

How To: Improve Academic Interventions: 7 Big Ideas

When a teacher observes that a student lacks academic skills needed to attain the Common Core Standards, that instructor must take on the role of intervention 'first responder'. This role implies that the instructor has the tools and know-how to assemble for that student an academic intervention plan designed to repair areas of skill deficit or underperformance. Of course, educators have always attempted to provide struggling students in their classrooms with additional, individualized support; that is the paradigm of good teaching. Research findings, however, have the potential to help teachers to strengthen their effectiveness as interventionists for individual students even as they continue to deliver high-quality core instruction to the entire classroom.

Here are 7 'big ideas' about academic interventions that can help teachers to be successful as classroom first-responders:

1. *Academic problems should be clearly defined.* Before a teacher can select interventions to address a student academic problem, the instructor must be able to describe in clear and specific terms just what the student problem is. In fact, the most important step in the entire process of developing an intervention is to be able to describe correctly and specifically the problem that must be fixed (Bergan, 1995).
2. *Academic problems should be linked to their probable cause.* Once an academic problem has been defined, the teacher will want to develop a hypothesis ('educated guess') about what issue is causing that problem. For example, a student may do poorly on a reading comprehension task because she lacks the necessary comprehension skills, is accurate but not yet fluent in those skills, had once learned those skills but failed to retain them, can perform the skills but has limited endurance, or possesses the skills but does not recognize situations when she should use them (Martens & Witt, 2004). Each of these hypotheses for the student's poor reading comprehension performance suggests different intervention solutions.
3. *Intervention strategies should be research-based.* When possible, the teacher should include in an intervention plan only those ideas supported by research. At present, there is little consensus on how to define 'research-based' interventions (Odom et al., 2005). At the very minimum, however, an intervention idea should be demonstrated to be effective in at least one study published in a reputable peer-reviewed research journal before it is considered for use in school intervention plans.
4. *Intervention plans should help students to access instruction--but not 'dumb down' instruction.* When putting together classroom intervention plans, instructors can choose from among a wide array of strategies to help the student to achieve academic success. But teachers should take care not cross the line and modify core instruction for struggling general-education students; that is, they should not hold underperforming students to a lesser academic standard than their classmates (Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). After all, it is illogical to expect that a student who already evidences a significant academic gap can accelerate learning can close that gap as a consequence of being expected to do less than peers.
5. *Interventions should be documented in writing.* When a teacher commits to develop an academic intervention to support a student, that instructor should always create a written plan to document the intervention prior to implementing it (Burns & Gibbons, 2008). A busy educator can be forgiven for viewing the requirement to write out intervention plans as meaningless paperwork. But there are actually compelling reasons for teachers to put commit plans to paper before starting interventions. First, people have only a limited capacity to juggle details in their head. In a famous and ground-breaking article, for example, Miller (1956) cited a number of psychological

studies demonstrating that the average person is able to actively manage only about 7 discrete bits of information at one time--which explains why local phone numbers in the United States are 7 digits long. A teacher who is running a whole classroom while trying to informally manage even 1 or 2 individual student interventions in their heads must manage far more than 7 information-bits--and is thus likely to overlook important details about instruction or intervention simply because of cognitive overload. When that same teacher is able to rely as needed on written intervention plans as a memory aid, however, she or he can manage the complexity with relative ease. A second reason that teachers should put intervention plans in writing is so that they can produce those plans when needed as proof that they are providing at-risk students with ongoing assistance. In this age of increased teacher accountability, the instructor who documents intervention efforts for marginal students is the one who will receive full credit for that intervention work.

6. *Interventions should be carried out with integrity.* If a student does not improve when given a classroom intervention, there are two possible explanations for this failure to respond: (1) the intervention plan was well-selected, well-constructed and carefully implemented but the student simply failed to make progress, or (2) some aspect of the plan was not carried out as designed, thus compromising the integrity of the intervention. Interventions can unravel for many reasons: e.g., change of school schedule, teacher or student illness, weather-related school cancellations, a misunderstanding on the part of the interventionist about how to implement an intervention strategy, etc. The teacher should monitor the integrity of any classroom intervention closely, ensuring that the actual intervention conforms as closely as possible to the guidelines contained in the written intervention plan (Gansle & Noell, 2007) and taking steps when needed to bring the intervention back into alignment with good practices.
7. *Goal-setting and progress-monitoring should be a part of all academic interventions.* At their core, academic interventions are intended to improve student performance (Duhon, Mesmer, Atkins, Greguson, & Olinger, 2009). But teachers cannot know with certainty whether a student is actually benefiting from an intervention unless they set specific outcome goals up front and then collect data periodically throughout the intervention to verify that these goals are met (Wright 2007).

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