifted teachers) share responsibility for the achievement of all students.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
D	Classroom teachers and intervention specialists (i.e. special educators, literacy specialists, gifted teachers) are knowledgeable about learning strengths and needs of individuals who require interventions.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree



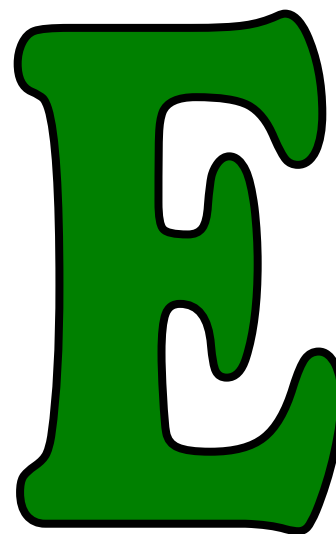
Instruction

- Appropriate instructional level
- Teacher enthusiasm
- Opportunities for reflection
- Varied, frequent methods of assessment and feedback
- Opportunities for student choice
- Use of varied teaching strategies
- Providing a "just-right" task - zone of proximal development
- Authentic and meaningful tasks
- Opportunities for collaboration/social learning
- Use of humor
- Documenting growth and sharing info with child
- Connecting new learning to prior knowledge



Curriculum

- Developmentally appropriate
- Cross-curricular connections
- Relevant to student interests
- Cultural relevancy
- Balance of skills vs. concepts
- Giving abstract concepts a real-world focus



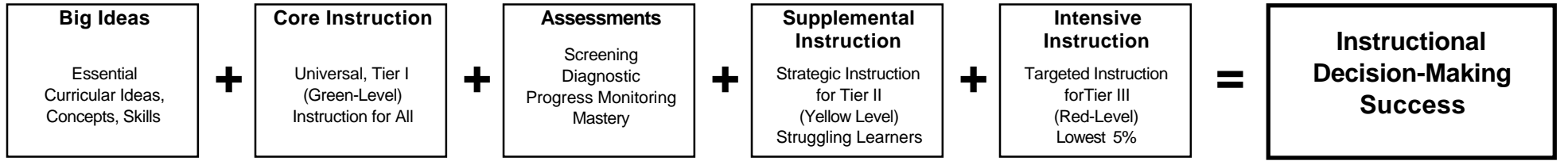
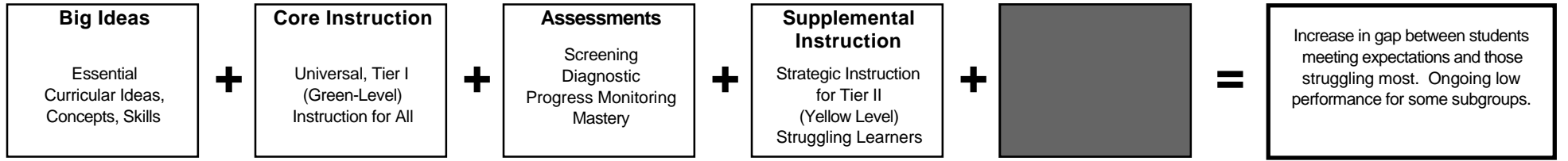
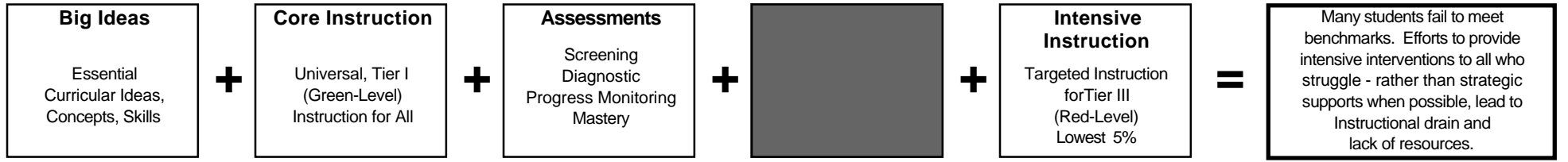
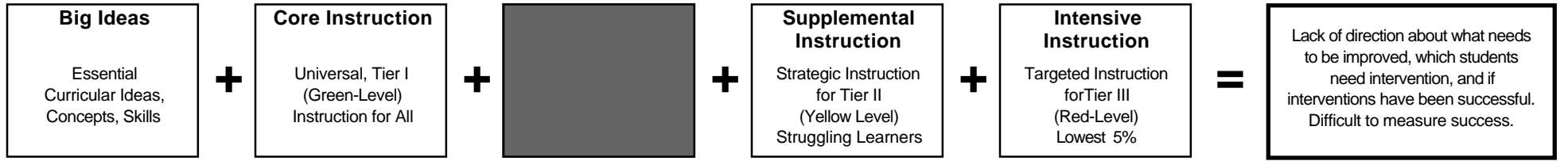
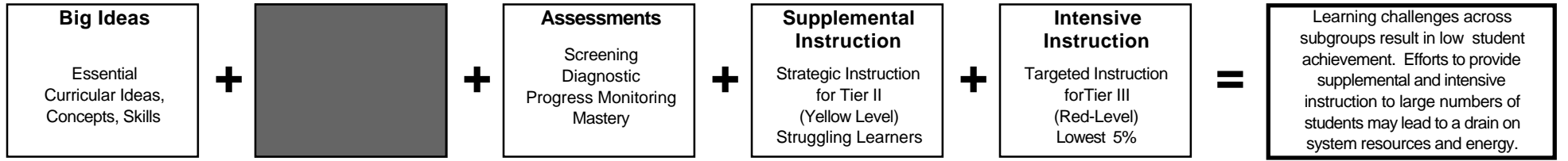
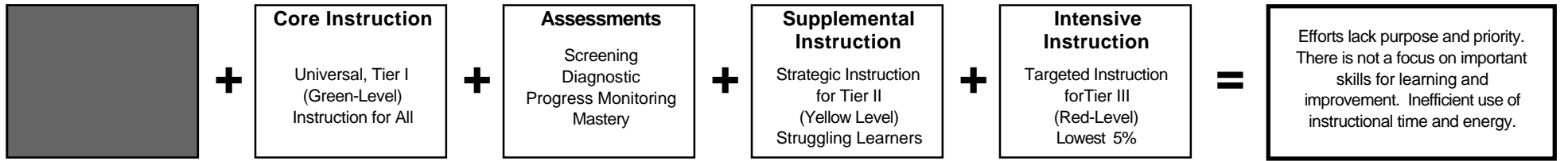
Environment

