

## EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

January 16, 2007

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: B. Holt

SUBJECT: Winterburn School: A School in the Engaging Students through Differentiated Instruction AISI Project

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RESOURCE  
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### INFORMATION

Winterburn School is a K-9 school educating 420 students in the regular and Christian Logos programs. Winterburn School serves a wide range of students, with diverse learning needs, and varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, including a significant aboriginal population. The challenge in meeting the varied learning needs of Winterburn students led the staff to select and participate in the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) Engaging Students through Differentiated Instruction project.

Winterburn staff understand that differentiated instruction does not mean designing individual program plans for each student. Rather, teachers are learning how to effectively modify instruction and how to continually group and regroup students, in order to allow each student to grow and learn at the best possible pace. Collaborative teams work not only within the school but also with teams from three other differentiation-project schools to support each other in this work. Within this professional learning community, teachers are using three research based guiding questions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Karhanek) to begin their differentiation journey.

*Question 1: What do we want each student to learn?*

Differentiated instruction begins with a clear understanding, by both teachers and students, of the Alberta curriculum. Winterburn teachers work in division-based teams (K-3, 4-6, 7-9) to establish which elements of the curriculum are essential for all students and which will be used to enhance and enrich students' experiences. Careful consideration is then made to ensure that the content that is being taught is the content that students are ready to learn.

*Questions 2: How will we know what each student has learned?*

This is a critical component of differentiated instruction. Teachers must clearly understand what the student already knows (or does not yet understand) in order to effectively adjust instruction. This means that teachers must continually assess students' understanding, using a variety of assessment for learning practices to allow students to demonstrate their learning. Armed with this information, teachers can effectively plan for next steps in the learning process, based on the students' readiness level.

Question 3: *What will we do when a student has not achieved or has already achieved the intended outcomes?*

With a strong knowledge of the essential curriculum outcomes and understanding of readiness level of the students, the teacher can now make sound decisions about what and how to differentiate instruction. Winterburn teachers are just beginning this journey, and many are choosing to begin in only *one* of the areas outlined below. As they develop expertise, they will move to differentiating in more than one area, with the ultimate goal of differentiating in all three areas within a given lesson. Teachers may choose to differentiate the:

- Content of the lesson. Careful consideration is made to ensure that the content that is being learned is the content that students are ready to learn. It may be necessary for one group of students to receive basic instruction around a concept, whereas another group may be ready to tackle more complex concepts relative to the content of the lesson. For example: some students will learn what “interdependence” means, some students who understand the concept of interdependence may be asked to explain how their family demonstrates interdependence.
- Process for learning the content. Decisions about the process for instruction is based on criteria such as readiness, ability, interests, learning styles, learning pace, etc. This process is ongoing – groupings are never static but continually change based on students’ learning needs. Differentiating process can be as simple as having some students work in cooperative groups while others work independently. Another example may be that visual/auditory learners could learn a concept by watching a video, and others may read about the same concept.
- Product for demonstrating learning. Teachers may provide students with choice in the way to demonstrate their learning. This could range from some students creating a poster while others may choose to write an essay or make an oral presentation.

### **Summary**

Differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that results in increased student success. Differentiated instruction puts students at the centre of teaching and learning, whereby teachers take into account *who* they are teaching as well as *what* they are teaching. Winterburn School teachers are learning to become experts at teaching flexibly in order to match instruction to student needs with the goal of maximizing the potential of each learner.

**DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004).** *Whatever it takes: How a professional learning community responds when kids don't learn.* Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

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