

When she arrived as principal at the Mendell Elementary six years ago, Julia Bott’s mantra was simple: *Inclusion*. Based on experience, she knew that, too often, students with significant cognitive and/or emotional delays were assigned to substantially separate classrooms. Yet, she also knew that many of these children could succeed in inclusive classrooms if they received the right set of supports embedded within a coordinated whole-school approach. And her own vision, in fact, reflected the shared beliefs of the larger school community that sought to be a place able to serve more children, no matter their needs.

Ellis Mendell School	
Address	164 School St. Roxbury, MA 02119
Grades served	K – 5
Principal	Julia Bott
Students	235
Teachers	20
School Day	9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

Motivated by this ambition, Bott has spent the last few years working with her team to organize the staffing, resources, and schedule to help ensure that Mendell Elementary can serve as many of these high-needs students as possible. Among the more recent innovations Bott has implemented is a daily dedicated intervention block, where all students in Grades 2 – 5 are provided individually-targeted instruction to bolster their work in their core academic classrooms.

The creation of the intervention block at Mendell was supported through a district initiative spearheaded by Hilary Shea, an Inclusion Specialist with Boston Public Schools central office. Shea had identified the lack of sufficient (or, more specifically, sufficiently research-based) Tier 2 and Tier 3 academic interventions as a major deficiency across the district. Knowing that so many BPS students were in need of these supports, she secured a grant to pilot a strategic, substantive intervention program in four schools. Shea expects that, over time, the expansion of high-quality intervention programming across these and other schools will enable the district to overhaul the system that may rely too much on IEPs to substitute for school-wide coordinated instruction.

When Shea first approached the Mendell about the opportunity to become a pilot site for the intervention block, the faculty and administration jumped at the chance. They had been searching for a way to serve students better in accessing grade-level content, especially those who needed intensive academic support in literacy, and the resources and training that accompanied this pilot seemed an ideal path to effective implementation of such supports.

Setting Parameters

At the outset, the faculty team that formed to shepherd through the implementation process set three tactical guidelines, each of which was rooted in sound pedagogical and organizational practice.

First, the team operated with the assumption that *all* students would participate in targeted interventions, even those who were learning at grade-level expectations, because it was essential that interventions be

perceived by both students and teachers as a core component of education and not merely a remedial program.

Second, and related, all teachers (and other instructional staff) needed to play a role in working with students for the practical reason that more staff were needed to subdivide classrooms and grades into smaller learning groups, the *sine qua non* of targeting instruction to individual student needs. Further, drawing upon the expertise of all teachers and other adult professionals (e.g., Special Education coordinator, inclusion specialists, etc.) would allow students to be matched with those instructors who could best serve them.

Finally, the team understood that the intervention block would be optimized only if it operated with rigorous consistency. The Mendell had long used a Response to Intervention (RTI) protocol, but it was not implemented with fidelity, specifically because times nominally set aside for Tier 2 and 3 interventions were often compromised by other educational or organizational priorities. Tier 1 instruction may have been relatively strong, but, for students who needed more differentiated support—and there were many at Mendell—the dedicated time to provide it too often disappeared.



With the principal’s full support in making the intervention block a top schoolwide priority and the methodical training of all teachers in the weeks preceding the opening of school in August 2015, the Mendell was set to launch its intervention block—aptly and cleverly called the “What I Need” or “WIN” period—when school opened in the fall.

What the Intervention Block Looks Like

Every morning at 9:40 a bell is sounded and all students in Grades 2 – 5 proceed with purpose from their homeroom (i.e., their core classroom) to their assigned intervention block space for a carefully planned 35 minutes. In some cases, students stay in their homerooms, but a good portion of students move to another room to learn with fellow students who have been assigned there because of their shared academic needs. Each grade breaks into 3 to 4 intervention classrooms, with students from the two homerooms per grade subdivided into one group that participates in Tier 1 support and two or three smaller groups that participate in Tier 2 instruction. (Fourth and fifth graders have some mixed-grade intervention groups, as well.) To determine which students will be assigned to which intervention group, grade-level teachers review assessment and other data every 6 – 8 weeks, discussing each child individually to ensure proper placement.

The instruction for students who are already at or close to grade-level proficiency tends to operate as an extension of the curriculum in their core classroom. For example, the Tier 1 group in 5th grade, having read the novel *A Wrinkle in Time* together, would then develop projects and presentations based on what they’ve read. Differentiation within this setting takes place by students having the ability to design their own project goals. For students who are not yet at grade level, teachers use more scripted literacy programs (e.g., *Foundations*) to be sure that all in the group master the basic reading and phonics skills they will need to engage in the higher-level work that takes place in the core classroom.

