Using collaborative tools to implement data-driven flexible grouping

Team-based practice

Team-based practices leverage multiple adults to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

Discover how to use cloud-based spreadsheets to fluidly and transparently group students by interest and skill.

Strategy:	Frequency and duration:	Practice adapted from:	Elements of the Next Education Workforce:
Using a cloud-based document to collect formative data on students' skills and interests supports educators in creating real-time, skill- and interest-based flexible groupings	Initial planning meeting(s) followed by regular (e.g., daily, weekly) meetings to review data and plan for flexible student groupings	**Falcon Hill Elementary** in Mesa, Arizona • Core educator team: Four certified teachers, one paraeducator • Learners: 80–90 learners in Grade 3	• Shared rosters • Learning paths • Student mastery • Just-right responsibilities

Returning from a year-and-a-half of school closures, and remote and hybrid learning due to COVID-19, Falcon Hill's 3rd-grade educator team found that student strengths and needs varied significantly. The team agreed that in order to be responsive, they would need an approach to deepen and personalize student learning that allowed them to be flexible in leveraging the formative student learning data and student interest data they were regularly collecting.

In January 2021, the team made two key changes. First, they shifted to organizing all formative student learning data and student interest data in Google Sheets, shared across the educator team. This meant all educators on the team could access up-to-date student learning and student interest data anytime, anywhere. Second, they instituted daily meetings to analyze data and plan for flexible student groupings.

Read on to explore an adaptation of Falcon Hill Elementary's process for using collaborative tools to implement data-driven flexible grouping.

Identify your high-level "who, what and when," along with educator strengths

In order to implement data-driven flexible grouping, teams should begin by identifying when data-driven flexible grouping will occur, what content area(s) will be addressed and who is available to support during this time. Then, team members can discuss distributing educators' roles and responsibilities according to educators' strengths and areas of interest.

Tip: Teams should pace with patience.
Consider implementing data-driven flexible grouping one subject area at a time.

Questions to consider

- When will data-driven flexible grouping take place?
- What content area(s) will be addressed?
- Who is available? Consider both members of the core educator team and members of the extended educator team.
- Which educators are best suited to address which elements of the content? Consider individuals' strengths (as identified by student learning data), interests, backgrounds and experiences.

Examine assessments and inventories

Once the content area(s) have been identified, look at the specific instruments and assessments the team plans to use and the cadence of assessment and progress monitoring. As a team, agree upon which student learning data (i.e., data from which instruments and assessments) will be reflected in a shared spreadsheet. Discuss what student interest data might be reflected in a shared spreadsheet.

For example, Falcon Hill Elementary implements data-driven, flexible grouping with reading, math, project-based learning and social-emotional learning. While they collect data using a wider variety of instruments and assessments than is reflected here, they agreed that data from the following instruments and assessments would be most helpful to log in a shared spreadsheet

Data featured in Falcon Hill Elementary's shared spreadsheet

Reading	Mathematics	Project-based learning	Social-emotional learning
• Reading levels (AZ leveling) • Phonics screeners (Acadience learning) • Conferencing notes	• Pre-tests Exit tickets • Progress- monitoring • Post-tests	• Student interest-driven topic choices	• Topic informed by SAEBRS screening tool

Questions to consider for each content area in which data-driven flexible grouping will take place:

- What instruments do we currently use to assess students' knowledge and skills in this content area (e.g., phonics screeners, running records and conferencing in literacy; standards-aligned pre-tests
- and benchmark assessments in mathematics; rubrics aligned with performance-based tasks across all content areas)?
- What is the cadence of each student learning assessment? How frequently is each assessment administered (e.g., daily, weekly, by unit)?
- As a team, do we collect additional data on an ad-hoc basis (e.g., periodic exit tickets)?
- What additional assessments, if any, should be delivered? How might we plan for these?
- When and how do we collect data on students' interests?
- What additional opportunities, if any, might exist for collecting data on students' interests? How might we plan for these?
- Consider all of the instruments, assessments and student interest inventories the team has identified: Which of these instruments, assessments and inventories should be reflected in a shared spreadsheet?