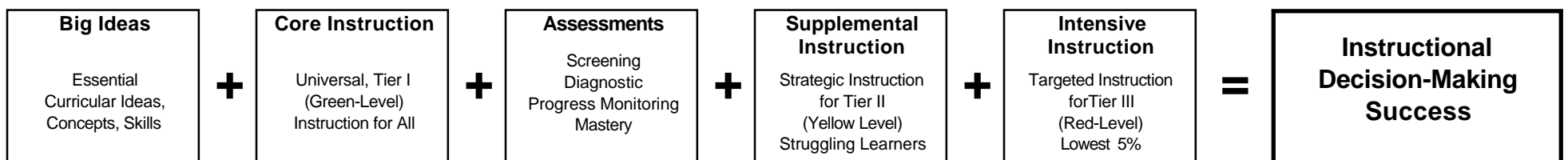
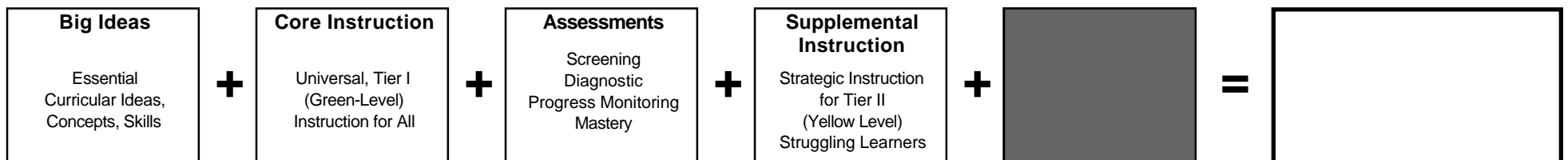
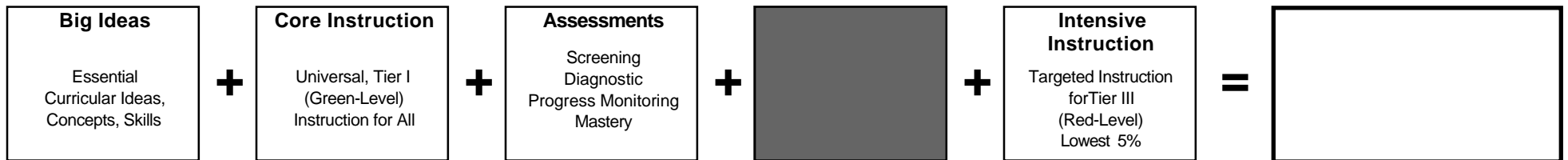
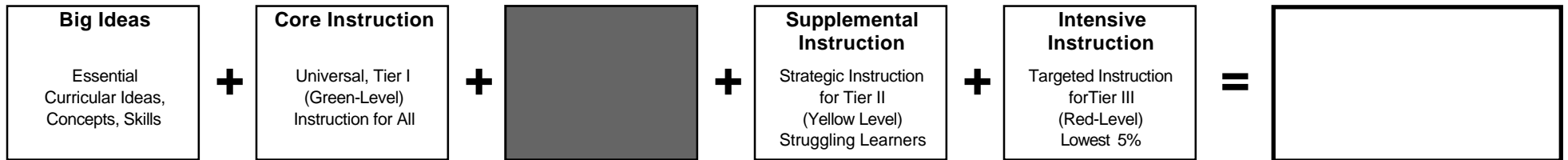
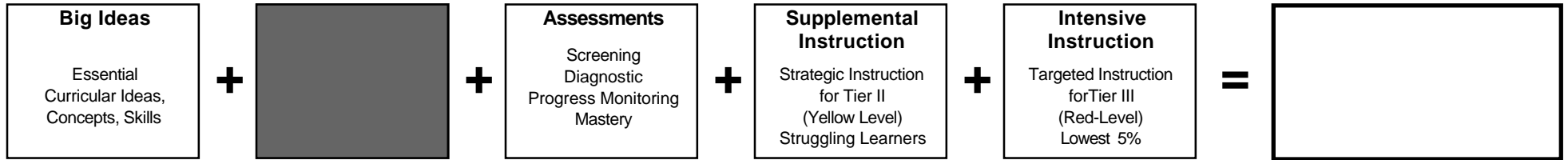
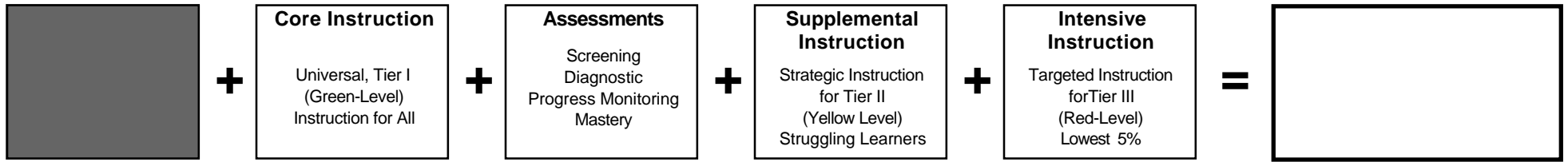
- Student sense of safety
- Peer relationships
- Student relationship with teacher
- Proximity to distractions
- Welcoming, warm atmosphere
- Physical conditions in classroom (i.e. warm/cold, dim/bright, spacious/cramped, clean/dirty, organized/cluttered)
- Student ownership in classroom space
- Classroom structures
- Arrangement of learning space, furniture, and kids
- Noise level
- Accessibility to materials and needed items or space
- Appropriate levels/types of sensory stimulation



