Over the past 30 years, more and more independent schools have established academic support programs and learning centers to address their students’ individual learning needs. Perhaps not surprisingly, as the number of students being evaluated has increased, even more families have requested academic accommodations and services for their children. For the most part, learning centers and tutors have served the individual needs of students well. But in the rush to accommodate students and families, there has been a tendency to over-pathologize students’ struggles and to categorize too many under the auspices of learning centers.

What began as a well-intentioned initiative to provide extra support for students who truly needed it has evolved into a full-blown model of special education that, by its sheer weight and focus, may actually undermine students’ academic experience.

While independent schools have made great strides to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of learners, at Winsor School (Massachusetts), an all-girls school for grades 5–12, we have shifted away from a deficit model of academic support to a school-wide collaborative support paradigm. By reconsidering academic support practices, we have effectively changed how we think and talk about students who struggle in school and
normalized typical differences in learning styles and needs among our students.

In place of the medical model for diagnosing students’ difficulties, the public school model for special education, and the tutorial model for student services, we are focusing on three emerging elements of academic support: (1) giving teachers agency in the academic support process, (2) changing the language we use to communicate about students’ struggles, and, most important, (3) giving our students voice to write their own learning narratives. This change in our institutional approach allows every student to develop the self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-efficacy they need to succeed both in our school and after they leave us.

Teacher Collaboration

Winsor realized that it couldn’t rely on just one person to fully and exclusively support every student who fell outside of a narrow range of learners. Teachers who see the girls every day have a much better chance of doing that — if they themselves have professional support to augment their own strategies for supporting a wide variety of learners. So the school created the coordinator of academic support position — my current position — to prioritize teacher support.

Perhaps predictably, getting teachers to buy into this new approach presented some challenges. But we have made significant progress — and the results, I believe, are noteworthy.

To be of help to teachers, I, as the coordinator of academic support, needed to position myself as an ally and a colleague, not a specialist. To do this well, I had to understand the teachers’ concerns and challenges. What I learned through listening and observation is that some teachers feel pressured to cover their curriculum to meet set standards or prepare students for state and national exams, such as APs. Some feel that adapting alternative strategies creates more work for them. Others feel that they do not have the skills or training to implement differentiated instruction in their classes. Without explicit training, many are apprehensive about adopting new technology and other forms of digital resources.

I have come to appreciate that, for teachers to effectively support students who struggle, they need to believe four things:

• First, they need to believe that they are responsible for the learning outcomes of all of their students.
• Second, they need to believe that they have the resources, tools, knowledge, and skills to reach all learners.
• Third, they need to believe that they have agency and support from their department head, supervisor, and administration.
• Last, and critical to successful buy-in, they need to believe that they have the time to implement teaching strategies to support all students in their classrooms.

Understanding the teachers’ concerns, and knowing that simple solutions don’t always work, I have had to find a way to invite teachers to participate with me in supporting their students.

Through experience, I have discovered that the best way to partner with teachers is to spend time with them in their classrooms. Classroom observations are one of the most informative means of gathering information about students who may be struggling in a class. While I am observing a particular student, I try to widen my lens — to become a data collector, suspending judgment and recording only what I can observe. For example, I would write, “Jane yawned three times within the first 15 minutes of the class period and put her head down on her desk when she started to write,” rather than “Jane seems sleepy today.”

After I visit a class, I meet with the teacher to share my notes. It is in conversation with the teacher that we come to see the factors that may be inhibiting an individual student’s learning, those that might enhance it, and when new understandings emerge. As one teacher put it, “This is the beginning of a conversation and it starts by asking questions: ‘How long was Sue at the pencil sharpener? Was Jane writing down her homework on her iPad or designing her bedroom?’”

The teacher may be concerned Sue had trouble getting started on coursework or that Jane has trouble following directions. A veteran English teacher commented that “classroom observations take some of the pressure off the teacher because it becomes a collaborative investigation to get one step closer toward understanding more deeply what might be going on [with a student’s learning].”

When we don’t have all of the information, it is easy to draw inaccurate conclusions. Having another perspective to shed light on the “invisible” variables helps us to understand how we can best respond.

For many teachers, finding the time to provide extra help is particularly challenging. During my first year at Winsor, I was unable to schedule a meeting with a calculus teacher, who was also a class dean, because during all of her free periods she was meeting with individual students for extra help. This was a senior AP course, and I wondered if the students were overly dependent upon the teacher. After
talking it over, we introduced the idea of learning groups with the goal of freeing up the teacher’s time.

We invited the students to participate and let them know that we believed that cooperative problem solving was an effective strategy to promote independent learning and would prepare them better for college. Students signed up for one learning-group period per week during a mutually free period, in exchange for no homework one night per week. In spite of some initial apprehension among the students, the idea quickly gained momentum. The students established group norms including the following: “Everyone shows up,” “Don’t leave anyone behind,” and “Be enthused.” In a follow-up survey, the students’ feedback indicated that they had indeed increased a sense of “personal responsibility” and “used clarifying questions as an opportunity to understand.” One student wrote that “our previous judgments about each other began to erode,” and they learned that they could “reach the finish line together.”

Our experiment had some predicted outcomes: Because the students no longer relied on her exclusively for extra help, the teacher had more periods free; and her students learned to collaborate with each other and became confident and independent with the material. An added bonus came when we presented our experience to our colleagues in a faculty meeting that spring. After our brief presentation, a veteran teacher said to me, “It sounds like you would try anything!” I know that comment might appear disparaging on the page, but it was meant sincerely. We opened the door for creative problem solving. By modeling a willingness to try something new, we were inviting colleagues to participate in the work and to share responsibility for student outcomes.

