EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

WESTMINSTER'S INTERVENTIONIST FRAMEWORK

National Center for Learning Disabilities

When 5-year old Mauricio Avila[1] stepped into Sherrelwood Elementary School, he had already been identified with a disability: developmental delay.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children ages 3 through 9 who experience a significant delay in physical, cognitive, communication, and other forms of development might be eligible for services and supports under the category of developmental delay. Mauricio's disability made it difficult for him to follow multi-step directions, recall information, and verbally express himself. What's more, like many other students with disabilities, Mauricio's disability wasn't a single challenge that could be easily addressed. Instead, it presented alongside another disability, a speech and language impairment. And yet, these disabilities did not fully encapsulate Mauricio. His teachers describe him as kind, friendly, and resilient. According to one teacher, Ryan Hartgerink, "Even if he isn't confident about the subject, he persists through hurdles and learns from his mistakes in order to improve." Still, his parents wondered whether the education system would see their son's strengths—or would they separate him from his peers, exposing him to lower expectations and frustrating him?

These are very real concerns for students like Mauricio and for their parents. A student's disability may be ignored if school professionals are not able to address it. Or students may be pulled out of class for specialized instruction and forced to confront the resulting stigma of being "different" from their peers. Sherrelwood Elementary School, where Mauricio is enrolled, is one of the elementary schools in the Westminster Public Schools in Colorado. Sherrelwood, and schools in the district more broadly, have two unique approaches to learning and support that helped address Mauricio's parents' concerns, and that distinguish Mauricio's experience from those of children with developmental delays and speech and language impairments in other districts:

1. **A Move Away From Age-Based Grade Placement**
   Students at Westminster aren't all in the same age- and grade-based class for all subjects. They are in multi-age settings. Younger and older students work together in a classroom based on their level of competency in that subject. A 5-year-old like Mauricio may be working on foundational skills in reading and language while advancing faster with the right supports in his math class.

2. **The Use of Interventionists**
   Rather than pulling students out of class to give them specialized instruction, the district has interventionists go into classrooms. They work with teachers to design and support instruction for students who might be struggling in a particular area and for those who might be more advanced, helping create educational experiences that meet all students' different learning needs and interests.

> Most students in Westminster Public Schools receive extra support from an interventionist.

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1 In this instance and throughout the rest of the text, the student's name has been changed to protect privacy.

