

# A Quality Assignment Routine

## Planning High Quality Assignments

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**"Clear verbal directions are necessary for students to process information that will enable them to complete assignments at a high level of quality."**

The Quality Assignment Completion Routine is a teaching routine based upon validated characteristics of classroom assignments that students and teachers perceive to be enjoyable and satisfying. As students attempt to reach important learning outcomes established by the teacher, they are more likely to finish content-related assignments they find personally challenging. In addition, the routine includes explanation factors to be used by teachers when verbally presenting particular assignments to students. Clear verbal directions are necessary for students to process important information that will enable them to complete assignments at a high level of quality.

The Quality Assignment Completion Routine includes a Planning Phase, an Explanation Phase, and an Evaluation Phase. Like other teaching routines previously developed at the Center for Research on Learning (CRL), each phase is interactive in nature, and contains methods and procedures for teachers to use when guiding students to complete tasks successfully. For example, during the Planning Phase, students plan worthwhile assignments with the teacher. During the Explanation Phase, students are taught how to set goals and record critical assignment information. During the Evaluation Phase, students are taught procedures for evaluating the quality of their own assignments before turning them in to the teacher.

An important element throughout the assignment completion routine is student choice. Offering students appropriate choices in assignment completion gives them power and control over their own learning, thus

enhancing the intrinsic motivation to create quality work.

This article will be presented in two parts. Part 1 will deal primarily with the Planning Phase. The article will begin with the rationales and background information that prompted development of the routine. Next, an overview of the Planning Phase will be presented that includes a description of each planning step, guidelines for how to use each of the steps, and methods and procedures for involving students in assignment planning through the use of Assignment Expert Teams.

### Rationales and Background Information

It is important to understand that the nature of classroom assignments given in mainstream settings represent a major vehicle for all students to learn content. Low student motivation to complete assignments is a major concern of teachers. As teachers learn more effective ways to explain assignments to students with LD (who often lack effective and efficient strategies for assignment completion), the teacher will have an impact on the students' ability to address a major setting demand.

### Literature Review

In order to identify the assignment characteristics and teacher explanation factors that are incorporated into this teaching routine, an extensive review of the literature was conducted to determine what principles teachers should follow to design assignments that promote positive learning outcomes for students. Although no empirical evidence could be found on what constitutes an

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effective assignment and what methods teachers might employ to design such assignments, some recommendations emerged from researchers to indicate that assignments should contain the following characteristics: be meaningful and appropriate for the established instructional objective; offer variety in format; provide the right amount of challenge for students to achieve success when applying reasonable effort; include student choices, points of view, and previous



learning experience; and, contain clear directions for students on how the assignment is to be completed. However, no information could be found on what students perceive to be important assignment considerations.

A search through the literature on assignment explanations indicated that assignments should be clearly explained, well-integrated into class lessons, and students be made aware of the value of completing assignments. However, the literature also suggests that in practice such guidelines may not be routinely followed. Again, no information could be found on what students perceive to be important explanation factors for teachers to include when giving assignments in class.

The motivation literature was also investigated for factors that positively influence assignment-completion effort by students. The ideas of three motivation theorists, (Deci, 1985; Glasser, 1986; and Keller, 1983) were deemed appropriate for inclusion in the routine. Collectively, these

theorists propose that intrinsic motivation to learn and perform is enhanced when teachers create classroom environments that allow students to fulfill their basic human psychological needs associated with learning. An element that is emphasized by all three theorists, and is also suggested from the education literature, is that of student choice. Students should have a major voice not only in specifying the types of assignments they are most willing to complete, but also in the types of assignment-completion information that is most helpful for them to satisfactorily complete assignments.

#### Development Research

After an analysis of the findings from the literature, a research study was conducted with a middle school population of students and teachers to determine what teachers and students perceive to be the characteristics of highly satisfying assignments and critical explanation factors. Ten social studies teachers, 14 students with learning disabilities (LD), and 10 students who were not handicapped participated in focus group discussions to identify what students and teachers perceive to be the elements of high-quality assignments and assignment explanations. From these discussions, a survey was developed and administered to 71 middle school teachers, 71 students with LD, and 102 regular education students enrolled in grades 6 through 8. The subsequent analysis of the survey data revealed all mean ratings by teachers and students to be above 5.5 (important) for all the assignment characteristics and explanation factors identified by the

focus groups.