Create your shared spreadsheet

As a team, create and format a shared spreadsheet that will house the student learning and student interest data agreed upon in the previous step. Based on your shared understanding of educators' distributed expertise and your discussion of assessment cadence, determine who will have access to the spreadsheet, who will enter data and what systems the team will use to ensure all data is accurate. Discuss protocols for how the team might address data entry errors and accidental overwriting. Falcon Hill Elementary uses Google Sheets to share their student learning and interest data. They dedicate one sheet to each subject area and use tabs to further organize data (e.g., by instrument, by unit). A separate Google Sheet was dedicated to student interest data with separate tabs for project-based learning topics and social-emotional learning topics. All educators on the core team have editing access to the shared spreadsheet and update it on an agreed-upon cadence. Additionally, the school's principal, instructional coach, special educators and paraeducators shared across teams have access so that they can participate effectively in data meetings.

Explore an example spreadsheet created by Falcon Hill's 3rd-grade educator team.

Questions to consider:

- What cloud storage systems are approved for use by our district and school (e.g., Google Drive, Dropbox)? If we have access to multiple cloud storage systems, which has the spreadsheet application that will best meet the needs of our team?
- Who needs editing access to this spreadsheet? Who needs viewing access? Are we confident that our access privileges are consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act?
- How will we format our spreadsheet(s)?
- Will all data for all content areas and all assessments/interest inventories exist in a single spreadsheet, or will we use multiple spreadsheets?
- How, if at all, might we use tabs within a spreadsheet to support our organization?
- How, if at all, might we use data validation and filters within a spreadsheet to support our organization?
- What information will we represent, and how will it appear within the spreadsheet (e.g., last name in column A, first name in column B, student ID number in column C)?
- Based on our shared understanding of each others' distributed expertise and assessment/inventory cadence, who will update data for each assessment/inventory?
- What are some ways we might ensure our data remains accurate and up to date (e.g., identify a data point person for the team, add a recurring meeting agenda item about this topic)?
- What will be our protocol if data is accidentally overwritten or if we think we notice an error?

Schedule regular, recurring meetings to support data-driven flexible grouping

If your team has not done so already, ensure you have frequent, (i.e., daily, weekly) recurring time set aside to review data, regroup students and deploy educators. Identify a data protocol that will lend structure to the conversation. If possible, agree upon a consistent approach for how the team will communicate new groupings to students. Finally, agree upon any protocols the team wishes to use to support data-driven flexible grouping that might be planned outside of these recurring meetings (e.g., highly fluid regrouping) or may require only sporadic discussion (e.g., interest-based groupings tied to a specific unit).

At Falcon Hill Elementary, educators meet at least two times per week to support data-driven flexible grouping. Meetings often (but not always) alternate between the content areas of reading and mathematics. As individual units demand, the team may add planning for student interest-based grouping in project-based learning and social-emotional learning to the agenda. Importantly, the team typically makes changes to phonics flexible groups using a separate protocol outside of this meeting time, as these changes are highly fluid.

Questions to consider:

- What recurring time will we meet to review data, regroup students and deploy educators?
- What educators will be present during recurring data meetings?
- Who will facilitate recurring data meetings?
- How will we structure our agendas for recurring data meetings?
- What protocols might we need to support data-driven flexible grouping that takes place *outside* of our recurring meetings (e.g., highly fluid regrouping, one-off groups tied to a specific unit)?
- How and when will we communicate new groups to students?

Grouping students: Tips to hold in mind

- Ensure the entire team is clear on how students will be grouped (e.g., by skill or by interest, heterogeneously or homogeneously).
- With each new grouping, reconsider your shared understanding of each other's expertise and interests to determine which educator will work with which student groups.
- With each new grouping, consider student group size in the context of educators' roles and levels of experience (e.g., novice educators may benefit from working with smaller groups).
- Ensure everyone is clear on when groups will switch (e.g., tomorrow, at the conclusion of this lesson sequence, as dictated by changes in student mastery).

Why educators and students love this practice

This made creating flexible student groupings easier. It helped us know exactly which students we would be assisting and gave us a clear picture of what those students' specific needs were."

— Falcon Hill Elementary educator team member

"We can feel the love and care that goes into the planning and adjustments that are continuously being made based on my child's needs."

— Falcon Hill Elementary parent

"Working in smaller groups makes learning easier."

— Falcon Hill Elementary student

Considerations for implementing this practice

Consider extended team members
Consider how the team can recruit additional educators (e.g., community educators, cross-team specialists) to support data-driven flexible student groups at specific times of the day.

Consider additional technology integrations
Consider what other collaborative tools (e.g., Google Forms, Google Apps) can be seamlessly integrated to gather data, link files, and increase ease of access for team members.