

Differentiation:

"The fact that students differ may be inconvenient, but it is inescapable. Adapting to that diversity is the inevitable price of productivity, high standards, and fairness to kids." Ted Sizer

Differentiation has been supported in Elwood since the spring of 2000. Differentiation is a philosophy of instruction that recognizes and supports the diverse academic needs of students. Elwood accepts those differences and balances its educational program by providing for the varied needs and interests of the students in the Elwood schools. Elwood believes that the student is the center of the school curriculum. It encourages differentiated instruction because it fits such a child-centered program of education by training staff in the best instructional practices.

What Is "differentiation"?

A BIG word for a simple concept: providing instruction that meets the differing academic needs of all students.

Differentiation ensures that each student is challenged by a variety of instructional strategies suited to his or her achievement and ability levels, learning styles, and interests. All students, in every classroom, at every grade level, are encouraged and nurtured to learn and grow as much as they can.

There are many instructional approaches that reflect differentiation:

- Providing multiple assignments within each unit, tailored for students of different levels of achievement, interest, and/or learning styles.
 - For example, students with advanced reading levels use material that is on the same topic, but more difficult, challenging or complex.
- Allowing students to choose, with the teacher's guidance, ways to learn and how to demonstrate what they have learned.
 - For example, in a unit on Ancient Greece, some students might write a play illustrating what they have learned; others might create a mural.
- Structuring the class assignments so they require high levels of critical thinking but permit a range of responses.
 - For example, students may be asked to speculate on the nature of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, explain cause and effect, justify their ideas, and anticipate alternative viewpoints.
- Having high expectations for all students allows teachers to provide instruction aimed at a high level of understanding; all students are expected to achieve at optimal levels.
- Implementing flexible grouping strategies that cluster students by achievement in a particular subject area, interest, learning style, personal choice, and ability.
- Creating learning centers with activities geared to different learning styles, levels of thinking, levels of interest, and levels of achievement.

- Providing students with opportunities to explore topics in which they have strong interest and find personal meaning.
 - For example, individual and small-group investigations of real problems are an option for students who have mastered curriculum goals or an activity for all students.
- Elementary Cluster Grouping:
 - This option places together three to eight students who are achieving significantly above grade level in a given subject area within an otherwise mixed ability classroom.
 - Students are "clustered" based on advanced skills in language arts and/or math and are brought together for instruction in their area(s) of strength.
- Accelerated and Advanced Middle and High School Courses:
 - Accelerated math, science and Honors English courses are offered in the middle school.
 - Accelerated, Honors and Advanced Placement courses are offered in the high school.

In the absence of differentiation in a school district, there is an implied philosophy that all students' needs are the same. The Elwood Public Schools do not support that implied philosophy. Elwood's goal is to implement the concept of "differentiation" outlined by Professor Carol Tomlinson of the University of Virginia (1993) as follows:

- Articulated philosophy of student differences
- Planned assessment and compacting
- Variable pacing
- Planned variation in content
- Flexible classroom arrangements
- Planned variation in how students make sense of that they learn
- Planned variations in students products
- Consistent use of flexible groups
- Individual goal setting, assessment

Most of the components of differentiation are in place in Elwood, to some degree, with teachers receiving ongoing in-service training to assure its full implementation. Gradually our teachers are converting their instruction from some differentiation to full differentiation