Data also reveal that while both LD and NLD students generally agreed on the order of importance of the assignment characteristics, some disagreements occurred between students and teachers. For example, that the element of student choice was rated first in order of importance by NLD students and second by LD students, while teachers rated this characteristic as number 12. The 12 assignment characteristics and 10 explanation factors that were validated by the survey are the foundation on which the Quality Assignment Routine is based. An explanation of each assignment characteristic appears in the steps of The Planning Phase below.

#### Overview of The Planning Phase

The purpose of the Planning Phase is for teachers to prepare content-related assignments that a class of diverse learners might like, enjoy doing, and be motivated to complete to a high level of quality. In addition, teachers are encouraged to include students in assignment planning.

#### Steps for Planning High-Quality Assignments

The associated subroutine, "PLAN" includes four steps for planning assignments. The mnemonic device,

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**"... intrinsic motivation to learn and perform is enhanced when teachers create classroom environments that allow students to fulfill their basic psychological needs."**

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"PLAN" was devised to help teachers remember each step of the planning subroutine.

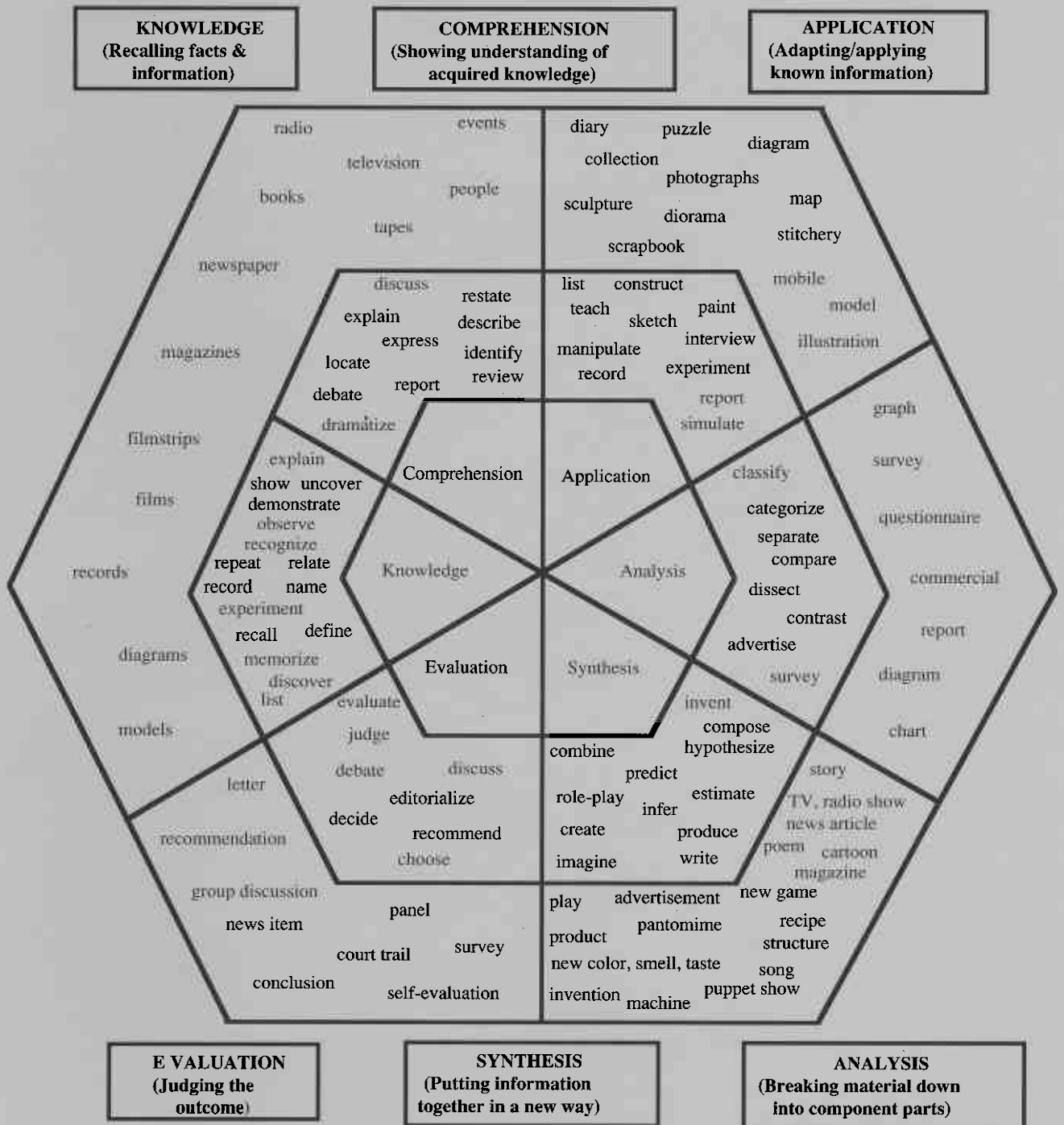
**Step 1: Prepare a meaningful assignment based on a well-defined instructional objective.** Here, teachers are to think about each assignment they plan in relation to a

