



# Christian School Insights

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## Individual Differences Part 1

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Often the question is asked, "What can a Christian school do in making provision for individual differences in learners?"

As long as there are individual differences in learning, there will be students who will be unable to master the content within a standard amount of time; for example, in nine months, a typical school year. These students are usually identified as below average or as the slow learning group. Similarly, students who learn at a faster rate are viewed as above average, advanced learners, even as gifted students.

How schools deal with this range of individual differences varies. Below average learners are given special help classes, sent to resource rooms, or assigned to tutors and so forth. Some schools lower learning and graduation expectations and use multiple tracking. For example, a high school may offer a vocational track and a college preparatory track. The merits of each of these strategies is beyond the scope of this article.

NOTE: It should be the school's goal and the teachers' responsibility to manage curriculum options and learning opportunities so all students develop their-God given talents to the fullest extent

## Retention and Promotion

A closely related question is, "Should students be retained?" One of the biggest challenges facing teachers and administrators is establishing an acceptable promotion and retention policy. As long as schools are organized as graded schools, there will be those who do not qualify for advancement to the next grade.

Given the large body of educational research supporting the negative aspects of retention, schools are modifying their promotion policies to reduce the number of non-promotions. Think of retention this way. Suppose you need to drive from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Dallas, Texas. Under normal conditions and with an adequate vehicle and plenty of gas, you should make Dallas in five hours. Let us say, after five hours, you only reach Oklahoma City just 100 miles from Tulsa, for whatever reason, car malfunction, detours in the road, accident, etc. Should you be sent all the way back to Tulsa and told to start all over?

Unless your car is repaired, the road fixed, more gas put in the tank or detours eliminated, there is no assurance you will make it to Dallas a second time. Retaining a student at a grade level for a second year without attempting to deal with the reasons affecting his rate of learning gives no assurance that the student will be any more successful on the second trip.

When a student fails to advance as expected, it is possible that the fault rests as much with the school and teacher as with the student. Dr. Bruce W Wilkinson author of *The 7 Laws of the Learner*, states, "It is the responsibility of the teacher to do everything in his power to cause the student to learn." Consider the following strategies:

**Assessment.** Incorporate a system that accurately assesses individual and group progress towards achieving curriculum objectives (prescribed learner outcomes). As soon as it is evident that students are not making progress, look for reasons within the entire teaching/learning environment, not just the student.

**Class Periods.** Consider extending the class period, school day, time allocated to a specific skill, or even the school year (summer classes) to accommodate individual differences in learning rate. If summer school is not an option, develop an individual study program for the student over the summer, where the student can work on mastering the objectives that were missed; then, re-evaluate the retention decision before the start of the new school year.

**Instructional Adjustment.** Permit teachers to adjust instructional programs, materials and methods to better meet the growth pattern of their pupils. Reading Materials. Provide reading materials within each classroom that cover a wide range of difficulty over several "grade levels."

**Class Size.** Promote smaller class sizes for teachers. Encourage them to adjust their teaching methods and to focus on small group and individual skill development.

**Communication.** Keep parents regularly informed about the progress of their children in all aspects of the school curriculum (daily or weekly if needed). Solicit their support and assistance in helping their children) achieve specific learner outcomes.

**Training.** Sponsor a school wide in service, conference or video series, such as

*The 7 Gains of the Learner, The 7 Laws of the Teacher, and Teaching With Style*, to equip your teaching staff to meet the needs of their students.

**Computerization.** Investigate using computer aided instruction in a wide variety of subjects. For example, tutorial software is designed to teach a subject as well as drill over it. Programs are intended to stand alone as an instructional entity in the curriculum. Thus, the computer is the teacher for a particular skill or area of information.

Use tutorial programs in the classroom under the direction of the teacher, or send them home with the student to be monitored by the parent. Some schools include a variety of tutorial programs in their school library, making them available for checkout by students and parents.

Other programs can assist with drill and practice. Incorporate these programs to supplement the regular instruction. For example, concepts which have been presented in the classroom by the teacher can be practiced and refined by the computer (a good example is Skills Bank III)

**Word of God.** Bring the uncompromised Word of God to bear on academic challenges. Declare Ephesians 2:10 over your students, "For (your students) are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works ...." Part of the good works of students are good grades.

**Help students to guard their words.** Words can help create within them a conquering attitude thus stimulating faith rather, then doubt. Their belief, coupled with God's promises, gives our students God's ability and power to overcome any homework assignment, special project, quiz, nine-week test, or any other school challenge.

For more insight into programing for students with special needs, see Christian School Insights, "Regeneration, An Alternative to Special Education."