What does differentiated instruction mean for student learning?

When students walk into their first grade class, they arrive with a “huge variety of skill levels,” notes Blakely 1st grade teacher Erin Sheehan. “Some students come knowing their letter names and sounds, while others are reading chapter books.”

How can you effectively instruct students with a wide range of skills, so that each student can be successful and challenged in their learning? “Differentiation allows me to meet the needs of all my students,” Sheehan explained.

What is differentiation? Differentiated instruction provides students with different avenues to acquiring content; to processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas; and to developing teaching materials so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability. It also may include finding how a student shows they have mastery of a concept, and how they display their learning.

The newly adopted Language Arts curriculum gives teachers materials that support differentiated instruction:

- Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2)
- Good Habits, Great Readers
- Daily 5
- Words Their Way

“We assess our readers using the Developmental Reading Assessment, which guides my instruction for each student by identifying their individual reading level,” shared Odyssey Multiage teacher Peggy Koivu. “It also identifies the comprehension skills needed for each level.” With this, she can choose strategies that will be most effective for a particular student, always with the goal of improving instruction to support student learning.

“Good Habits, Great Readers focuses on seven over-arching strategies of effective readers that are taught to the whole group,” noted Sheehan. Students read books at many different levels while keeping those seven strategies in mind, learning how good habits support great readers.

Blakely teacher Jill Phillips adds, “The structure and practices of the Daily 5 allow students to build both reading and writing stamina, as well as independent work skills. With these independent skills in place, teachers are able to engage in differentiated instruction with small groups and individuals, while independent workers practice reading, writing and word study.”

Phillips also commented on the Words Their Way program. “I can create a routine with my students, allowing them to work at their individual levels in phonics study. It provides both exploration and practice, enabling students to recognize and use common word patterns for both reading and writing.”

Knowing that children have their strengths and weaknesses, 1st grade parent Michelle Hobbs commented, “These programs allow our teachers to structure the curriculum around a child’s strengths. Working in smaller groups also enables teachers to adjust more quickly to the constantly changing abilities of each individual and to alter their instruction accordingly.”

Hobbs noted the best part: “From my son’s perspective, he isn’t ‘bored’ and finds the work fun and challenging.”

Differentiated instruction engages students and strengthens their learning. Hobbs concluded, “It’s not just more work, it’s better, more suitable work.”
It would be hard for students to have great achievements without great schools. You may consider schools as stars in their own right.

**America’s Best High Schools & Best High Schools in Math & Science**

Recent rankings by US News & World Report placed Bainbridge High School and Eagle Harbor High School among the Best High Schools in the country. Based on six components, BHS also was ranked by Newsweek as one of America’s Best High Schools. Additionally, US News & World Report placed BHS in the top 100 (No.68) of America’s Best High Schools in Math & Science.

**School of Distinction**

Because of their sustained improvement in reading and math over a 5 year period on the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE), Eagle Harbor High School was again designated in 2011 as a School of Distinction by the Center for Educational Effectiveness.

**Washington Achievement Awards**

Washington Achievement Awards celebrate the state’s top performing schools in specific categories: overall excellence, and special recognition in language arts, math, science, graduation rate, improvement, and closing achievement gaps. Bainbridge Schools receiving this award:

- **Bainbridge High School 2009, 2010, 2011:** Overall Excellence and Graduation Rate
- **Eagle Harbor High School 2011:** Graduation Rate
- **Woodward Middle School 2010, 2011:** Overall Excellence
- **Odyssey Multiage Program 2010, 2011:** Multilevel Overall Excellence
- **Capt. Charles Wilkes Elementary School 2009, 2010:** Language Arts

**Blue Ribbon School**

In 2004, Woodward Middle School was the only middle school in Washington State and one of only 25 middle schools nationwide to receive the National Blue Ribbon Award from the US Department of Education. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program recognizes academically superior schools and honors them as “national models of excellence.”

**Activity in the Wilkes Neighborhood**

The view from the street shows the foundations for the education wings complete. Drilling of the ground-source (geo-thermal) bores will be complete in April. This type of heating system will significantly reduce heating costs in the new school. You may also see the administration offices being framed.

Over the first few weeks of spring, the entire school will be enclosed as the detailed interior work will be in full swing.

The last day of school, now scheduled for June 15, will begin the busiest time for this project, as the construction site will expand to encompass the entire Wilkes campus. Working toward completion, the site will be exciting to watch as many notable changes occur on a daily basis.