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**\*BLOOM'S ASSIGNMENT WEB**

Note to Teachers: Understanding what students are required to do within each of Bloom's thinking level categories helps us to better define our instructional objectives in relation to the content we are teaching. As a result, we can plan more meaningful assignments.

The inside section of this web represents Bloom's thinking level domain. The middle section lists action verbs that identify what students might be expected to do in relation to each thinking level domain. The outside section suggests possible assignments that can be planned for students to match what they are required to do in each domain.



\*Information in this table was taken from Taxonomy of Educational Objective for the Cognitive Domain (Bloom, 1956)

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particular combination of content they are currently teaching and what important learning outcome would be achieved for students if they completed the assignment. In doing so, they ensure that a clear, understood purpose is inherent in the assignment. Teachers can use Bloom's Assignment Web as useful planning tool to help them create purpose for their assignments and consider the cognitive level on which objectives and the assignment will be based (See page3).

**Step 2: Link planning decisions to possible student motivational outcomes.** Here, teachers are to think about factors within the assignment that might affect a student's effort to complete a high quality assignment on time. More specifically, they are to specify any pitfalls or problems students may face as they complete the assignment. In addition, teachers are to consider the assignment in relation to the following assignment characteristics: optimal challenge for all students in the class, so students are provided with assignments that represent the appropriate level of

difficulty; personal relevance factors, so students can connect the assignment to their own lives and interests; format variety, so students will not be bored by having to complete assignments in the same way again and again; student choices, so learners can exert a certain amount of control within the dimensions of the assignment-completion process; creative expression opportunities, so students can approach the task in unique and imaginative ways; and opportunities for interpersonal/social interactions so students can work with one or more persons to complete the

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### EXAMPLE OF A HIGH QUALITY ASSIGNMENT

**Step 1:** Prepare a meaningful assignment based on a well-defined instructional objective.

Content: The Civil War Topic: Plantation Life

- a. Instructional objective: Students will be able to record events in the life of a young person who lived on a plantation during civil war times. (Bloom's Knowledge and Comprehension Domains)
- b. Purpose: To practice and extend knowledge about what it was like to have lived as a young person during the Civil War.
- c. Assignment: Create a written diary or audio describing your life had you lived on a plantation during the Civil War.

**Step 2 :** Link planning decisions to possible motivational factors affecting all students.

- a. Personal Relevance factors: Creative thinking over drill and practice; opportunity to pretend and choose favorite life events that appeal to individual students.
- b. Variety: Diary and/or an oral presentation format over traditional "list of events."
- c. Possible Student choices: Oral or written format; personal selection of outside resources; opportunity to work with a partner; choice of life events; due date; artistic design of diary; allowing students to help set criteria for quality work.
- d. Optimal Challenge: Meets the students' modality strength (oral or written); selection of materials can meet varying reading levels; peer help is possible.
- e. Pitfalls: Students may be unfamiliar with diary format (show example); tape recorders may be unavailable (announce location and check out procedures).

