Differentiation is a process teachers use to enhance a student’s learning by improving the match between a learner’s unique characteristics and the various components of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
Instructional Decision Making is a systematic process of using student achievement and other data to guide instructional decisions. It is supported through the Iowa Department of Education’s Instructional Decision Making (IDM) initiative. IDM is designed to improve the learning of all students. IDM is the terminology used by the Department of Education and the stakeholders designing and supporting the initiative aimed at increasing the use of this systematic process in Iowa schools. There are other terms used by individuals and groups to describe processes that contain the same essential elements as IDM. These terms, initiatives, or models are not in opposition with IDM. Indeed, they support one another. Schools may want to use their own terminology or labels as the process is incorporated at the local level.

Instructional Decision Making supports a unified schoolwide or districtwide system of assessment, curriculum, and instruction addressing the needs of high, average, and low-performing learners. The process of using data systematically to make instructional decisions provides a framework for aligning resources to meet the needs of groups of students as well as individual students.

Instructional Decision Making is not...

- an instructional program. It is a project to assist schools to establish a framework to make decisions about instructional needs based on student performance data.
- intended to promote or encourage placement into programs, rather it is to promote the match between instruction and student need.
- intended to focus only on students who are below expected levels of proficiency. There are gifted students who require significant differentiation or acceleration.
- Something that can be implemented independently. Instead, it is a cooperative effort of teachers, administrators and support staff.

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Instructional Decision Making and Continuous Improvement

The process of using data to match instruction to student needs uses a continuous improvement model of needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. These same four stages are present in the Iowa Professional Development Model, the Iowa Support System to Support Schools in Need of Assistance, and the Heartland Problem Solving model.

- Continuous improvement is the process in which all schools engage to plan and improve systems. Continuous improvement efforts should include all students (those who struggle and those who achieve at high levels).
- The Iowa Professional Development Model focuses on improving student achievement. To do this, educators must have the skills, knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations needed to provide quality instruction.
- The process used when a school is identified as SINA follows the same four steps, but is targeted toward a particular area of need and includes specific requirements.
- In Heartland, the Problem Solving Model has been used to identify student needs and implement instructional interventions. It has been utilized within a system of teacher and parent referral.

Instructional Decision Making uses the same four-step process as each of these, with the focus on meeting the instructional needs of all students.

Key Features of Instructional Decision Making

- Instructional Decision Making focuses at the student level.
- Plans are developed to ensure appropriate instruction for all students even at the individual level if needed.
- The structure allows immediate feedback regarding effects.
- The process is repeated frequently throughout the school year.
- Data are used to match students with similar needs to resources and strategies to meet those needs.
- It is not just all children...but each child!

Benefits of Instructional Decision Making

- Instructional Decision Making will help educators to know immediately, “Is what we are doing working?”
- Schools will know which children need something different.
- Educators will be able to intervene early.
- Schools will make the most efficient use of existing resources by matching them to student needs. i.e. gifted, Title I, at-risk, special education, ESL. (Different kinds of data may need to be collected based on students’ unique needs.)
- IDM will assist to streamline and integrate the use of data.
- Staff will be empowered to make effective instructional decisions for all students.
- If data are continually collected, and if decisions are based on the data, student achievement will improve.
Foundational Principles

- There is shared responsibility for student achievement across the entire school community.
- All students are part of the general education system.
- The best way to address student-learning needs is to be proactive.
- Differentiated instruction is an essential part of an instructional program.
- Accurate reliable assessment data are essential to determine the instructional abilities of all students.
- Instructional decisions are based on multiple sources of data.
- The effectiveness of instruction is routinely monitored; ongoing formative data are used to indicate when changes in instruction are needed.
- Parents are vital members of the team to support students.
- Administrators and teacher leadership teams are vital in the instructional leadership and data-based decision making of a district and school.
- Teachers have adequate tools, strategies, support, and resources to meet the needs of all students.
- Quality professional development is essential to support implementation of a systemic effort to support IDM.
- A variety of research-based practices will be needed to address the needs of learners (not one size fits all).
- Each school has a unique culture, and a unique set of resources and needs requiring a tailored system of decision-making.
- Individuals with skills in data-based decision making will be needed to support the process.

Essential Steps or Components

As stated earlier, Instructional Decision Making is based on a continuous improvement cycle. This cycle is repeated throughout the school year attending to the needs of all students including those in general education, special education, at-risk programming, English Language Learners (ELL) and gifted and talented students. The specifics of implementation are dependent on the school, but there are some basic steps or components that will be present in every site.