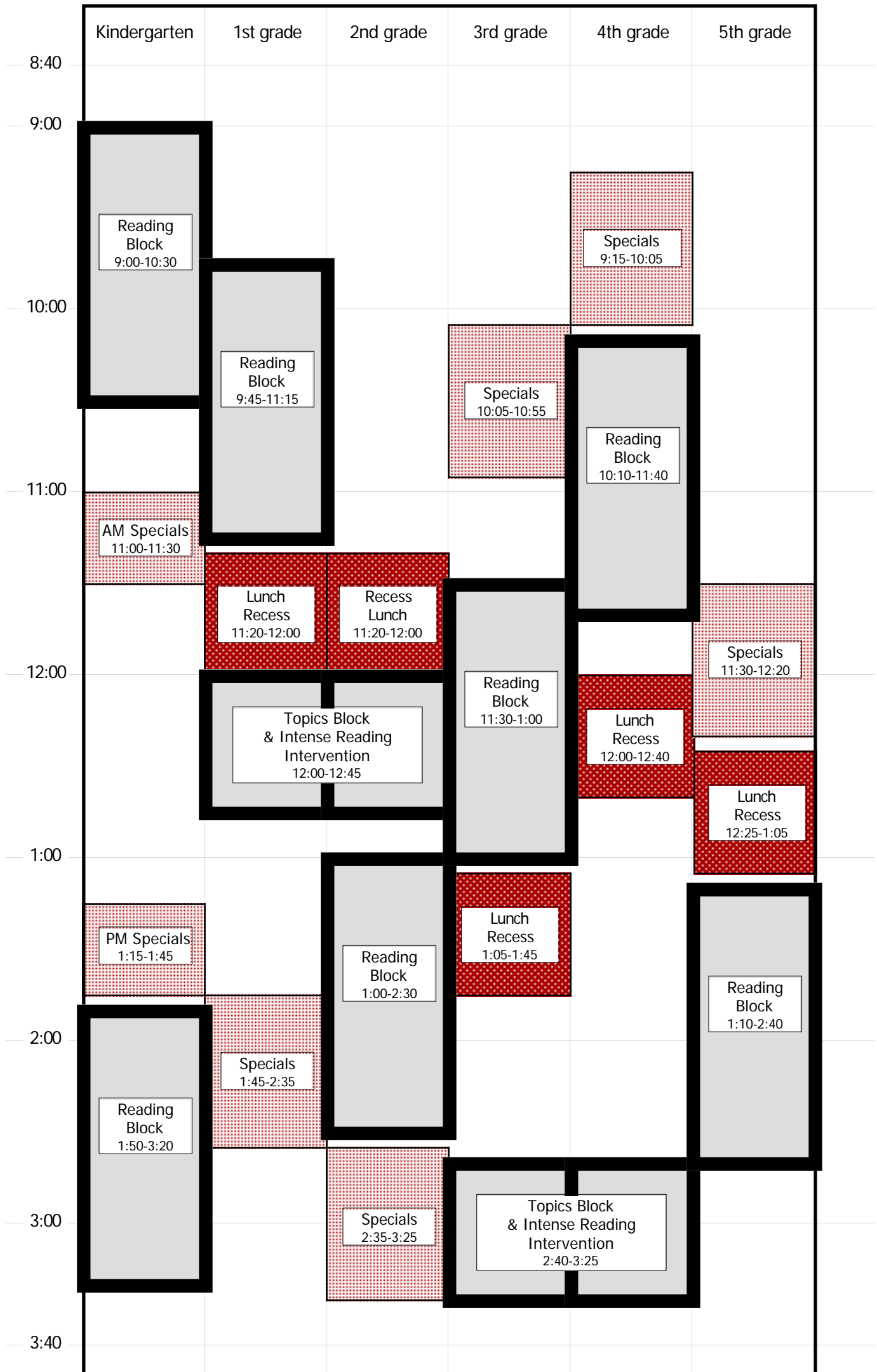
Learner

- Student relationships with peers, teacher
- Learning styles and intelligences
- Sense of belonging
- Special needs of learners
- Acceptance of responsibility as a learner
- Health/hygiene of student - physical, emotional well-being
- Child's perception of self as a learner
- Attitude and motivation to learn
- Confidence
- Opportunities/exposure - prior knowledge to build upon
- Connection to what is purposeful/meaningful to the learner
- Ability to attend or focus
- Basic needs - sleep, food, shelter





