



Sacred Heart School

"Enlightening Minds, Inspiring Hearts"

Differentiated Learning at Sacred Heart School—Valley Park

Sacred Heart School is known for its differentiation of instruction for our students. Our teachers have been differentiating for our students for several years now. Our teachers have kept up with educational research regarding teaching and learning. They have worked diligently to implement what they have learned in order to build in success for every student.

What is "differentiation"? It is the process of giving students what they need. Students have different skill levels, learn at different rates, and have different interests. Students have varied levels of maturity and ability to focus on a task. They are motivated by different things and differ widely in ability to think abstractly and understand complex ideas. "Differentiation" is not an individualized program for each child. It is a process by which our students work in flexible groups to learn in different ways and on different skill levels.

We know that children learn in different ways. Some are visual learners; some learn by hearing; others learn best while moving. Some learn better alone; others learn better with a partner. Some are more reflective than others. Our teachers provide information in many different ways to meet the needs of our students. Our teachers get to know our students and their learning styles very well. In this way they build in successful experiences according to how students learn best. Students are also assessed in different ways and can demonstrate their knowledge in different ways, too.

The following examples show the expertise and flexibility of our teachers and the variety of activities that go on in our classrooms. Activities vary from year to year depending on the needs of the children.

If you have visited either of our kindergarten classrooms, you may have noticed groups of children working on activities at different skill levels. We begin with children at their own levels and help them progress at their own rates to reach their full potential. Some students may have mastered kindergarten skills and have advanced to skills that would be more typically found in first grade or beyond. Students have their own work folders, practice different sight words, and read books on different reading levels according to their abilities.

The first graders are taught in small groups using leveled readers. This practice allows their teachers to match the students' reading abilities with their texts. Creative writing is a focus for these young students. Some children write the minimum of five sentences, while other children are capable of producing longer stories. There are different spelling lists as well. A spelling pre-test is given on Monday. If a student scores 100% or misses only one word, he/she studies the challenge list. Learning centers are used to meet the needs of our students. The boys and girls rotate among these centers which offer differentiated work in various subjects.

The second grade has different reading groups, also. Each group uses books that are on appropriate levels. These groups are flexible and change throughout the year. Math activities are differentiated according to student learning styles and skill levels. Language arts activities include activities that address all learning styles. Spelling is differentiated as well. Pretests are given and challenge lists are assigned to students who are ready for them. Pretests are also given before a new chapter in math. Boys and girls are given practice or enrichment according to their needs. Learning centers differentiate for learning styles by providing auditory, tactile, visual, and kinesthetic activities.

Our teachers prepare many different types of activities for third graders as well. There are differentiated spelling lists. Book reports are differentiated, too. The students choose books and present book reports to the class in many different ways. Children work individually, in groups, and with partners. They are often seen working in cooperative groups on a social studies project or experimenting in science. During tests in the content areas, items may be read to a student when necessary. The teachers also paraphrase a question when needed. Children are challenged in accordance with their abilities and often choose topics of individual interest.

Differentiation is also found in the intermediate classrooms, Gr. 4 and 5. There are leveled math assignments and math groups in the fourth grade. Learning contracts are offered at times to allow student-directed exploration and discovery. The students are given pretests in several subject areas. If they already demonstrate a mastery of the material, the teacher provides more in-depth study of the topic and/or a new topic. The children have leveled graphic organizers in language arts, science, and social studies in order to meet different learning styles. There are choices on projects in all major areas of study. The students can work in a small group or alone on projects. Their teachers use a combination of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic activities and more to respond to student needs.

Fourth and fifth graders participate in Literature Circles. This allows students with varying interests to read and discuss novels they select and get into themes, characters, and plot in depth. Because developing a love of reading is something that all boys and girls should experience, the children have the opportunity to share their excitement about books by regularly presenting book reports to their classmates. Although the genre is pre-selected each month, the students have opportunities to explore and choose their own novels. The presentations have included presidential posters, walking billboards, cereal box ads, accordion books, character cans, and dressing like a character from the book. A wide variety of projects including drama, art, music, or written assignments are demonstrated not only in language arts, but in social studies and science too. Leveled readers are used in social studies to match the student's abilities. In addition to leveled lists of words from their spelling books, students compile their own word lists to study based on misspelled words in their everyday work. Children use the computer, headphones, and Spellingcity.com for individual practice and work at home, too.

Jr. High teachers, Gr. 6-8, differentiate in many ways, also. Students have adjusted assignments tailored to meet their interests, needs, and skill levels. They may not all be assessed the same way. They may not all have the same questions on tests. The students work in small groups, whole groups, in partners, and individually, depending on skills, interests, and motivation. Individual help and instruction are always available. Jr. High social studies projects reflect the students' interests, learning styles, and abilities. There are tiered projects. The students have multi-sensory learning activities as well as learning stations. In math students use leveled worksheets and tests. Different groups (that change throughout the year) learn the same concepts, but with different materials that reflect each student's knowledge or experience. Math learning centers are used to incorporate different ways to learn the same concepts. Literature circles and other activities are used to differentiate instruction in language arts.

The use of technology is integrated into all subjects at all grade levels to further help differentiate in all subject areas. Our classroom teachers plan technology lessons with the technology teacher. Both teachers are in the computer lab with the children. Computers and laptops are also used in classrooms. All classrooms are equipped with interactive boards—even in our specialty subjects. We also use individual, automatic student response systems. In this way students use these "clickers" to respond to a question or another item that is projected onto the interactive white board for instant results and feedback.

Our teachers use many enrichment activities in their classes to challenge our students, and our full-time learning consultant works closely with teachers and administration to build in success for each student.

This is in no way a comprehensive list of ways Sacred Heart School differentiates for our students. Instead it provides some examples of how we differentiate our instruction to bring success to each student.

The beauty of our school is that while we are helping our children grow in academics, they are also growing into faith-filled young adults. They get accepted into their high schools of choice and are equipped to face the rest of their lives with the gifts of the Holy Spirit: the gifts of knowledge, courage, piety, good judgment, and fear of the Lord. Together our parish, faculty, and staff work as a team to help our children blossom into the best they can be!