**Step 3:** A range clear, well-organized directions to be later explained to students.

- a. Resources: Class notes; textbook; imagination; outside library books and articles; family histories.
- b. Evaluation Criteria: For diary: 7 entries that describe events and feelings; use of 5 vocabulary words learned in class; correct spelling. For recording: 7 recorded events; 3 x 5 card to be turned in with tape that lists 5 vocabulary words that were used.
- c. Action Steps: Review class notes and vocabulary; select references; share ideas; create an outline; determine oral or written presentation; make your diary; check accuracy of events, vocabulary, and spelling.
- d. Due Date: Thursday, May 1, or Friday, May 2.

Note: This planning step represents important information for students to know in order to complete the assignment satisfactorily.

**Step 4:** Note time and details for discussing assignment completion results with students.

- a. Date: May 7.
- b. Discussion Ideas: Provide teacher feedback on: how well the class did on the assignment and how overall class performance might/could improve. Investigate student satisfaction on: what they believe they learned as a result of having completed this assignment; what they enjoyed/did not enjoy doing on this assignment.

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assignment.

**Step 3: Arrange clear directions.**

Teachers are to consider all the information students need to know and understand in order to complete the assignment satisfactorily. The information generated during this planning step will later be presented to students in an organized way. When planning clear directions, teachers are to think about the action steps students will need to take in order to complete the assignment satisfactorily. In addition, teachers are encouraged to include the following assignment characteristics:

completion time consideration- specify the due date and provide students with time to begin the assignment during class

product evaluation criteria- designate how the final product will be judged

available resource lists- consider the materials and human resources that might be needed.

**Step 4: Note the time and details for the task-evaluation phase.**

Teachers need to plan time and a process for evaluation of students' personal satisfaction with the completed assignment and its outcomes. Teachers also need to plan for their evaluation of the usefulness of the assignment. This step is intended to incorporate methods and procedures for giving assignment completion feedback, another assignment characteristic. Ideas for giving assignment completion feedback begins with the Planning Phase and ends with the Evaluation Phase of the routine. More details on implementation of the PLAN steps, and suggestions for how to use them can be obtained by writing to Joyce Rademacher, 820 Lake Park Dr., Oak Point, Texas 75068. An example of a high quality assignment is on page 4.

**Results of Preliminary Studies**

The Planning Phase was implemented by six middle-school social studies teachers from grades 6,

7, and 8. Prior to training, the Experimental Teachers' mean percentage score related to using the planning steps was 45.6%. It was 99.4% after training, mean scores for a comparison group of teachers was 46.9% before the study and 41.3% after the study. Results based on the Experimental Teachers' performance indicate that teachers can learn to plan/design assignments according to a set of validated high-quality assignment dimensions.

**"Experimental teachers were significantly more satisfied at the end of the study than at the beginning of the study with their current methods of planning assignments."**

Satisfaction measures were also gathered from teachers and students on the Planning Phase. The mean satisfaction ratings from a survey indicated that Experimental Teachers were significantly more satisfied at the end of the study than at the beginning of the study with their current methods of planning assignments. In addition, written responses to a feedback questionnaire indicated that teachers were more aware of including the 12 validated assignment characteristics in their planning of content-related assignments. More specifically, the teachers mentioned that they included more student choice, more variety, and clearer directions for assignments. Teachers also made recommendations on how the instructional materials might be simplified.

**The Use of Assignment Expert Teams within the Planning Phase**

One way in which teachers can provide structured choices for students in the implementation of the Planning Phase of the routine is

through the use of Assignment Expert Teams. Assignment Expert Teams provide an avenue for establishing positive working partnerships between students and teachers for the purpose of improving assignment completion for the whole class.

Guidelines for using Assignment Expert Teams are quite simple. Expert Team members are selected by the teacher; each team includes four to eight students. Basing their selection of students for the team on classroom performance, each teacher is to select one to two students who perform in the above-average range, one to two students who generally perform in the average range, and one to two students who are students with LD and/or considered to be low achievers.