Keysor Master Schedule 07-08



Keysor Master Schedule 08-09

	Half Day Kindergarten	Full Day Kindergarten	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade	5th grade
8:40							
9:00			Tier III Reading Intervention 9:00-9:45		Specials 9:05-9:55		
10:00	Literacy Block 9:30-11:00	Reading Block 9:30-11:00	Reading Block 9:45-11:15			Specials 9:55-10:45	
11:00	AM Specials 11:00-11:30					Tier III Reading Intervention 10:45-11:30	
12:00		Lunch Recess 11:20-12:00		Recess Lunch 11:20-12:00			Specials 11:30-12:20
1:00				Reading Block 12:00-1:30	Reading Block 11:30-1:00	Lunch Recess 12:10-12:50	Lunch Recess 12:35-1:15
2:00	PM Specials 1:15-1:45	Specials 1:15-1:45			Lunch Recess 1:05-1:45	Reading Block 1:00-2:30	
3:00	Literacy Block 1:50-3:20	Recess 1:45-2:05	Specials 1:45-2:35				Reading Block 2:00-3:30
3:40				Specials 2:35-3:25			

Keysor Master Schedule 09-10

	Half Day Kindergarten	Full Day Kindergarten	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade	5th grade
8:40							
9:00	Literacy Block 9:00-10:00			Tier III Reading Intervention 8:45-9:30			
10:00	AM Specials 10:00-10:30	Reading Block 9:30-11:00	Math Block 9:15-9:45	Math Block 9:30-10:30	Reading Block 9:30-11:00		Specials 9:10-10:00
11:00	Math Block 10:30-11:00		Reading Block 9:45-11:15			Specials 10:00-10:50	Math Block 10:00-11:00
12:00		Lunch Recess 11:20-12:00		Recess Lunch 11:45-12:25		Math Block 11:00-11:50	
1:00	Literacy Block 1:00-2:00		Tier III Reading Intervention 12:00-12:45		Math Block 12:00-1:00	Lunch Recess 12:10-12:50	
2:00	Specials 1:30-2:20		Math Block 12:45-1:15	Reading Block 12:30-2:00	Lunch Recess 1:00-1:40		Lunch Recess 12:35-1:15
3:00	PM Specials 2:20-2:50	Recess 1:45-2:05	Specials 1:30-2:20			Reading Block 1:00-2:30	
3:40	Math Block 2:50-3:20			Specials 2:20-3:10	Tier III Reading Intervention 2:00-2:45		Reading Block 2:00-3:30

August 29, 2008

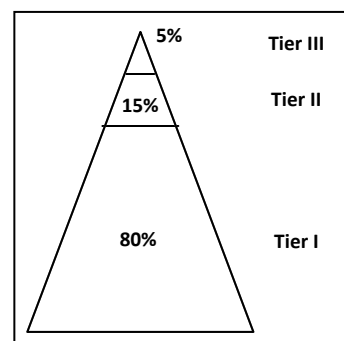
Dear Keysor Families,

One challenge we face as educators is figuring out how much information to share with parents so what we do share is useful and makes sense. We never want to keep things from you, of course, but we recognize that sometimes too much information can be counter-productive. There are times we feel common language and understandings are important to our collective work. This is one of those times.

Over the last year and a half we've undergone a shift in thinking about problem solving and interventions for students who need additional supports. We have at times been a little slow to respond to student learning issues – not on a teacher level but as a school, sometimes out of necessity but often due to external constraints, laws, or policies. If we suspected a student needed additional help in school we often spent several months figuring out the problem – and making sure there really was one, before we put interventions or supports in place. These supports were often paired with a disability diagnosis and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Problem solving at Keysor and in Kirkwood has thankfully become much more proactive and responsive to student needs. Our work reflects an initiative known as *Response to Intervention (RTI)*, which has been prominent in some states for decades but has recently gained national attention. Many Keysor teachers have had wonderful training opportunities and have emerged as leaders in the area; teams from roughly ten schools across Missouri visited Keysor last year to observe our work, even though we were in our first full year of implementation.

Our focus at Keysor is first and foremost student achievement, particularly in reading, writing, and math. When students struggle, or when they need more than what our regular curriculum demands, their achievement will suffer, too. The research behind RTI and our student support model suggests that on any given task or subject to be learned, roughly 80% of students will be successful with regular, quality instruction (see graphic). An additional 10-15% of students will require focused, small group instruction – *in addition to* what everyone else receives, in order to meet achievement expectations. Adding those numbers together you'll realize we have some students still not "getting it," which isn't acceptable to us (or allowable under *No Child Left Behind* legislation).



Roughly 5-10% of all students on any given task will require the universal instruction provided to all students, strategic small group instruction, AND additional intensive interventions – often in group sizes of three or less.

