

What You Don't Know About
Academic Interventions May Be
Hurting Your Students:

7 Instructional Strategies for Accelerating Student Learning

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What You Don't Know About Academic Interventions May Be Hurting Your Students: 7 Instructional Strategies for Accelerating Student Learning

In these difficult times, more students than ever before are [experiencing learning gaps](#) and being placed in academic interventions. While the intent behind intervention is obviously to help students, there is a great deal of research indicating that many interventions have little impact on existing discrepancies and inequities, leaving students in the same situation year after year, perpetually behind (Steiner & Weisberg, 2020).

Below, read more about why traditional interventions often don't work, how to use 7 instructional strategies to accelerate student learning, and a research-based professional learning series called the Core Instruction Power Pack that is designed to help teachers prevent learning gaps.

Are Your Academic Interventions Catching Students Up or Leaving Them Behind?

As you review your intervention data, consider the following questions:

- What is the average length of time students are remaining in intervention (hours per day as well as days enrolled in intervention during the school year)?
- Are students being pulled from core instruction for intervention?
- Are the same students participating in intervention every year?
- What percentage of students exiting intervention are demonstrating proficiency?

In too many cases students remain in interventions for months or even years without any discernable results, leaving those students disengaged, discouraged, and prime candidates for dropping out.

In too many cases students remain in interventions for months or even years without any discernable results, leaving those students disengaged, discouraged, and prime candidates for dropping out. Those who do persevere through high school but don't pursue a postsecondary education face an uncertain future with limited job opportunities and less earning power than peers who participate in some form of postsecondary education (Business Wire, 2011).

Students who receive grade-level content throughout their school career are better prepared to successfully tackle the challenges of postsecondary education and are more likely to pursue such opportunities, which are now a necessity for attaining even modest, middle-class economic success (Achieve the Core, 2019).

Why Traditional Academic Interventions Don't Work

Most academic interventions attempt to address broad areas of need, such as math, reading, or even reading comprehension, rather than specific skills.

Think about fifth graders who are identified as having low math proficiency. This could signify misconceptions related to place value, fractions, algebraic thinking, number sense, or a host of other key concepts.

Now imagine all the fifth graders in a given school who are lacking proficiency in math are grouped together for intervention. It's pretty easy to see why this model doesn't yield results; students receive general math support and practice rather than targeted instruction on the key skill or concept they need.

The same situation happens in reading, where students who demonstrate poor reading

comprehension receive the same intervention treatment regardless of whether the issue is decoding, fluency, vocabulary, or another specific area of need.

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happening as a result of skillful teacher monitoring and verification of learning.

In reality, many students do experience learning gaps and there is simply not enough time for them to go back and master all of the previous content before moving on to new content. But teachers can strategically identify the critical skills and concepts students need to fully understand grade-level content and they can teach these skills and concepts without repeating entire units or years' worth of instruction (Rollins, 2014).

The TNTP Acceleration Guide (2020) provides a great example of this strategy, where seventh-grade students who missed an entire unit on Statistics and Probability are taught the specific concept of “measures of center such as mean” because in seventh grade that concept must be applied to “...draw inferences about a random sample” (p. 9). That type of “just in time” scaffold allows students to move forward with grade-level content while bridging the gap of unfinished learning.

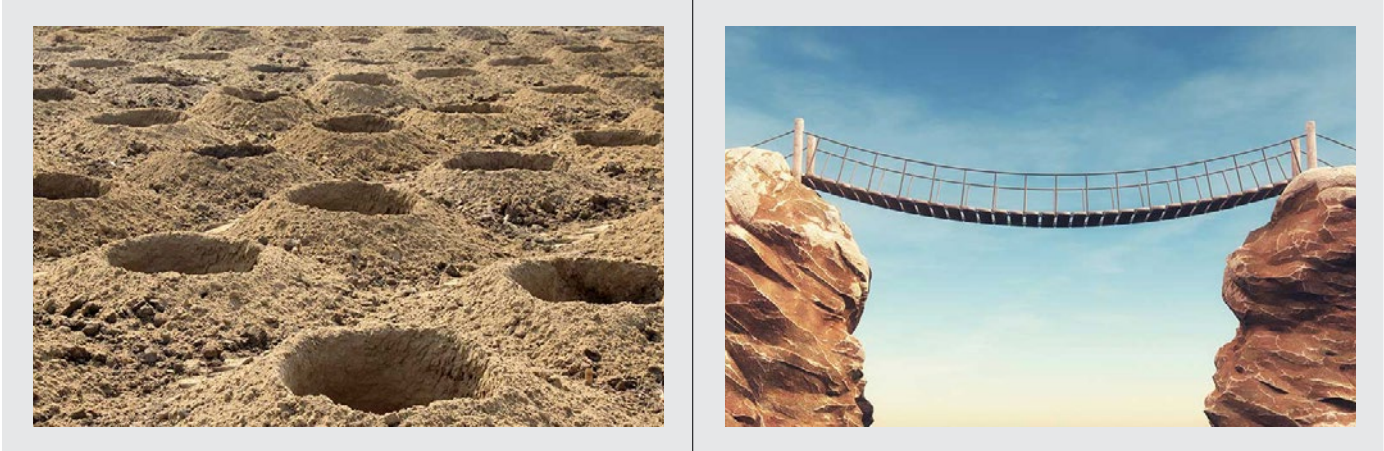
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The Mastery Myth