Teachers are to arrange a time for the Expert Team to meet for approximately 30 minutes outside of class. During this meeting, the teacher informs students of important content of the upcoming unit. Next, the team suggests enjoyable and beneficial assignments that correspond to unit objectives. The teacher notes the necessary information students will need to know for each assignment option. students are guided in naming particular resources, evaluation criteria for quality work, two or three action steps for completing the assignment, and due dates. This information translates into a major part of the verbal directions that will  
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**Strategram**

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## Osseo Area Schools

by  
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The Osseo Area Schools, a growing district in the northwest suburban metropolitan area of Minneapolis/St. Paul, is the fifth largest school district in the state of Minnesota. Brooklyn Junior High and Park Center Senior High in Brooklyn Park, schools on the east side of the district, serve a diverse and often transient population. The high needs of many of the students are effectively addressed through the Strategies Intervention Model.

Learning Strategies were first introduced to teachers in the Osseo schools in 1985 when Carl Skordahl, a special education supervisor, arranged for the training. Since that time, both regular education and special education teachers at elementary and secondary schools have been trained in the strategies, and strategies are taught throughout the district. This article profiles two special classes which rely heavily on strategies for curriculum—Study Skills at Brooklyn Junior High and Writing Skills at Park Center Senior High—and provides two examples of how strategies are taught in regular education settings.

### Study Skills Class

The Brooklyn Junior High special education department created a strategies/study skills class eight years ago. The class includes 20 or more seventh-grade special education students, and it is taught by two staff members. The class period is used for a strategies lesson (25 minutes) and a structured study time (20 minutes). The goal of the year-long course is to help seventh graders adapt smoothly to junior high by addressing their needs and concerns during the first weeks of school, teaching them strategies, helping them set individual goals for learning and organization, and helping them learn to use 20 minutes effectively to complete a school assignment. In addition, one day a week is called "Personal Growth Day," and social skills, adolescent issues, and disability awareness are addressed.

The 100 daily points are awarded for listening (using the SLANT Steps), participating in the day's activity, being organized for studying, and studying (20 points for each 10 minutes of studying). Students pick up a 3x5 Post-It at the beginning of the hour, and teachers record a 20-point circle for each 10 minutes the student is observed studying.

On Mondays, the students write a personal goal

for the week; they evaluate it on Friday when they turn in their totaled point sheet for a weekly grade.

The Test Taking Strategy is taught first. Students take notes for PIRATES, PASS, RUN, and ACE on index cards. Because of the large size of the group, a modified score sheet (**See Modified Test-Taking Strategy Score Sheet on page 7**) is used during Controlled Practice so that teachers can handle the volume of papers to be graded. The FIRST-Letter Mnemonic Strategy (FIRST only) is taught next, and students and teachers generate mnemonic devices for core content classes as well as completing lessons to mastery level. The Sentence Writing Strategy is also taught, and more than a school quarter is spent on simple and compound sentences. In addition, the Paraphrasing Strategy is taught as part of the reading focus for one quarter. At this time, LISTS is taught, and students complete a variety of activities associated with their textbooks.

The class has evolved into a pure strategies class, and teachers receive positive feedback about the strategies. The study component allows students time to present concerns, clean lockers and school folders/bags (for the organizationally impaired), get materials, use the strategies in the content areas, and ask questions.

### Writing Skills Class

The Writing Skills Class at Park Center was developed to meet the needs of the high number of students whose assessments indicated a deficit in written language. The curriculum includes the Sentence Writing Strategy, the Paragraph Writing Strategy, reading and spelling activities, and a word-processing program. Some groups of students complete both strategies in a year's time, going on to write 5-paragraph essays and short, research-based articles. Other groups may complete only Sentence Writing and part of Paragraph Writing.

A variety of hands-on activities and in-class generalization assignments are used during the Describe and Controlled Practice Stages. Teachers discovered that hands-on activities provided effective reviews and cooperative learning situations. The in-class generalization assignments, an interim step before generalizing to the regular education setting, were deemed necessary because, while the students seemed well able to write the various sentence types on the worksheets, their accuracy in writing floundered when they were asked to respond to questions based on their reading or lectures.

Hands-On Activities. Hands-on activities include

*(continued on page 7)*

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sorting activities for the Paragraph Writing Strategy. These include the following:

1. Topic Sentences: A series of topic sentences of each of the three types are photocopied, laminated, and cut apart. Students place them correctly on a grid with headings labeled "General," "Clueing," and "Specific."

