

## **February 2003 Clover Park High School**

Teachers at Clover Park High School have begun to implement classroom-level changes that focus on helping all students reach high standards. The strategy they are learning about and trying out in their own classrooms is called differentiated instruction and it involves providing students with multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. For the teachers at Clover Park, it also means recognizing that students come from varied backgrounds, skills, and knowledge and that they need varied opportunities to acquire mastery of skills and topics.

The impetus for Clover Park teachers to begin learning about differentiated instruction came this fall, when the school implemented 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade houses. One of the consequences was that they didn't have enough faculty in each house to teach both regular English and pre-AP English. They decided to blend the classes so that each English class would include regular, pre-AP, and inclusion students who didn't need self-contained classrooms.

After the first couple of weeks, students and teachers in these blended classes were concerned that the classes weren't working as intended and Principal Paul Tytler realized that teachers and administrators alike needed a shared understanding of differentiation and an ongoing investment in professional development and the accompanying support mechanisms.

Clover Park's Instructional Facilitators Katie Taylor and Judi Orr, who consider themselves "guides" in the English faculty's exploration, developed a series of professional development sessions on differentiated instruction for their colleagues. During the first half-day session, Katie and Judi introduced the concept of differentiation, discussed the connection between personalization and differentiation and looked at examples of differentiation taken from Tomlinson's books.

During one activity, staff members looked at the different student learning profiles that were used at the fall high school meeting hosted by the Gates Foundation. "We learned that as a group, we all liked school, were eager to learn, and behaved as such. But, many of our students have different attitudes than we did about school," says English teacher Casey Curtis. "It forced me to think about how my students are different from me and to ask myself what engages them? And, how can I engage them and meet their learning needs through my lessons?"

During the second half-day professional development session led by Katie and Judi, teachers brought lessons they had developed to share with their colleagues using a tuning protocol. The group discussed how the lessons were differentiated and ways in which greater differentiation could be provided. Katie and Judi facilitated the discussions and used prompts such as "What have you done with struggling learners that has been successful?"

The group also discussed how assessment could be a useful tool. "Assessment holds students to the same high standard, but with differentiation, how you get there can be different," explains Katie. For example, if a teacher wants to assess her students' understanding of grammar and punctuation, some students may be able to demonstrate what they know in a paragraph, while others may need several paragraphs. The important thing is not the length of their assignment, but that each student demonstrates what she knows about grammar and punctuation.

The third and final professional development session will be an all-day session in mid-February and the focus will be on discussing the differences between tracking and differentiation. The Clover Park teachers will also spend the third day embedding differentiation into lesson and unit planning so that it is not perceived as an “add on,” but an integral part of designing curriculum, assessment and instruction.

Although the efforts to differentiate instruction at Clover Park are just beginning, Katie says the response from teachers and students has been positive. “Teachers now understand that it’s not about creating more work, but instead looking at students’ different abilities and figuring out how to get everyone to the same high standard. The students like having choices and being able to demonstrate in different ways what they know.”

English teacher Casey Curtis says her efforts to differentiate in her classroom have had a couple of unanticipated outcomes. “I realized that creating off-the-cuff lessons wouldn’t work for every student. Differentiation pushes me to plan backwards and be very clear about what I want my students to know and then figure out how to get them there and how they will demonstrate it.” Casey, who participates in a Critical Friends Group (CFG), says her efforts to differentiate have also benefited from the support and feedback she receives from her CFG colleagues.

