

DIFFERENTIATION AT OPEN WINDOW SCHOOL

At OWS we know that the most effective curriculum for gifted learners is one that is differentiated and appropriately challenging. Differentiation recognizes that students learn at different speeds, in different ways and is the practice of tailoring curriculum and instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in a classroom. It taps into students' multiple levels of readiness, interests and learning profiles and results in appropriate modification of content, process, and product.

Content is the “what” a student is learning. It consists of ideas, concepts, descriptive information, and facts. Content, as well as learning experiences, can be modified through acceleration, compacting, variety, and pacing. Our students often need additional complexity, abstractions and advanced materials.

To differentiate process, the “how” students are learning, activities are structured to be intellectually demanding. Tiered assignments allow students to work on tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult and allow students to be successful at their level of readiness. It facilitates building on prior knowledge and encourages continued growth. Teachers tier assignments based on the challenge level of a task, the complexity of the task, the resources used to complete a task, the expected outcome and/or, the anticipated outcomes. Teachers also have multiple levels and types of learning materials at their disposal. In a differentiated classroom, students work at the pace most suited to their abilities and learning profiles. Small, flexible instruction groupings (by ability, interest, readiness, temperament, etc.) create an appropriate match between student and instruction.

Student products and outcomes, the “evidence of student learning,” are also differentiated. Letting students choose how they want to show their learning by giving them choices, allows students to work in their preferred learning style and investigate and develop learning passions. Providing independent study and open-ended projects offer learning experiences that encourage depth, breadth and complexity.

Formal and informal student assessment measures readiness and informs our differentiated instruction. The difficulty of skills taught should be slightly in advance of a student's current level of mastery. In assessing students, background knowledge and learning profiles are considered in addition to skill level. A student's learning profile includes learning preferences (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic styles), classroom working environments, and personal preferences (group, individual work, partner etc.). Individual interest in topics, activities, and products motivate a student and often determine the choices a teacher offers.

OWS teachers differentiate by taking all of these factors into account, individually or in combination.