1. A process (based on student performance data) will be utilized to identify those students who may be in need of differentiated instruction and what their specific instruction needs might be.
2. Students are grouped for instruction with some students needing more intensive instruction than others.
3. The progress of those students receiving differentiated instruction is monitored as well as the implementation of that instruction. Changes are made as needed.
4. The process is repeated (usually three times per year).

Although students are grouped and individual instructional needs are met, data must also be used to consider if improvement to the core instructional program is needed.
### Instruction

Three levels of instruction are typically needed.

**Core Instruction:** Comprehensive instruction provided in general education for all students. All students must have access to core instruction.*

**Supplemental Instruction:** Instruction provided to some students that is differentiated to meet their needs. This instruction may look very different based upon student need. Some students may need preteaching or reteaching.

**Intensive Instruction:** Instruction provided to a few students who need significant differentiation and greater intensity in their instruction.

*Participation in core instruction at the same level as same age peers may not be appropriate for some students.

### Assessments

**Screening Assessments** are linked to district standards and benchmarks and used to identify students at-risk of not meeting expectations or those who are exceeding expectations. (Screening in some situations needs to occur at least 3 times per year.)

**Diagnostic assessment processes** are used to specify the individual needs of students (Administered when indicated by data.)

**Progress monitoring and formative assessments** are used to determine the effects of instruction and to make instructional changes when needed. (Monthly, biweekly, or weekly)

**Summative assessments** are large scale assessments linked to statewide learning outcomes. In Iowa the measures primarily used are ITBS and ITED.

### What will it take for an IDM initiative to be successful?

The following components of effective continuous improvement will be necessary for success with Instructional Decision Making.

1. Focus on Instruction
2. Continuous Staff Development
3. Continuous Assessment of Student Performance and Implementation
4. Sustained Effort
5. Technical Assistance
6. Willingness to Lead, (Administrative support and teacher leadership)
7. Policy Support,
8. Cross Role Learning (Requiring Collaboration)
9. Time

(From Every Child Reads)
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Is this initiative required?
No. This initiative is supported by the state and by Heartland AEA 11, but is not mandated.

2. How does this project fit with other initiatives?
IDM is a systematic decision-making framework for supporting effective practices to meet the needs of all students. It is a way of looking at and analyzing student achievement and other data that supports other initiatives within a system. What IDM adds to other initiatives is a focus on the use of data to determine that each student's educational needs are being met. Defining a comprehensive system for using data can streamline and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of existing building practices. For example, the CSIP and IPDM processes involve collecting and analyzing student data to set goals, develop a plan, and determine content for professional development. IDM ensures that we are examining data from each student to meet the needs of each and every learner and continues to provide specific student data to assist with formative and summative evaluation. Effectively using CSIP, IPDM, and IDM together will help more students be successful.

3. How does Instructional Decision Making support differentiation of instruction?
This process directly supports the notion of differentiation. While few argue the need to differentiate, the decisions about what and how to differentiate for each student are more difficult. Content, process, context, and student characteristics should be considered as decisions are made about the individual student’s needs for differentiation. These considerations should be data based. Differentiating core instruction, however, will not address the needs of individual learners who require skill-building instruction or advanced learning. Likewise, providing supplemental, skill-building instruction for short periods does not mean that students will be able to handle the large group instruction provided throughout the day. IDM looks at all parts of the curriculum, ensuring that the core is differentiated and there is differentiated instruction for students who need it.

5. Isn't this a special education initiative?
No. Instructional Decision Making is focused on the continual challenge of meeting the needs of ALL students. It provides the framework for creating a seamless process of decision making across ALL levels of student instructional need. A seamless process emphasizes shared responsibility for the students within a school and creates a seamless response to the students instructional needs using various resources, programs, and services developed for students of similar instruction needs. Identification for such services as ESL, gifted and talented, Title I, special education, and other targeted services and programs can be enhanced using this more systematic process.

6. This sounds like problem solving. Don't we already do this?
IDM applies problem solving practices in a systemic manner. The intent of IDM is to be proactive in response to instructional needs rather than reactive. It uses a screening process to identify low- and high-performing students at risk for not having their needs met, and provides intervention at the earliest possible moment.

7. Isn't this a deficit model?
No, the IDM is inclusive of all students. Students whose performance is exceeding expectations have unique needs that should be addressed through significant differentiation or acceleration. The assessments used to identify these students may vary, but the framework of using data to guide instructional decisions applies to all students.

8. Will schools be required to use certain assessments and instructional programs?
No. Each school will determine which assessments they will use and what instructional practices will be implemented to respond to student needs.

9. Isn't it more important that we improve our core instruction. (Won't this take away from those efforts?)
Improvements to core instruction are essential and continuous. At the same time core instruction is improving, there will be students with individual needs. Doing both is our responsibility and it is the only way we can truly serve all students.