

## Responding to That “Pesky” Question Four in a PLC: How Will We Extend the Learning for Students Who Are Already Proficient?

By Thomas W. Many

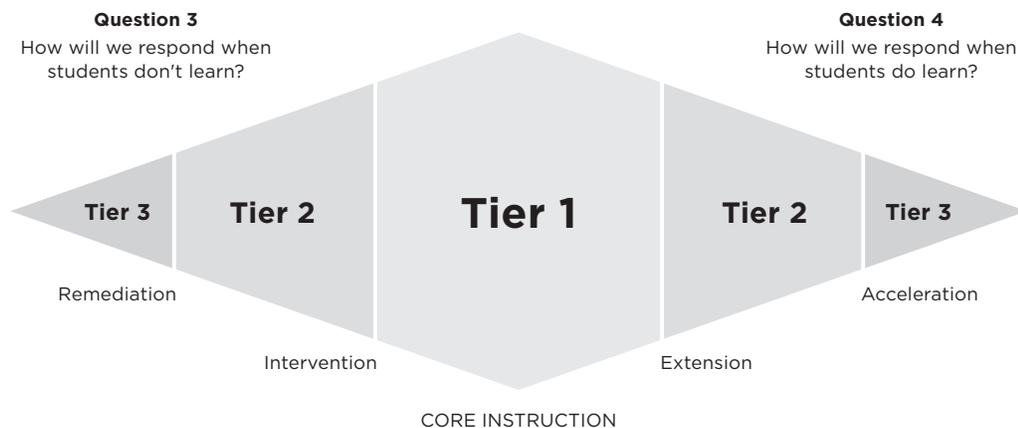
Adapted from Texas Elementary Principals & Supervisors Association’s TEPSA News, August 2020, Vol. 77, No. 4, [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org)

“All students, including the most gifted and talented, will need additional time and support in their learning at one time or another.”

—Mike Mattos, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, & Thomas W. Many

Collaborative teams focus on answering the four critical questions of learning in a PLC, and most teams are clear about how to approach the first three. It is responding to the fourth and final question, the one education leadership professors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2017) label “a bit pesky,” that is so important if teams are to meet the needs of all students.

Of the four critical questions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016), the last two are most similar to each other. In fact, question three (“How will we respond when students do not learn?”; DuFour et al., 2016, p. 36) and question four (“How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?”; DuFour et al., 2016, p. 36) share so many of the same characteristics, Mattos and his colleagues (2016) suggest schools view “intervention and extension as two sides of the same coin” (p. 127).



Certainly, there are differences with terminology and whether students are working above or below grade level. For example, question three is designed to provide more time and support for students who are not yet proficient on the essential outcomes. Conversely, question four provides additional time and support for students who have demonstrated mastery on the essential outcomes for a class, course, or grade level. Teachers working with question three will use terms like *intervention* and *remediation* while teachers working on question four will more commonly use words like *extension*, *enrichment*, and *acceleration*.

### Striking Similarities

Despite these differences, when teachers take collective action to ensure all students learn to high levels, the number of similarities between how teams respond to questions three

and four is striking. Responding to both questions relies on how students are progressing through a standards-based curriculum using a tiered approach. When done well, responding to both questions requires some form of universal screening, progress monitoring, differentiated instruction, and the use of research and evidence-based strategies. A team's response to either question is based on student needs, provides flexible and fluid support, and relies on a team approach to using data. How teams respond to questions three and four is much more alike than different.

With so many similarities in the way teams respond to questions three and four, one might think the term *pyramid of interventions* would refer to both—and perhaps it should—but the majority of educators view the process of responding to these two questions as distinctly separate.

---

“If a school is going to build flexible time, support, and collaboration into its school week, it can apply these efforts to support students in advanced coursework as well.”

—Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, & Janet Malone

---

Buffum and his colleagues (2018) define an *intervention* as “anything a school does above and beyond what all students receive to help certain students succeed academically” (p. 27). Their definition does not distinguish between students performing above or below grade level, and while students who are not yet proficient must receive extra time and support, it is equally true that students who are performing above level or advanced in their academics also need support to thrive in school (Coleman, 2010).

## Two Sides of the Same Coin

Just as Mattos and his colleagues (2016) argue that intervention and extension are best thought of as two sides of the same coin, remediation and acceleration could be complementary if educators view them in the same way. Some teams find that turning the RTI triangles on their sides to create a diamond shape helps them visualize questions three and four differently. Educators often refer to the *differentiation diamond*; the figure on page 218 shows how the tiers associated with question three (core instruction, intervention, and remediation) on one side mirror the tiers of question four (core instruction, extension, and acceleration) on the other. If teams had this kind of parallel structure in place for question four, Tier 1 would continue to focus on the important (nice to know) and essential (need to know) standards; Tier 1 would provide extension only on the most essential standards; and Tier 3 would accelerate learning by introducing new content and concepts.

When you view the traditionally separate triangles together as a diamond, the image promotes developing a more flexible and fluid perspective. This kind of thinking better accommodates students who might need intervention, perhaps even remediation, in one subject while simultaneously engaging in extension or acceleration in another. Together, the diamond serves the full spectrum of students and makes it clear that responding to critical questions three and four is part of the same process.

---

“All students deserve to attend a school where their learning needs are met.”

—Mary Ruth Coleman

---

The relationship between questions three and four is neither separate nor linear. Though schools might initially devote more resources or place greater emphasis on question three, question four is just as important as the others. Well-designed intervention systems have a reciprocal quality; they are equally adept at serving students who take longer to learn as well as those who learn quickly.

## A Balance

Teachers on the most effective teams recognize that success requires a balance of consideration to questions three and four. They report that looking at the two questions side by side allows them to simultaneously provide services that intervene, extend, remediate, and accelerate their students' learning in more holistic ways. In short, teachers report that when they consider questions three and four together, the team does a better job of responding to the needs of all students.

## References

- Buffum, A., Mattos, M., & Malone, J. (2018). *Taking action: A handbook for RTI at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Coleman, M. R. (2010, October 19). *RTI for gifted students* [Interview transcript]. Accessed at [www.rtinetwork.org/mpdf\\_print.php?htc=YToxOntzOjEzOiJyZXBvcnRfaWRjaGF0IjtzOjI6IjI0Ijt9](http://www.rtinetwork.org/mpdf_print.php?htc=YToxOntzOjEzOiJyZXBvcnRfaWRjaGF0IjtzOjI6IjI0Ijt9) on March 17, 2021.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (3rd ed.). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2017, February 15). *That pesky fourth PLC question*. Accessed [www.solutiontree.com/blog/that-pesky-fourth-plc-question](http://www.solutiontree.com/blog/that-pesky-fourth-plc-question) on April 14, 2020.
- Mattos, M., DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. W. (2016). *Concise answers to frequently asked questions about Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.