It’s easy to fall into the trap of assuming students must master all previous grade-level content before they are ready to tackle work at their current grade level.

It seems like a logical assumption, and in an ideal world, students would have the time and resources available to master previous content in an expeditious way without compromising core instructional time. Even better, learning gaps would have been prevented from ever

Bridging gaps vs. Filling gaps



Bridging gaps by teaching critical skills and concepts is much more effective than attempting to fill in every hole from students' previous learning experiences before moving on to grade-level content.

The Most Effective Ways to Accelerate Learning

There are a number of approaches to acceleration, which can be combined for maximum benefit.

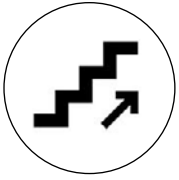
During core instruction, teachers can provide scaffolds that help all students access grade-level content. Outside of core instruction, using intervention time to provide targeted instruction on specific skills or concepts gives an even bigger boost for students who have missed critical content upon which current lessons rely.

This is not the same as pre-teaching or previewing content, which is often used to help students who may lack background knowledge or need additional processing time to gain footing for upcoming lessons. In that situation, all participating students are receiving the same information, albeit in advance of the rest of the class. This one-size-

fits-all approach lacks a systematic plan for diagnosing and addressing each individual student's missing skills. For acceleration to be effective, there must be a system in place to monitor and verify learning so that critical missing skills and concepts can be identified (Steiner & Weisberg, 2020).

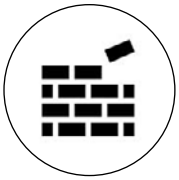
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7 Instructional Strategies for Accelerating Student Learning



1. Scaffolding Intentionally

One of the easiest ways to accelerate is to determine the taxonomy of a lesson's standard and learning target, and then begin instruction at a lower taxonomy level, building understanding and confidence as you gradually ramp up the rigor. Similarly, starting a lesson with less complex text to establish a solid foundation of understanding before transitioning to more complex text allows students to be successful with text that may have been inaccessible without that support. Finally, combining skills rather than focusing on isolated skills provides opportunities for students to use familiar, mastered skills in conjunction with newly acquired ones to achieve new levels of understanding.



2. Building Knowledge and Vocabulary

Research has shown that two factors – relevant background knowledge and vocabulary – largely determine how well students understand what they read (Fisher, n.d.). We can bolster students' comprehension of grade-level text by building knowledge and vocabulary in a variety of ways, including immersion in multimedia resources that focus a single topic. Systematic planned encounters with texts, photographs, recordings, and infographics that are all connected to a topic provide students with the concepts and words needed to successfully tackle challenging grade-level tasks (Wexler, 2019).



3. Prioritizing Standards

Not all standards are created equal, yet sometimes all are given equal instructional time. In our current situation, many teachers have less instructional time with students as a result of school closures or virtual class schedules. It is more important now than ever before to make informed, conscious decisions about how much time and attention will be devoted to specific standards. In his article on Common Core standards, researcher Larry Ainsworth recommends evaluating standards against a list of criteria such as:

- Does the standard last beyond one grade level or does it reflect a critical life skill?
- Does the standard have applications that cross over into other content areas?

- Is the standard a prerequisite for future learning?
- Those standards that don't make the cut are not eliminated; they simply are not focused upon with the same level of intensity (Ainsworth, 2015).



