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TIP SHEET: USING DATA TO STRATEGICALLY GROUP STUDENTS

*For more information on the importance of multiple grouping strategies,
review [Using Data to Strategically Group Students Guidance](#).*

Summer can provide a wonderful opportunity for all students to benefit from additional instructional time, particularly the kind of individualized small-group instruction that's possible with smaller classes and more flexible blocks of time. Research shows that students and teachers benefit from multiple grouping strategies, including small groups, pairs, and whole-class instruction with homogenous and heterogeneous groupings. A variety of data can be used to group and regroup students throughout the summer based on their skill level, readiness, behavior, and interests. The steps that follow offer guidance on how to approach your grouping strategy.

1. GATHER AND ANALYZE STUDENT DATA

It's important for program leaders and instructional staff to have an understanding of students' learning profiles. If time and access to data are limited, prioritize learning about student performance on standardized assessments to determine if they are far below proficient, below proficient, proficient, or beyond proficient. This data is essential for providing meaningful instruction during the summer. Ideally, the program is targeting recruitment to students of certain profiles, so this data should not come as a surprise.

If possible, also gather and analyze data on student behavior and attendance and any additional factors that may have influenced their participation or performance during the school year. These data will provide a more holistic view of a child's needs during the summer and help teachers prepare appropriately. With these data in hand, consider the types of staff you would need to design, manage, and support classroom learning effectively.

2. USE DATA TO PLAN OVERALL INSTRUCTIONS

To begin with, data should be used to identify student and program needs, set an instructional purpose, select curriculum, and place students in classrooms. Summer program leaders may decide to keep the range of student abilities narrower in each classroom than is common during a regular school year to maximize the teacher's ability to meet the needs of all the students in his/her classroom in the shortened amount of time.

In addition to the formula or process you create for grouping, it's paramount to keep student perception and experience at the forefront of your overall design. For instance, avoid classroom or group labels that may result in stigma, and avoid grouping students who are not closely related by age or grade level.

Before the program begins, program leaders should facilitate collaboration between classroom teachers and special education teachers and aides to develop appropriate scaffolding for students with special needs.

3. USE DATA TO INFORM LESSON PLAN AND OVERALL GROUPINGS

As teachers begin to plan weekly and daily lessons, they should consider what classroom configurations are best based on the learning outcome for each activity. Options may include a teacher-led group (whole-class, small-group, or an individual teacher-directed activity) or a student-led group (collaborative, performance-based, or pairs). Teachers can use student learning profiles to inform initial plans and then use formative assessments such as exit tickets and checks for understanding to revise their grouping strategies as needed. Teachers may regroup students if they determine certain students need more individualized instruction and support or may provide whole-class instruction if all students are at a similar level of understanding.

It's important to change groupings periodically so students aren't grouped with the same classmates at all times. Groupings should align instruction with need and accommodate activity choices or available resources (time, equipment, or personnel). Also, when the learning outcome is appropriate, consider ample ways to promote youth voice and choice in what and how they learn so that youth feel a sense of agency, ownership, and pride in their learning. Go beyond ability grouping to group students based on their interests in a particular topic or cooperative roles in a project. Random grouping and student-selected groupings can also be used to vary the grouping strategy and expose students to new learners and learning styles.

4. ESTABLISH ROUTINES AND STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING GROUPS NOT RECEIVING DIRECT INSTRUCTION

Successful small-group instruction requires a clear and consistent routine and process for managing the other students with whom the teacher is not directly working. In a class of 15-20 students, there may be 3-4 small groups to work with during small-group instruction time. Students must be supported to work independently during this time. One strategy is to create several engaging center activities for the other students to work on. These activities reinforce skills taught during whole-group instruction, but do not require new instruction. This frees the teacher to work with one specific group at a time. Students rotate from one center to another with each group eventually getting small-group instruction time with the teacher.

Making small-group instruction work during summer programs is not always an easy task. It is an approach that takes a lot of preparation time and effort, which is sometimes in short supply during summer programs. However, the powerful opportunities it provides can pay big dividends for students. Providing students with high-quality small-group instruction can make a significant academic difference for students in summer programs.