While it’s understandable that teachers would worry about not having enough time or the appropriate skills to support students with a range of learning needs, our experience at Winsor indicates that involving teachers in the process of engaging in student support doesn’t add to their workload; rather, in the words of one teacher, “The model at Winsor seems to me to make life simpler for everyone — and it does so while getting students more precisely what they need.”

Our task is not to discard it for its failures but to capitalize on its undoubted and almost limitless potential.

—From “The Life of the Teacher,” by Dr. Victor L. Butterfield, president of Wesleyan University

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there are several problems with this process.

For one, it used to be that the proliferation of testing and diagnoses produced among the teaching faculty a certain skepticism about the legitimacy of a student’s need for accommodations. A second problem is the expectations of families. For many families, testing is a sensitive topic. Of course, parents are concerned that their child is struggling, and they want to get her the help she needs. But parents also fear labels and worry that their child will be stigmatized or will suffer as the result of a diagnosis in terms of course selection or rigor of curriculum.

What it comes down to, however, is that when expectations and assumptions about testing and extended time become the tail that wags the dog, the “endgame,” or the driving force behind academic support programs, we miss the point. The conversation about teaching and learning stops. The purpose of an evaluation should never be “to get a student extended time,” or “to diagnose a problem,” but rather, to understand the learner.

**Giving Students Voice**

Students who have the opportunity to explore their learning through a comprehensive evaluation become vital contributors to the construction of a learning profile. In most cases, the student determines which strategies and accommodations, when warranted, are most useful to her. As one student put it, “writing my own learning profile makes it feel like it’s my business.” Unlike an Individualized Education Plan or a list of accommodations, the learning profile is a narrative that describes an individual learner in detail.

Helping the student to develop her self-awareness means more than talking about “learning styles.” We want to help each student articulate how she makes meaning, how she practices and engages with new ideas and information and concepts, and how she can best demonstrate her understanding. One student put it best: “The learning profile doesn’t just tell you how you learn things, but also addresses certain characteristics that get in the way of learning and offers solutions that can help you to learn more effectively. The learning profile helps people realize everyone is different and there are strategies you can use to overcome difficulties.”

Students need a language to talk about their learning beyond, say, being “good at” math or being a “hands-on learner.” One department head explains, “Students at Winsor now have a much better understanding of their own learning strengths and challenges. They are able to articulate how they learn best and are better advocates for themselves. They are also just more comfortable talking to teachers about the help they need.” Another teacher explains, “Students are invited to participate in — even initiate — conversations about their learning; they come to understand themselves and how they think, and they develop the tools for doing their best work.”

When students can talk about how they learn and know how to ask for help, they can begin to develop self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is commonly defined as the belief in one’s capabilities to achieve a
goal or an outcome. But self-efficacy is about more than goal setting. There are many qualities and life skills wrapped up in the idea of self-efficacy: grit, determination, persistence, and resilience. With coaching, practice, and feedback, students become specialists of their own learning.

Including the student in the creation of her learning profile has also helped me to partner with teachers. Teachers can be overwhelmed by a long list of accommodations that are imposed from outside the school. One teacher notes that she appreciates having students write their own profiles because it feels “more authentic, and it is more practical for this particular student on a daily basis at Winsor.” Another teacher said, “I have found that because students are more self-aware from being involved in the process, I am able to respond more directly to their needs.”

The strategies suggested felt “doable” and not a burden on the teacher. Previous learning profiles typically included a boilerplate list of accommodations, which usually amounted to extra time for tests. As one teacher notes, “Such an approach was relatively ineffective — we were merely giving the students more time to spend struggling with the work that challenged them.”

Before formal accommodations for an individual student are approved at Winsor, I present a draft of the profile to the Documentation Review Committee, which includes the division head (upper or lower), the director of studies (who makes all programmatic decisions regarding credits and requirements), as well as the student’s class dean. This collaborative review gives me the opportunity to clarify questions and consider how the recommended strategies will be implemented by specific teachers in specific classes.

Whether or not the person evaluating our student recommends extended time, the documentation review committee determines whether this is an appropriate means to support the student’s learning in the context of our program. In developing the learning profile, I also talk to the student and her teachers about whether or not extra time on summative assessments would be an effective strategy to support learning. One teacher explains, “While a student may still get extra time to complete tests, she now knows how to use that time most effectively for her way of thinking.” In the 21st century, we are assessing students in all sorts of different and meaningful ways including formative, project-based, and portfolio assessments. By reducing the reliance on extended time, we are able to devote our energy and understanding to our students’ learning experiences.

In the past seven years, we have effectively reduced the number of students receiving extended time from 13 percent to 1 percent. This is significant on several levels. According to one department head, “Since we moved away from extra time, we’ve been far more thoughtful about strategies and accommodations that will actually address learning challenges.” An important and unique result of this reduction is that the demand for testing and accommodations (specifically extended time) no longer drives our academic support practice.

I do not mean to suggest that learning disabilities and ADHD do not exist. Nor do I mean to suggest that learning centers and tutors are obsolete. What I am suggesting is that when we give teachers agency in academic support, when we are accurate and careful in how we communicate about our students who struggle, and when we give the student a voice to write her (or his) own learning narrative, we have the opportunity to empower students and teachers and shift a school culture from dependence on interventions that no longer serve our girls to independence and self-efficacy.

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