Every classroom teacher at Sherrelwood designs curricula to facilitate both general instruction (directed toward all students) and small group instruction, where students deepen their understanding of content. Interventionists, who may be special educators, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) specialists, Title I specialists, and sometimes liaisons for advanced learners, with specific areas of expertise, collaborate with Mauricio's teacher around specific learning targets. They work with Mauricio in a small group setting to be sure he is using strategies to master the content and develop personal and social competencies essential to his long-term success. Interventionists work with students who are "behind" and with those who are "ahead," so Mauricio doesn't have to feel singled out. In fact, most students at Westminster Public Schools receive extra help from an interventionist. Because everybody is engaging in small group time, there is no stigma associated with the support Mauricio receives, and he and his peers receive instruction that is tailored to their unique learning needs, strengths, and interests.
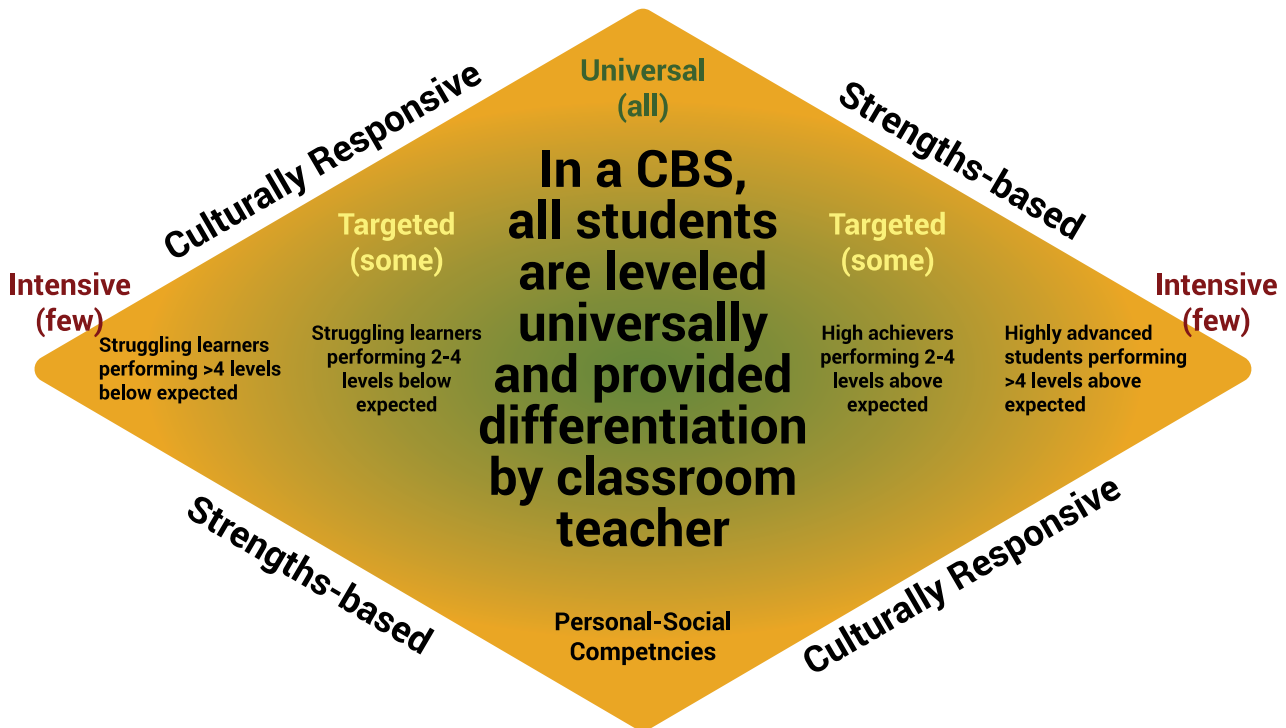
SHERRELWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AT A GLANCE

Location:
Denver, Colorado

# of Students: **265**

# of Students With Disabilities: **41**

Interventionist Program began: **2012**

Other Grants/Funds Supporting Work:
Just normal district allocation and funds

Culturally Responsive

Strengths-based

Universal (all)

Targeted (some)

Targeted (some)

Intensive (few)

Intensive (few)

In a CBS, all students are leveled universally and provided differentiation by classroom teacher

Struggling learners performing >4 levels below expected

Struggling learners performing 2-4 levels below expected

High achievers performing 2-4 levels above expected

Highly advanced students performing >4 levels above expected

Strengths-based

Culturally Responsive

Personal-Social Competncies

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THE VISION: LEARNING OVER SEAT TIME

The vision of the interventionists at Westminster is not only to help struggling learners like Mauricio, but to re-conceptualize learning in a struggling district. During the 2006–2007 school year, Westminster (which was then called Adams 50) was placed on the state's Academic Watch list, putting it in the lowest 5 percent of districts in the state. When parents, community members, and school and district leaders came together to respond to this designation, they were clear: They didn't want to just improve their test scores; they wanted to prepare students to succeed in postsecondary education, careers, and civic life. That led the district to change academic programs so that a student like Mauricio wouldn't be limited to one traditional grade level. Instead he would move toward clearly defined standards and learning targets. Learning would be measured by a competency-based system (CBS) that enables students to progress upon mastery of distinct knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with a standard.

This has not been an easy fix, nor has it solved every problem. While the school and district have shown steady improvement, there are still many students who struggle. School staff and the community continuously reflect on and evaluate their process and make changes to ensure that students in this economically and demographically diverse district have meaningful ladders of opportunity. Educators at Westminster believe that all children can learn at high levels, but may get there at different times and in different ways. This lends credence to their aphorism: "Learning is the constant and time is the variable." Even so, as many other districts across the country embark on competency-based and personalized approaches to learning, this framework proves to be a promising practice in reducing educational stigma, building on student strengths, and targeting supports to students like Mauricio and his peers.