2. Detail Sentences: Lessons from the Supplementary sections of the Student Lesson Book are reproduced to provide sorting activities. For example, Lessons 1A and 1B from the Transition Section are reproduced, laminated, and the phrases are cut apart. Students sort the phrases on grids with the 5 sequencing areas as headings. This same type of activity can be prepared using lessons on point of view and verb tense.

In-class Generalization. The in-class generalization assignments include having the students respond to simple questions about themselves using specialized formulas, then respond to reading comprehension questions which have been discussed in the full group, and finally respond independently to a series of questions based on a reading selection with a mix of sentence types.

Students Learning Strategies in the General Education Setting

Four years ago, Janet learned about SLANT at the summer KU meeting, and she presented SLANT to Brooklyn Junior High teachers at their fall workshop on study strategies. That afternoon, a seventh-grade social studies teacher asked to borrow

the overheads to present the routine to his classes. Two days later, Janet learned that all 350 seventh-grade students has been taught SLANT. Now SLANT is known school-wide and reinforced in all subject areas through direct teaching and classroom posters.

In the areas of physical education, art, industrial arts, and home economics, several steps have been modified to fit the content. For example, "Lean Forward" has been changed to "Look at the Demonstration." Teachers and parents are supportive of this strategy, and it has been quite successfully integrated into the school.

The English Department teaches the Sentence Writing Strategy at Brooklyn Junior High as well. Seventh-grade English teachers focus on simple sentences, eighth grade teachers focus on compound sentences, and complex sentences are presented in ninth-grade.

These are just a few examples (**more will be included in the next issue**) of ways that the Strategies Intervention Model has been included in two Osseo district schools to make content more accessible for students.

**Modified Test-Taking Score Sheet Directions**

1. The General and Instructions areas remain the same.
2. Test Item section: Remember; give 1 point if they make a list for main pts. Reducing, Abandoning, Estimating: give 2 pts. in each area for showing **evidence** of reduction and abandonment or using ACE (Don't check every item).
3. Test Item: 25 pts for each correctly answered sentence.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**TEST-TAKING SCORE SHEET**

Pretest \_\_\_\_\_ Controlled Practice # \_\_\_\_\_ Posttest # \_\_\_\_\_ Maintenance # \_\_\_\_\_

General:

PIRATES	
Name	
Order	
Time	
Affirmation	
Start	
Turn Back	
Survey	
Total	

Instructions:

	Underline	Respond
I #1		
I #2		
I #3		
I #4		
I #5		
Total		

Test Items:

Answers to test questions and other marks on the test show evidence of:

Remembering		(1-List)
Reducing		(2)
Abandoning		(2)
Estimating on abandoned items		(2)
Total		

Calculating the score:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 \text{General} & & \text{Instructions} & & \text{Test Item} & & \text{Test Item} \\
 \text{Total} & & \text{Total} & & \text{Total} & & \\
 \boxed{8} & + & \boxed{10} & + & \boxed{7} & + & \boxed{25} \\
 (8) & & (10) & & (7) & & (25) \\
 & & & & & = & \boxed{50} = \boxed{\phantom{00}} \% \\
 & & & & & & (Mastery = 90\%)
 \end{array}$$

(continued from page 5)

be explained later.

Teachers who met with students in small groups to plan assignments also commented favorably on this aspect of the Planning Phase. For example, teachers described the students as being "enthusiastic about the meetings," as "being in control" and "having a greater understanding of what is involved for effective assignment completion."

Students also commented favorably about their experiences on planning assignments with the teacher as members of the Assignment Expert Team. Categories of responses pointed to the fact that students felt they had experienced more student choices and control, had a "clearer understanding of assignments," and that "planning with the teacher had been an enjoyable experience."

In conclusion, research data on the Planning Phase of the Quality Assignment Completion Routine shows that teachers can learn to plan assignments according to the prescribed steps. In addition, the research points out the importance of listening to students as we design effective instructional methods and procedures that will affect student achievement in mainstream settings. If indeed,

"motivation affects learning and learning affects motivation" (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1987), teachers need to consider the types of assignments they are expecting students to complete. Motivating students with diverse learning needs to complete them to a high level of quality is essential in the process of educating all students in today's schools. ■

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