

Flexible Grouping:

A Responsive Strategy to Meet Student Needs
in Real Time



What Is Flexible Grouping?

Flexible grouping is a highly effective strategy for creating an inclusive classroom culture that honors learner variability. Use data to put students into small groups for instruction. Your groups should change frequently in response to the lesson outcome and student needs. Students can be grouped at the same skill level or with varying skill levels.

Flexible grouping will be a key classroom practice when you return to in-person learning. Flexible grouping can support accelerated learning and address foundational skill needs. It also increases your students' engagement¹ and supports their social-emotional needs.

Flexible grouping supports students with disabilities — the 1 in 5.² It helps students get the right support, in the right way, at the right time. You can deliver individual support and intervention within the general education classroom, rather than removing students.³ When flexible grouping is an expected routine for all students, it reduces the stigma the 1 in 5 can experience from working more frequently with the teacher. When used for collaborative learning activities, flexible grouping supports the 1 in 5 in using their assets.

1 Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. (2014). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. ASCD.

2 Castle, S., Baker Deniz, C., & Tortora, M. (2005). Flexible grouping and student learning in a high-needs school. *Education and Urban Society*, 37(2), 139–150.

3 Ross, D., & Fisher, D. (2009). Talking in class builds English learners' proficiency. *California English*, 14(4), 10–12.

Why Flexible Grouping Meets the Needs of the Post-COVID-19 Classroom

This spring, NCLD and Boston University's CERES Institute surveyed over 2,400 teachers. We asked about their perceptions and feelings on the school year and how their students handled learning during the pandemic, particularly those with learning and attention challenges. We heard feedback on lessons learned throughout the pandemic, including what teachers want to keep for next year and what they hope would change.

One key finding was that smaller student-to-teacher ratios increased teacher confidence and self-efficacy. As the student-to-teacher ratio decreased, teachers felt more confident in their abilities to address the individual needs of their students. Teachers also identified a strong need for strategies to support students' grade-level learning and for strategies to support the unique learning needs of students with learning and attention issues.

Additionally, to meet the needs of all students next school year, four in ten teachers said they need strategies to keep students engaged and motivated, strategies to catch students up to grade level, and social and emotional learning support for students. In fact, over two in five teachers identified flexible grouping as a strategy they will implement to address these needs! Flexible grouping provides you a structure for delivering targeted, individualized instruction to small groups of students.



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How to Implement Flexible Grouping

As you return to in-person learning, use peer collaboration and small group instruction to meet academic and social-emotional needs. Try these moves to implement flexible grouping in your classroom.



Go-To Teacher Moves in Any Setting



Additional Considerations for Hybrid Settings

Identify your learning outcome. The objective will inform the group size and make-up.	Group students according to their location. Keep virtual students together and in-person students together
Determine student needs using data appropriate for the task. What student skills will be required for the task? Can you group students to complement skill levels and needs? How can the task use student interests to maximize engagement?	Consider student personalities. Aim for a balance of introverts and extroverts.
Set group norms with your students.	Modify group norms for virtual students. For example, when can students use the chat?
Practice routines and transitions to and from flexible grouping locations.	Set expectations for virtual transitions too. For example, how long does a student have to join a breakout room?
Provide the whole group explicit instruction to present key vocabulary and engage background knowledge.	Provide the whole group explicit instruction on the use of technology.
Reduce social anxiety. Provide your students the steps needed to complete a task, one step at a time. Assign roles to students like a reader and a recorder. Use sentence stems.	Build in extra time for an icebreaker. Give students individual thinking time. Use the chat to share initial ideas to start the conversation.
Check for understanding of the learning activity, at each step. Provide immediate feedback.	Create multiple breakout rooms so you can “move” from group to group easily.
Debrief by asking students how the learning experience was and how to improve.	Use a Jamboard, Google Doc, or Kudoboard to capture feedback from students.

How will I integrate flexible grouping into my daily practice?

Progress Monitoring Is the Key to Effective Flexible Grouping

A key element to flexible grouping is collecting, analyzing, and responding to student data. Meaningful progress monitoring is even more important as schools emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Without effective progress monitoring, you run the risk of misunderstanding where challenges lie and potentially inappropriately referring students for special education.