> "We started with traditional gifted, special education, and English learner services and layered it on top of our competency-based approach. We realized within a month or two that it wasn't going to work. If competency-based systems were going to work, we needed to break down silos between departments and support students in a different way."
>
> – *Dr. Steve Sandoval*

IMPLEMENTING THE INTERVENTIONIST SYSTEM AT WESTMINSTER

When Westminster began implementing their competency-based system, their assumption was that they could implement programs for struggling and advanced learners like they always had. But that assumption quickly changed. Dr. Steve Sandoval, the executive director of special services, recalls, "We started with traditional gifted, special education, and English learner services and layered it on top of our competency-based approach. We realized within a month or two that it wasn't going to work. If competency-based systems were going to work, we needed to break down silos between departments and support students in a different way." Interventionists were the key to making competency-based systems work for all students, including those who weren't in the middle of the performance range. Interventionists work collaboratively with teachers to support and challenge all students wherever they may be on the learning continuum.

There are six essential components that sustain Westminster's Interventionist Framework and that support all students, including those with disabilities like Mauricio:

1. **Shared Leadership**—Staff must work in teams rather than in hierarchies. This means the success of a student like Mauricio is a collaborative venture owned by all teachers, rather than the purview of the general, special education, or interventionist teacher alone. Mauricio, specifically, is served by multiple interventionists and teachers who collaborate to support his success, each taking a leadership role according to their area of expertise.

2. **Blended Service Approach**—Educators provide targeted and intensive supports to all students based on their learning needs and interests, rather than based on their disability or other identification. Because all students are eligible for support and acceleration, the capacity educators develop to serve Mauricio can benefit all his classmates.

3. **Role Flexibility and Time**—Interventionists can be special educators, CLD specialists, and Title I specialists, not regular classroom teachers. They can "push in" to a variety of different classrooms to help close gaps and accelerate learning under a variety of different needs and settings.

4. **Collaboration and Planning**—Staff have sufficient collaborative time in their professional learning communities to engage in a meaningful problem-solving process, rather than having to find time to evaluate student challenges and needs on their own. In serving Mauricio, staff used that collaborative time to brainstorm resources and strategies to address his needs and identified how those approaches could serve other students as well.

5. **Data-Driven Decision-Making**—Interventionists and other staff draw on multiple sources of student performance data, ranging from standardized tests to classroom products and observations, to identify and address the full range student needs. In Mauricio's case, this also included a focus on social and emotional competence measures.

6. **Research-Based Intervention and Instruction**—Interventionists and other educators implement externally validated, research-based interventions that address student needs holistically.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

What do the six components of the interventionist framework mean for a student like Mauricio? In a traditional model, Mauricio would be separated from peers based on his disability. But with the interventionist framework, he has access to the same curriculum as his peers and receives targeted instruction to address his needs and interests, the same as any of his peers. Still, the benefits of this system don't come without strategic effort.

Key Benefits of of Interventionist Framework	Key Challenges to Overcome to Ensure Success
• **Collaboration** The interventionist framework relies on equal responsibility of educators and on more collaborative working relationships to support the holistic personal and learning needs of students with disabilities and their peers. • **Competency-Based** The interventionist framework relies on student achievement of explicit competencies that can be monitored and supported continuously. • **Inclusion and Access** Students with disabilities aren't separated from their peers and are provided equal access to the same enriching, engaging general education curriculum.	• A master schedule must be designed with designated time for collaborative problem-solving to occur among educators. Those educators must be trained and supported to collaboratively approach student challenges and interests. • Interventionists and other educators must be trained to tailor and deliver content in ways that address each student's challenges with specific competencies. Otherwise students might feel stuck and fall further behind. • Educators must monitor student progress and strategize to ensure that students don't fall too far behind and aren't continuously participating in small groups that progress more slowly, thus reverting to separate educational tracks.

CONCLUSION

Because of the focus on explicit competencies and greater collaboration among educators, the shift to competency-based systems underway at Westminster and other districts provides the potential for greater inclusion and engagement for students with disabilities like Mauricio. Even so, the team at Sherrelwood Elementary and within the Westminster Public Schools would be the first to note that there is more work to do to close achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their peers. Nevertheless, in scaling the interventionist framework, they have begun to answer a key question plaguing the competency-based education field nationally: How do we turn the lofty vision of this work into a real system of supports that ensure that students are actually able to accelerate in their areas of strength while allowing for remediation where they struggle?