

Gap Closing: Grade 6

The question:

*How can I, and why should I, support the use of recently released “Gap Closing Strategy for Grade 6 Number Sense” to close achievement gaps in my school?
(Elementary principal)*

Suggestions:

I. SET CLEAR GOALS

Continually connect and re-connect classroom based strategies such as Gap Closing to the broader moral imperative of education. Principals interviewed as part of the Gap Closing research noted how seamlessly the strategy fit into their school improvement plans.

“The materials were a perfect match given our numeracy focus on three part problem solving and we loved that the materials, similar to our school-wide plans, directly focused on our at-risk students.”

When included in your school improvement plans the Gap Closing Strategy becomes another important piece of what Fullan (2003) calls a school’s *strong internal accountability* mechanism, i.e., where students’ instructional needs are constantly being identified and addressed through timely instruction.

“Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based society.”
Fullan, 2003

Many schools are selecting goals and strategies that support differentiated instruction, small group guided instruction, and ongoing assessments linked to the TLCP process or learning cycles. In such cases, principals who have used the Gap Closing Strategy report that they were logical and welcomed additions in their school improvement plans.

“Our comfort with small group differentiated literacy instruction was certainly more refined when compared to our teaching practice around numeracy. Gap Closing increased teacher confidence with small group math instruction by offering focused and scaffolded lessons matched to student need”

2. ALIGN RESOURCES WITH PRIORITIES

The most common reasons teachers balk at new initiatives include time management (*not enough time in the day*), class management (*I need more support*) and work-load (*I am already too busy*). Assessment expert Douglas Reeves (2007) notes school leaders who wish to pave the way for successful implementation must clearly and deliberately *“pull the weeds before teachers can plant the flowers.”* This means purposefully aligning needed and predictable resources to support the strategy.

“Part of my role is to respond to teacher need, if they are motivated to try new initiatives like Gap Closing that will help their students, then I must listen to their needs and either get the resources in their hands or offer the supports.”

Successful strategies used by Principals to support the effective use of the Gap Closing Strategy have primarily centred around providing *time* and *extra supports*. Examples include providing teacher release time to familiarize themselves with materials and collaborate with colleagues, or aligning support staff such as Special Education Resource Teachers, Teacher Librarians, Learning Support Teachers, or Educational Assistants to overcome classroom teacher’s initial management concerns. Principals interviewed have also reported providing school funds, if needed, and aligning or expanding collaborative planning time for teachers to monitor and plan next steps for students using the gap closing strategy.

3. PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CULTURES

Principals committed to creating collaborative work time dedicated to supporting the gap closing strategy have reported the greatest staff “buy in” and excitement. When teachers, along with administrators, take the time to monitor and plan next steps for the individual students involved in the gap closing strategy they maximize the capacity building of their staff.

“You have to be a learner with learners. You have to know where things are in terms of current practice, what is available out there, and offer it to your teachers. This creates a focus for and desire to collaborate...my teachers love to collaborate around current practices that produce results”

Many principals reported they were able to support collaborative planning around the gap closing strategy by piggybacking on existing collaborative structures.

“The project has really promoted a collaborative culture that has sustained itself. The teachers, seeing fantastic student results, are now encouraging each other and demonstrating teacher leadership”

“Collaborative cultures are not always connected to learning and achievement. When they concentrate on planning staff social activities, developing student behaviour codes, or swapping test-prep strategies, they become just another distraction from the core tasks of teaching”

Hargreaves, 2009

4. USE DATA INFORMED DECISIONS

Andy Hargreaves (2009) notes, “continuous monitoring through the effective use of data by teachers who know how to blend evidence with creativity and intuition in their teaching has succeeded with even the most traditionally underserved students in the most unlikely settings.” Effective use of Gap Closing Data will sustain and fuel further teacher efficacy because it has revealed impressive student learning through its targeted focussed instructional approach.

“Our teachers are so excited about Gap Closing because they were able to see the gains, the results were there in our neediest students. The diagnostic materials and other assessments like ONAP are instrumental in this!”

Once data is collected by teachers, principals who are actively engaged must examine the results and celebrate the growth with students and teachers.

The planned use of data is a common characteristic of high-performing schools”

Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008

5. ENGAGE IN COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS |

For principals to properly support and champion the gap closing strategy, they must have a deep knowledge of the materials and know what effective math instruction looks like.

The gap closing strategy requires a commitment to assessment based small group instruction. For example, Gap Closing writer Marion Small (2009) notes, “Teachers are not using educational time optimally if they either are teaching beyond a student’s zone of proximal development or are providing instruction on material the student can handle independently.”

With any implementation there will be detractors. In such cases Principals must exhibit persistence by engaging in courageous conversations about the gap closing strategy and how the materials will prove effective. This requires an authentic knowledge of good math instruction and a willingness to trump misguided opinion with informed facts.

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Gap Closing Strategy Materials for Grade 6 Number Sense are available for download on www.edugains.ca

Research Context and Evidence - Gap Closing: Grade 6 is available at <hyperlink>