Ongoing progress monitoring helps identify students who need individualized support. Progress monitoring can also ensure that students in an accelerated learning environment are mastering content. If students are not on track, progress monitoring identifies who needs timely intervention.

When implementing flexible grouping, be aware that groups – or students – might present their learning differently. You should consider multiple ways to determine if students mastered the task. This flexibility in assessment is critical to determining if the 1 in 5 mastered a task or skill. Consider using rubrics to provide a consistent method for assessing students when providing flexibility in the ways they can demonstrate those skills.

Learn More

[Flexible Grouping: What You Need to Know \(Understood\)](#)

A research-backed, expert-vetted, and classroom teacher-reviewed article on flexible grouping, including additional ideas for implementing the strategy and applying the practice to distance learning.

[Distance Learning Toolkit: Key Practices to Support Students Who Learn Differently \(Understood\)](#)

A toolkit to help educators meet the needs of all students during distance learning. It includes additional ideas for implementing flexible grouping.

[High-Leverage Practice: Establish a Consistent, Organized, and Respectful Learning Environment \(Council for Exceptional Children\)](#)

A 20-minute video designed to augment professional learning for establishing a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment. The video:

- Describes important steps
- Shows how a variety of teachers implement the practice with all students, not just students with learning and attention issues

[Differentiated Instruction: Maximizing the Learning of All Students \(IRIS Center\)](#)

Three-hour interactive, multimedia learning module for educators. Topics include:

- Understanding the key elements of differentiated instruction
- Differentiating instruction based on students' readiness level, interests, and learning needs
- Differentiating instruction for three main instructional components: content, process, and product
- Evaluating and grading differentiated products
- Preparing students and classrooms for differentiated instruction

[Ability Grouping, Tracking and Grouping Alternatives \(Learning for Justice\)](#)

Five-minute video in which experts discuss the history, practice, and perils of grouping students for classroom instruction according to their perceived abilities, as well as alternatives.

A Note to School, District, and State Leaders

As part of the American Rescue Plan Act's \$121.9B for K–12 schools,⁴ 20% of each district's funds must be set aside to address learning loss. Flexible grouping is a strategy worth investing in with these funds. It meets the needs of all learners, but especially those identified as students with disabilities and English learners.⁵ And it works for accelerating learning and addressing foundational skill needs.

Students will be returning in the fall with varied learning needs. It will be essential to determine where students are performing and what kinds of supports they need. Flexible grouping can support them – and teachers – in meeting those needs while also ensuring that students are learning grade-appropriate content.

We also know that many school districts are opting to expand tutoring availability. Effective tutoring goes beyond giving students more practice opportunities with the support of an adult. It needs to be implemented using data, high-quality instructional materials, and effective structures. Again, using the principles of flexible grouping can ensure that tutoring services are maximized and meet student needs.

For more ideas on implementing flexible grouping, check out [Forward Together: A School Leader's Guide to Creating Inclusive Schools](#) for a comprehensive guide on implementing this strategy, as well as others that will meet the needs of the 1 in 5 and all students. Additional school, district, and state-level policy recommendations to support educators can be found in [this resource](#).

4 Tavalin, K., Brennan, K., Mandlawitz, M., and Walsh, S. (2021, May). American Rescue Plan Act Overview: Understanding the New Law and Its Impact on Education [Webinar]. Council for Exceptional Children.
https://exceptionalchildren.org/may2021freeresource?_zs=4rnn1&_zmi=awHr

5 IRIS Center. Flexible grouping. Teaching English language learners: Effective instruction practices (online learning module). IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University.

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Author: Lindsay DeHartchuck, M.A.

Expert Reviewers: George M. Batsche, Ed.D. and Douglas Fisher, Ph.D.

Teacher Contributor: Julian Saavedra, M.A.



[NCLD](#) works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues — by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. We're working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work, and in life.



[Understood](#) is dedicated to growing and shaping a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work; a world where people with all types of disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy meaningful careers; a world where more communities embrace differences. Because differences make the world worth exploring. Differences define who we are. Differences are our greatest strength.

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