White Paper: Learning Acceleration in Literacy Instruction

Introduction

A child's ability to read is a critical predictor of both educational and lifelong success. Students must have every opportunity to gain and strengthen this skill, and teachers must be equipped and empowered in the teaching of reading to best support their students. This means ensuring that every student is provided opportunities to engage with grade-level work. The purpose of this white paper is to address some of the common challenges educators face when considering how to accelerate student progress toward proficiency, such as understanding what is meant by learning acceleration, how it differs from remediation, and how to develop an effective acceleration model.

What is Learning Acceleration?

Often educators associate acceleration only with gifted education practices that involve presenting curriculum content earlier or at a faster pace to move students beyond the grade-level content. However, learning acceleration also provides an organized way to eliminate persistent gaps in student achievement (KRS.158.645). It is an instructional approach that focuses on helping students access and master grade-level content.

Learning acceleration starts with immersing students in high quality, standards-aligned grade-level content. Teachers intentionally integrate missing pre-requisite skills, knowledge and academic vocabulary into the current grade-level instruction, allowing students to learn new content while addressing gaps. This "just-in-time" approach keeps students moving forward on their intended grade-level trajectories.

In her book, *Learning in the Fast Lane: 8 Ways to Put All Students on the Road to Academic Success,* Rollins (2014) provides this additional clarification around an acceleration framework:

> Accelerating students is not pre-teaching; that risks tedium. Rather, it is an enriching experience designed to stimulate thinking, develop concrete models, introduce vocabulary, scaffold critical missing pieces, and introduce new concepts just prior to the acquisition of new learning. (p.10)

The use of high-quality instructional resources (HQIRs) ensures students consistently have opportunities to engage with grade-level content by providing teachers with the lesson plans, differentiated activities, supplemental materials and embedded assessments they need to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Building "just-in-time" strategies to access grade-level content is not easy. To support this goal, the Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE) *Intellectual Preparation Guidance* outlines the four core processes to help teachers develop a deeper knowledge of the HQIR. By engaging in unit and lesson internalization, teachers are able to identify the skills and content knowledge needed to access upcoming lessons, and through the use of curriculum-embedded assessments determine whether students possess that learning. In this approach, the teacher starts with grade-level content and strategically

builds in earlier skills or concepts as the students need them. Students then have the tools they need to fully grasp the grade-level material. This ensures students spend more time engaged with the work of their grade vs engaged with below grade-level work– *critical to closing achievement gaps*.

Opportunities to accelerate learning must begin with a strong foundation of Tier 1 instruction that includes grade-appropriate assignments, consistently good instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for all students. According to recent research findings from 28,000 schools[1] that were successfully helping students catch up, robust instruction should be implemented within a safe and supporting environment that recognizes and addresses the unique assets and needs of the learner. Educators focus on incremental growth for every student over time and proactively identify the differentiated support targeted to the unique skills and services students need to stay on grade level.

In addition to this strong foundation in Tier 1, some students will need more targeted support. Accelerated intervention plans aligned with grade-level instructional resources are created and implemented to provide supplemental (Tier 2) and intensive (Tier 3) support for those students who need additional time and support or instruction in more foundational skills to accelerate their rate of progress to achieve proficiency.

The overarching goal of learning acceleration is to focus on quickly identifying and addressing gaps in critical concepts to allow students access to grade-level work rather than be held back by remediation or lower-grade concepts.

Learning Acceleration vs Remediation

How is learning acceleration different from remediation? While both learning acceleration and remediation are often associated with *meeting students where they are*, the former is a model that focuses on an immediate target – upcoming standards-based instruction anchored in the grade-appropriate high-quality instructional resource (HQIR).

Learning acceleration prepares students for new learning; past concepts and pre-requisite skills are "laser focused" and addressed within the purposeful context of future learning (Rollins, 2014)

Learning acceleration seeks to ensure that students are ready to learn current content vs remediation which starts with re-teaching what can be a very long list of missed skills and knowledge from previous grades (Steiner, 2024). Remediation has its focus on the past and often delays access to new content – reviewing big chunks of missed material until students have mastered missing skills. There is a strong tendency for schools, with good intentions, to focus only on remediating student learning gaps and delay access to grade-level work until *all* the missing learning is remediated. By spending the majority of time focusing on basic skills work, remediation lacks relevance to what is currently happening in the classroom.

Table 1 below comes from the work of Suzy Pepper Rollins (Learning in the Fast Lane, 2014; p.8*)* and presents a comparison of acceleration and remediation.

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[1] TNTP (2024). The Opportunity Makers. Paths of Opportunity Series. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED660673.pdf

Table 1:

A Comparison of Acceleration and Remediation

	Learning Acceleration	Remediation
Self-efficacy	• Self-confidence and engagement increase. • Academic progress is evident.	• Students perceive they're in the "slow class", and self-confidence and engagement decrease. • Backward movement leads to a sense of futility and lack of progress.
Basic Skills	• Skills are taught just in time for new concepts. • Students apply skills immediately.	• Instruction attempts to reteach every missing skill. • Skills are taught in isolation and not applied to current learning.
Prior Knowledge	• Key prior knowledge is provided ahead of time. • Enables students to connect to new information.	• Instruction typically does not introduce prior knowledge that connects to new learning.
Relevance	• Treats relevance as a critical component to student motivation and memory.	• Relevance is not seen as a priority.
Connection to Core Class	• Instruction is connected to core class; ongoing collaboration is emphasized.	• Instruction is typically isolated from core class.
Pacing and Direction	• Active, fast paced, hands-on. • Forward movement: goal is for students to learn on time with peers.	• Passive, with more focus on worksheets or basic software programs. • Backward movement: goal is for students to "catch up" to peers.