In all the intervention classrooms, students also participate in appropriate technology-based learning programs to help them practice certain skills or to elevate their level of comprehension. Using these technology interventions (e.g., Lexia) also helps teachers to identify student areas for growth more precisely.

Anticipating and Addressing Challenges

The relatively small size of the Mendell—two classrooms per grade and only about 25 full-time staff—meant that mechanics of the intervention block needed to be finely tuned to adhere to the three operating principles the planning team had laid out—all students in instructional blocks, using a wide array of educators for a dedicated time each day. On days when all staff were present, a well-organized structure for WIN that adhered to these principles could run like clockwork, but on a day when any one staff member (or more) was absent, the school risked not serving all children in the time marked for intervention. Consequently, the planning team, together with school leadership, established contingency arrangements to ensure that each intervention group had a backup plan in case its particular instructor was absent that day.

A second issue associated with the school's small size was space and, specifically, identifying the best allocation of space to promote optimal student learning. Because there were several more learning groups than classrooms, planners needed to figure out which groups could share classroom space and, further, if there were groups that needed to meet outside of traditional classrooms. To manage the school's space constraints, some classrooms host up to three intervention groups, and the school has placed tables in the hallways and the resource room.

One challenge that continues to be a work in progress is identifying the suitable curriculum or learning program for each of the different groups. For most students, the curricular supports selected initially are continuing to work well, but there are some who do not benefit as much from these conventional choices, so teachers have been experimenting with other approaches. To determine the effectiveness of any new program, teachers typically give students at least two weeks to interact with it before assessing its potential. As with the entire WIN block content, teacher teams figure out together during their weekly collaboration sessions how to proceed with any one group of students.



Outcomes

The effect of having a daily intervention block that expressly targets the learning needs of each student has been measurably positive. Teachers note that, in the core academic classes, more students have the skills they need to take on more complex tasks. With the students' foundational skills in place, teachers are able to deepen learning and spend more time structuring learning around projects. Formative assessment data from the 2015 – 16 school year show that about half of students that were below-grade level in the fall were reading at grade level by spring, and 60 percent made significant progress over the course of the year.

A secondary impact has been that as grade-level teams collaborate for lesson planning, building differentiated learning directly into daily routines is facilitated because teachers know many more students beyond their own classroom. While Mendell has long felt like a school with a "family atmosphere," the fact that teachers now essentially share students for academic instruction enhances the perception and the reality that each child's progress depends on a team effort.

Lessons Learned

Considering the Mendell WIN block has been in place for only one school year, the structure has been largely free from obstacles, and the impact on educational efficacy has been noticeably positive. A number of factors contribute to the success, even as Mendell faculty and leaders look to make improvements for the year to come:

1. **Thorough and thoughtful planning** entailed not only putting staffing (and contingency staffing) arrangements in place, but also it demanded having students literally walk through the procedures of the intervention block. In fact, Mendell spent the first three weeks of school practicing hallway transitions and running mock intervention blocks to help students build familiarity with what was expected of them when the blocks started in earnest in October.
2. Though spurred by the district and endorsed fully by the principal, the WIN block was **teacher planned and driven**. With a substantive understanding of what students needed and how the block should be organized to optimize instruction to serve those needs, teachers were both best poised to organize the system and to ensure its continued success. They effectively used their weekly common planning time to review how well students were progressing in core, as a result of their WIN block work.
3. Understanding the significance of **daily, uninterrupted intervention** in ensuring efficacy—and building a structure and behaviors to assure that the block would remain sacrosanct—constituted a huge leap forward in how the Mendell approached the challenge of supporting diverse learners.
4. A ready **willingness to experiment** to learn what worked and what did not was vital to the cycle of continuous improvement to which the Mendell teachers and leadership committed from the outset. Technical glitches or curricular misalignment were not taken as failures, but as opportunities to learn how to improve.
5. Underlying the entire success of WIN block was the **mutual trust** that teachers have developed with each other and with school leadership. Without this trust, teachers would never have felt empowered to turn their idea into reality and improve upon the system they had already built.

Where does the WIN block go from here? Principal Bott and her teachers explain that they have been very pleased with the “nuts and bolts” of the structure they’ve put in place. Every day, all students have been engaged in substantive academic intervention or extension. The process of targeting of which instruction should go to which student has been administered carefully and with several data points to inform placement.

Nonetheless, the Mendell staff and leadership also recognize that there are some instances where the program could target instruction even more precisely and that certain students need different ways to access material. As part of this continuing search to find the right pedagogies or programs for students, teachers have tried out various software solutions, an endeavor that will continue into next year. Unlike in years past when Mendell faculty struggled to figure out how to embed the intervention they knew the students needed into the school day, however, the challenge now is to make a good system even better.