HLP 17:
Use Flexible Groupings

High-Leverage Practices
for Students with Disabilities

Teachers group students to develop an identified skill or to complete a learning activity. The groups change often based on students' needs, skill development, or knowledge. That said, how teachers make decisions to use groups, how the groups are constructed, and what type of instruction is delivered all hinges on a skilled educator making nimble decisions to support student learning needs. Although the use of flexible groupings is an HLP on its own, this practice requires teachers to use other HLPs or evidence-based practices within the group to move the needle on student performance. Decisions about group size and instruction to be delivered within is up to the members of the educational team (HLPs 2 & 6).

This resource is intended to support school leaders looking to embed the HLPs in professional development, implementation, teacher observation and feedback efforts at their school site.

The major source for content within this resource is the chapter by Larry Maheady, Tim Zgliczynski, and Gliset Colon in *High-Leverage Practices in the Inclusive Classroo*m; the book *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education: The Final Report of the HLP Writing Team*, and content on **www.highleveragepractices.org**.

Teachers Who Effectively Use Flexible Groupings

- Vary grouping size (e.g., whole or small group) and type (e.g., same-ability/homogeneous or mixed-ability/heterogeneous groups) based upon students' instructional needs and learning objectives.
- Use same-ability (homogeneous) small groups to provide focused, intensive instruction for students with similar instructional strengths, needs, and/or interests, to help them meet short-term instructional goals and objectives.
- Use mixed-ability small groups to increase engagement in academic discussions and the sharing of knowledge and skills and to improve interpersonal relationships among students with and without disabilities across racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Use cooperative learning structures (e.g., jigsaw, quiz-quiz-trade) to meet a wide range of instructional objectives (i.e., academic, behavioral, interpersonal).
- Carefully monitor students' learning and interactions between group members when students are participating in group work.
- Hold students accountable, both individually and collectively, to strengthen students' personal accountability and promote positive interdependence.
- Provide groups with frequent and varied opportunities to respond to promote active engagement of all students.

Tips for School Leaders to Support Teachers

- Provide educators with instruction, professional development, and/or coaching on how and when to use flexible groupings.
- Observe educators providing instruction within flexible grouping and provide feedback and/or coaching on its effectiveness, as well as support in improving its use as needed.
- Encourage co-teaching partners, individual teachers, and teams to be creative (and flexible!) with grouping students, reminding them of the multiple instructional objectives that varied types and sizes of groups can address.
- Implementing and managing flexible groups can be challenging – be sure to check in with teachers who may be having difficulty, help them identify specific challenges, and work with them on mitigating these issues.

Questions to Prompt Discussion, Self-Reflection, and Observer Feedback

- What is the advantage of using flexible grouping during instruction?
- How should decisions be made regarding timing and use of various grouping types?
- Why is it still important for the teacher to provide frequent and varied opportunities to respond, even when students are participating in a structured group activity?
- Is there a "best" type of flexible grouping type/size to use? Why or why not?
- What are some of the barriers to organizing and implementing flexible groups? What are some potential solutions to these barriers?

Online Resources

[High-Leverage Practices: A Professional Development Guide for School Leaders](#)
A downloadable online guide providing school leaders, including administrators, principals, mentors and coaches, with practical tools for engaging staff members in learning about how high-leverage practices can enhance student learning in the school and district.

Books

Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching.* Guilford Press.

Journal Articles

Castle, S., Deniz, C. B., & Tortora, M. (2005). Flexible grouping and student learning in a high-needs school. *Education and Urban Society, 37*(2), 139–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124504270787

Iversen, S., Tunmer, W. E., & Chapman, J. W. (2005). The effects of varying group size on the reading recovery approach to preventive early intervention. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 38*(5), 456–472. https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194050380050801

Slavin, R. E. (1987). Ability grouping and student achievement in elementary schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 57*(3), 293–336. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543057003293

Slavin, R. E. (1990). Achievement effects of ability grouping in secondary schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 60*(3), 471–499. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543060003471

Stevens, R. J., & Slavin, R. E. (1990). When cooperative learning improves the achievement of students with mild disabilities: A response to Tateyama-Sniezek. *Exceptional Children, 57*(3), 276–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440299105700311

Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., Moody, S. W., & Elbaum, B. (2001). Instructional grouping for reading for students with LD. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 36*(3), 131–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/105345120103600301

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