There is compelling research that learning acceleration works for all students (Steiner, 2024; Szatrowski, 2022; TNTP, 2018; 2021). When students who start the year behind grade level have access to stronger instruction, they can close gaps with their peers by as much as six months. In classrooms with consistently good grade-level instruction, those gaps can close by more than seven months. In contrast, a remediation approach of providing students with work better suited to earlier grades at the expense of time spent with grade-appropriate instruction continues to widen the academic gap. Overall, findings indicate that students who experience learning acceleration struggle less and learn more than students who started at the same level but experienced remediation, particularly for students of color and those from low-income families.

In 2022 TNTP partnered with ReadWorks®, a free digital platform of supplemental reading resources, to analyze trends in teachers' use of grade-level assignments as recommended on the site. The results were troubling – students were assigned more time on below grade-level work even when they demonstrated the ability to be just as successful on grade-level work.[2]

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[2] TNTP and ReadWorks (2023). Unlocking Acceleration: How Below Grade-Level Work is Holding Students Back in Literacy. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED624426.pdf

This was especially true for students in schools serving more students of color and those from low-income families. While these results suggest that many schools are not yet implementing accelerated learning strategies, there is a clear path forward. By implementing a consistent and cohesive learning acceleration plan, students who start out below grade-level can succeed in grade-level work.

Learning Acceleration: A Call to Action

The shift from remediation to a full-scale learning acceleration model requires a coordinated and consistent effort made up of multiple elements. Drawing on recent research and guidance from various educational reform organizations based on experience from the field (Steiner, 2024; TNTP, 2021, Short & Hirsh, 2021), key considerations have consistently emerged for schools and districts seeking to incorporate an effective acceleration model into their schools. To ensure coherence throughout this process, plan for two-way communication between teams at all levels of the system.

KEY ACTION STEPS TO ACCELERATING LEARNING FOR LITERACY:
Build a district-wide comprehensive, coherent acceleration strategy.   • Utilize MTSS teaming structures at district, school, teacher and student levels to support learning acceleration efforts.   • Align the district wide multi-tiered system of supports (KyMTSS) to ensure academic and behavioral systems, structures and processes work together to create a safe and supportive climate for learning that addresses the needs of all students.   • Establish the degree of autonomy granted to school leaders that will allow for differences in capacity and circumstances while ensuring implementation of key components of acceleration.   • Gather and analyze relevant data to determine the state of literacy in the district and each school.   • Articulate a common vision for literacy that aligns with the evidence of what works in literacy instruction.   • Ensure adoption and effective implementation of high-quality instructional resources (HQIR) aligned with the *Kentucky Academic Standards* (KAS).   • Prioritize consistently good instruction aligned to grade-level content and concepts.   • Set a clear goal to ensure that students experience coherent literacy instruction aligned to the instructional vision – from curriculum, HQIRs, interventions to extended school services, and assessments.

Create a model of instructional coherence.

- Develop a curriculum implementation plan with goals and action steps matched to the current stage of implementation.

- Establish how curriculum embedded assessments will be used to evaluate what students know and need to know to access upcoming grade-level instruction.

- Establish decision rules for how universal screening and diagnostic assessments will be used to identify students in need of accelerated intervention plans.

- Develop a process of analyzing the results of assessments and proactively planning for subsequent differentiated instruction, interventions and supports.

- Consider the range of instructional modalities needed to deliver differentiated instruction and ensure adequate time is allotted in the schedule for whole group, small groups and intervention for students needing supplemental or intensive intervention.

- Determine how often students will be assessed, how student progress will be monitored and how often data will be analyzed by teams at each level of the system to determine effectiveness of instruction, intervention and supports.

- Conduct an audit of intervention resources and practices to determine:
  - Alignment with the HQIR implemented in Tier 1.
  - Alignment to the literacy needs identified through universal screening and diagnostic assessments.
  - Strength of evidence of effectiveness in accelerating students toward proficiency.

- Utilize a consistent data-based decision-making process at all levels of the system to determine student needs, identify solutions, set measurable goals and monitor the impact of the learning acceleration model.

Ensure professional development for accelerated learning within the context of the adopted HQIR.

- Identify curriculum-based learning needs aligned to the stage of curriculum implementation (e.g., launch, early implementation or ongoing).

- Develop a professional learning plan to address identified needs and allocate resources to implement the plan.

- Ensure educators receive the training and ongoing support they need to effectively internalize and implement those high-quality instructional materials.

- Develop flexible schedules that give grade-level and content-level teams enough time each week to study the curriculum, practice selected lessons, plan for their students and reflect on their progress.

Supporting KDE Resources:

Model Curriculum Framework Section I: Curriculum Development Process

Curriculum-based Professional Learning Guidance Document

Continuous Improvement Playbook for Curriculum Implementation

Intellectual Preparation Guidance Document

Tier1/Tier 2 Alignment Guidance

KyMTSS Implementation Guide

By ensuring there is a coordinated effort among these various elements, learning acceleration becomes a cyclical process in which teachers and students analyze assessment data, focus on priority grade-level content, establish groups for students to learn skills and knowledge to access the content, and monitor students' progress to adjust instruction.

Conclusion

Current research from the field is clear, with sustained commitment to implementing strategies for a learning acceleration model from all stakeholders, it is possible to transform student learning outcomes. When educators deliver consistent grade-level instruction, intentionally address the unique needs of individual students, create an emotional climate for learning and ensure coherent systems, data and practices are in place to support a continuous process for improvement they can accelerate students' growth toward grade-level proficiency in reading.

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