How do we know which students require additional assistance or intense support? Teachers certainly know their students, so their input is highly important. In addition, Kirkwood has started using quick, research-based assessments called CBMs (curriculum-based measurements) that help us identify students who may struggle and monitor their progress over time. The CBMs used at Keysor are grade-level specific and take 2-8 minutes to complete. Assessments are given to all Keysor Kids three times a year (Sept/Jan/May) and data is analyzed to identify possible concerns and areas of strength.

Students identified for additional reading or math help will get it – and will usually get it quickly. Children who have a disability will continue getting the special education support they require. Many students who struggle do not have an IEP, however, and we expect that our comprehensive problem solving and intervention process will result in fewer instances where special education testing is necessary. Our problem solving and intervention team works closely with teachers to put appropriate supports in place, often in the classroom but sometimes in a small group, pull-out format. As we provide additional instruction, student progress is monitored to determine if our teaching is making a difference – or if we need to try something else. Keysor Kids who receive Tier II supports (less intense, usually in classrooms) are assessed roughly every month. Those who receive Tier III interventions (more intense, usually outside of class) have their progress monitored on a weekly basis. In addition, we examine overall student growth every 6-8 weeks and make adjustments accordingly.

Our communication with families will reflect our tiered levels of support to students. All Keysor families are receiving this overview information, just as all Keysor Kids receive quality, Tier I instruction. If your child should be identified for additional Tier II supports at any time throughout the year, you will receive additional information from your classroom teacher. If your child requires Tier III intervention in reading or math, likely in a small group setting outside of class, a specialist will communicate with you and your classroom teacher about these supports and your child's ongoing progress toward learning goals.

Problem solving around student needs – and our instruction to meet these needs, is a collaborative effort. We hope to provide early intervention before problems become critical in nature and achievement suffers. Our goal is not to simply study the problem or identify learning disabilities. Our goal is to avoid student failure. We appreciate your ongoing support of Keysor and our Keysor Kids. As always, if you have questions or comments please feel free to call (213-1620) or email me at painteb@gw.kirkwood.12.mo.us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bryan".

From the principal's desk

Dr. Bryan Painter, Keysor Elementary School, Kirkwood School District R7

September 17, 2008

Dear [Mr. and Mrs. Jones](#),

Keysor and the Kirkwood School District are committed to meeting the academic needs of all students. Teachers' instruction is informed by ongoing assessment data as we work to provide differentiated learning opportunities for all Keysor Kids. Our goal is for all children to perform at or above grade level during each academic year. The notion of "no child left behind" is something we take very seriously.

Attached is a copy of a letter sent to all Keysor families in late August. This letter describes Kirkwood's problem solving process, quick research-based assessments called CBMs, and tiered structures for student support. Recent assessment data suggest [Sarah](#) would benefit from additional instruction and learning time in reading.

All Keysor Kids have approximately ninety minutes of reading within the regular classroom. [Sarah](#) has been identified for Tier 3 supports and will now receive an additional 45 minutes of reading instruction in a small group setting with a specialist. We will monitor [her](#) academic progress on a weekly basis and alter our instruction and programming, as necessary. Information about [Sarah's](#) progress will be shared periodically via your red Keysor Home Notes folder.

Thank you for your continued support. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free contact us at any time.

Sincerely,

L'Tanya Freeman, Classroom Teacher
213-6100 ext 2214
freemal@gw.kirkwood.k12.mo.us

Stephanie Byrne, Intervention/Support Teacher
ext 2043
byrnest@gw.kirkwood.k12.mo.us

Bryan Painter, Principal
ext 2301
painteb@gw.kirkwood.k12.mo.us

Project Construct *Connections*

A newsletter for administrators

2008

Response to Intervention and Constructivism: Strange Bedfellows?

By Bryan and Kristen Painter

Bryan Painter has been principal of Keysor Elementary School in Kirkwood, Missouri, since 1999. He previously worked for the Middle Level Leadership Center at the University of Missouri and was an assistant principal at PS 321 in New York City. Kristen Painter is an educational consultant, working with districts in the areas of literacy and instructional coaching. She was previously a staff developer with Teachers College Reading and Writing Project in New York City and Title I Coordinator/Director of Literacy for Jennings School District in St. Louis.