4. Modifying Guided Reading

In typical guided reading implementations, students work with the teacher while reading texts at their instructional level during small group time. For students whose instructional reading level matches their grade level, this is great, but what about those students who are reading several years below grade level? As noted by Steiner and Weisberg in their article about catching students up, a great deal of evidence indicates that having students continue to work in texts below grade level day after day does not help them “catch up” (Steiner & Weisberg, 2020). Instead of sticking with this model, which also often neglects to include decodable texts for young readers, spend more time working in grade-level text with appropriate scaffolding and knowledge building to ensure success.



5. Diagnosing Essential Missed Learning

If we don't know which concepts and skills students are missing, how can we possibly provide the kind of targeted instruction needed to bridge those gaps? The annual high stakes test most students take isn't likely to yield the kind of information that will help in this regard. Instead, ongoing progress monitoring is the key to uncovering areas of need that can then be addressed. This can be challenging in a virtual or hybrid environment, but the Student Evidence Tracker is an easy-to-use tech tool that solves the problem of monitoring effortlessly. The tool empowers students to self-assess their own learning and ask for assistance during the lesson. Teachers can verify students' self-assessments and easily monitor the progress of the entire class from the tool's dashboard in real time, offering “just in time” support as needed. Working with colleagues to develop a strong diagnostic measure that can be used at the beginning of each unit to determine student needs can be an additional step in monitoring students' progress.



6. Utilizing Interdependent Collaborative Student Teams

Many classrooms and schools have achieved powerful results when students work in academic teams to tackle rigorous standards-based tasks. Unlike other group work structures, in [Academic Teaming](#) every member contributes to the group's success, developing essential social-emotional skills in the process. [This video](#) shows

an academic team in action and demonstrates the power of the student teaming process as students push each other's thinking without needing the teacher's assistance. This [second clip](#) highlights the dramatic changes observed by teachers who engaged in this work. In academic teams, each student brings different strengths to the team, making both academic and social-emotional acceleration a natural result of the collaboration ([Toth & Sousa, 2019](#)).



7. Incorporating Text Sets

Text sets, also called expert sets, are curated collections of multimedia resources that are tightly focused on a specific topic. How does this fit into acceleration? Through the strategic use of text sets, we can prepare students for engaging in discourse and tasks for which they may not otherwise have been equipped. Students can quickly get an in-depth understanding of the subject matter, including the academic vocabulary associated with the topic (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2016).

Core Instruction Power Pack

[View Demo](#)

The Core Instruction Power Pack Accelerates Learning AND Strengthens Core Instruction

Even for the most experienced educators, putting together all the pieces of the 7 instructional strategies to accelerate student learning while coping with the challenges of an ever-changing teaching environment can feel overwhelming.

Learning Science International's [Applied Research Center](#) developed the [Core Instruction Power Pack](#), a professional development series designed specifically for these challenging times when teachers really cannot add one more thing to their plates.

The Core Instruction Power Pack consists of three modules of professional learning, each focusing on a different aspect of effective core instruction. Live, expert facilitators deliver the modules, modelling the instructional practices they teach and helping teachers navigate through the essentials for accelerating learning and preventing learning gaps. These in-depth modules are six hours long each, totaling 18 hours. A module can be delivered as one six-hour session in person, or

it can be broken into virtual sessions (two hours long each).

The three modules included in the Core Instruction Power Pack are:

1. **Building a Solid Foundation for Student Success:** Facilitate active student engagement through expectations and student collaboration. Create routines that maximize instructional time and increase student equity and autonomy while ramping up the rigor.
2. **Creating Tasks Worthy of Student Groups:** Plan rigorous tasks that require collaboration and deepening understanding as students process learning.
3. **Monitoring for Learning During Core Instruction:** Evaluate how and what to monitor, when to intervene, and how to make decisions based on student evidence.

Core Instruction Power Pack

[View Demo](#)

The pandemic has brought attention to a dire issue that predated COVID-19: the inequity that results when students languish in academic interventions and remedial classes focusing on content that is years below grade level. Let's use this opportunity to change the trajectory of those students by using instructional strategies that accelerate student learning and put students on the fast track to success.

Resources

- [Core Instruction Power Pack](#)
- [Student Evidence Tracker](#)
- Related blog: [Achievement Gaps and the Lost COVID-19 Generation](#)
- Related reading: [Students Lost Time and Learning in the Pandemic. What 'Acceleration' Can Do to Help](#)
- Related reading: [The Problem with Guided Reading](#)

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Our vision for education is to close the achievement gap. Equip all students with the social, emotional, and cognitive skills they need to thrive in the 21st century. Expand equity by giving every child access to rigorous core instruction that empowers learners to free themselves from generational poverty.

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