It is fair to say that most, if not all, educators truly want students to succeed at the highest levels possible. We're held most accountable for students' academic achievement, but in our hearts and minds, we want kids to develop and grow as whole human beings, thriving academically as well as socially, emotionally, and physically. It's also fair to say that, in the current educational climate, schools and districts across the country have regularly failed to meet these goals with many students, especially those in minority subgroups and in poverty. Reasons for these failures are varied and can be debated at length, as can possible solutions to the shortcomings.

Without oversimplifying the complexities of school improvement, it could be argued that our essential work in helping students succeed isn't fundamentally complex at all: We must focus on relationships, and we must focus on good teaching. Opinions will vary about what good teaching is—and, for that matter, how it can be measured or evaluated—but our belief is that best practice is grounded in constructivist philosophy. We believe students will have the greatest opportunities for success, no matter what challenges they bring to the classroom, when they work with teachers whose practice emphasizes the following:

- meaningful opportunities for conversations and exploration of ideas
- engagement with and problem solving around authentic tasks
- individual and shared meaning-making in the classroom and beyond school walls
- consistent focus on the needs, strengths, interests, and learning preferences of each child
- ongoing evaluation of and reflection about practice, with changes made to meet the needs of students.

In addition, students are more likely to be successful with teachers who, when students struggle, don't ask, "What's wrong with this child?" but rather "What do I need to change about my instruction, the curriculum, or our environment that might support his or her learning?"

But what happens when students continue to fail, in small or large numbers, despite our best efforts as teachers and even schools? No Child Left Behind, the legislation and the idea behind it, has collectively changed schools' approach to student achievement. We may not always like it, but grade-level expectations, subgroup scores, and Adequate Yearly Progress are in the forefront of our minds now, and they're all tied directly to one measure: standardized test scores.

With the stakes so high and the clear need to support students across subgroups, many schools are looking for new ideas and new ways of thinking. One idea getting a lot of attention—Response to Intervention (RTI)—is actually not that new at all. RTI is a general education initiative that's been around in varied forms for more than three decades but has recently gained popularity with its inclusion in the 2004 reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

So how does RTI fit in with our constructivist beliefs about teaching, learning, and schooling? At first glance, it may not. The core structure of RTI calls for additional instruction for students who aren't successful with the core curriculum and instruction that all students "receive." That alone doesn't sound very constructivist, implying that knowledge is something delivered from one person to another. Also, RTI's backbone is data-based instructional decisions. Constructivist educators have not historically had a strong attachment to the type of data often referred to in "data-based instruction." The data that excites us is the kind about which we can tell a story—such as Alex, who came into fourth grade hating to read but by mid-fall had found a favorite author, or Kiki, who after lunch count added page two to her story about her baby brother that she had started the day before.

So is it possible for constructivism and RTI to coexist in the same school? Can constructivist educators actually be themselves in a school committed to RTI? We believe the answer is yes, and furthermore, we believe efforts aimed at student achievement within an RTI philosophy can and will be enhanced by teachers and principals committed to constructivist teaching and leadership. To better explore these possibilities, we should first learn more about RTI.

What Is Response to Intervention?

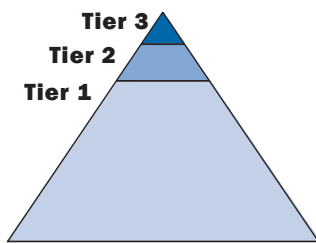
Response to Intervention is generally regarded as a systemic approach to problem solving around student growth and achievement. It is simply a way of teaching to students' needs, using data to examine how students are responding to our work, and adjusting our instruction accordingly. Key components include quality instruction around big ideas; early intervention opportunities; and the use

of data to screen student needs, monitor their progress, and adjust instruction accordingly. Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) call RTI “an assessment-intervention model that allows schools to deliver sound instructional methods to students...who might otherwise fall through the cracks” (p. 2). They go on to describe RTI as an “objective examination of the cause-effect relationship(s) between academic or behavioral intervention and the students’ response to the intervention (Brown-Chidsey and Steege, 2005, p. 2).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) defines RTI as a “multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning at increasing levels of intensity” (Cortiella, 2006, p. 1). The use of RTI is also viewed as a data collection alternative to the discrepancy model (IQ versus performance), in the event a student requires testing for a learning disability.

Dave Tilly (2007b) describes RTI as a school-wide approach to the achievement of every student, arguing that the varied definitions of RTI are merely different spins on the same idea. It is not a curriculum, nor is it a one-size-fits-all panacea. It is about problem solving, data analysis, and good teaching. In its purest sense, Tilly (2007a) says, RTI could stand for Really Terrific Instruction aimed at helping all kids be successful and meet achievement expectations.

At the heart of RTI is a three-tiered framework (see figure below) for identifying and exploring students’ needs and the supports they require to meet social and academic expectations. The tiered triangle or pyramid is based on the idea that all students should receive “quality, universal instruction” and that this instruction likely will not be sufficient to meet all students’ needs. Additional strategic and



targeted supports for some children will be necessary.

In theory, 80% of students in any school should meet academic and behavioral expectations when engaged with a strong instructional program that includes teaching

to varied interests and levels of readiness. These students, who are successful within the core curriculum, fall into the large Tier I portion of the intervention triangle.

A subgroup of students, roughly 15–20%, may require additional strategic teaching beyond the core instruction in order to be successful. These students (Tier II) would ideally be supported through small group instruction in the classroom. Strong teachers should be able to meet these learners’ needs—with the right knowledge, skills, and strategies—over time and with persistence. Students identified for Tier II supports should be monitored on a regular basis to ensure they are progressing toward achievement benchmarks.

An even smaller subgroup (Tier III) consists of students who are significantly behind peers on a given skill—or several skills—and require intense supports beyond the core and strategic efforts already discussed. Instruction at this level is essential to school-wide RTI success, as it targets the students who, historically, have fallen so far behind expectations, they’ve never caught up. Even our best teachers—constructivist or not—often need assistance supporting these learners. Instruction at this level must focus on the specific needs of these students and should be research- and evidence-based. It often comes via standardized, scripted programs highly focused on minute skill development with small increments of growth. Put bluntly, Tier III interventions are designed to be followed to the letter and are only child-centered if the teacher makes them so.

Strengthening the Core

How does sound constructivist teaching, built on opportunities for individual and shared meaning-making, fit into an RTI approach for supporting kids? Our opinion is pretty simple: Not only can constructivism fit into an RTI approach to schooling, it must be the foundation of the core instruction provided for all students. In the spirit of RTI, constructivist educators need to renew their commitment to the principles that underlie their philosophy of teaching. We need to examine what it truly means to meet all kids’ needs. We need to tailor our instruction so all students have an access point to new learning and enough challenges to push them forth. In other words, we need to strengthen our core instruction. By strengthening the core with a commitment to our constructivist

principles, we can and will see higher numbers of students be successful in the classroom. There will be fewer needs for Tier II strategic supports and even less demand for intense Tier III interventions.

Will there still be times we need to problem solve with others and even get others’ support? Absolutely. Hard work and quality instruction don’t always equate to academic success, no matter how much we want them to. Schools that embrace Response to Intervention recognize that problem solving is a critical piece of good teaching. Teachers share strategies and collaborate around issues that impact student achievement. While some schools hold countless meetings to talk about student needs and admire the problem, RTI encourages teachers to develop a shared commitment to systemic data collection, sound instructional strategies, and the appropriate use of researched-based interventions. Constructivist educators have much to offer in this model of problem solving. Many are expertly skilled at identifying the needs of students, based on their actions and work, and love the challenge of finding strategies to connect with learners and make a difference for each student.

Ultimately, we must remember that our greatest impact on student achievement—as teachers, principals, and instructional leaders—will always be through the core instruction we provide all kids. Instruction provided to 100% of students will have a greater impact on achievement than strategies or interventions aimed at less than 20% of those we teach. Quality constructivist teaching, built on constructivist principles, will result in more effective instruction and thus greater achievement for all students.

References

- Brown-Chidsey, R., & Steege, M. (2005). *Response to intervention: Principles and strategies for effective practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Cortiella, C. (2006). *A parent’s guide to response-to-intervention: Parent advocacy brief* (pp.1–10). New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities..
- Tilly, D. (2007a). *Celebrating every ed.!* (PowerPoint presentation). Long Beach, CA: 9th Annual Innovations Conference.
- Tilly, D. (2007b). *Response to instruction: Linking data to instruction* (PowerPoint presentation). Kodiak, AK: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development NCLB Winter Conference.