

Differentiation planning for leaders

Use this as your step-by-step guide to create an inclusive, empowering environment for every educator at the start of the school year. Keep it at your side as you design and run professional learning.

1 Know your teachers

- Gather input before planning—use short surveys or informal check-ins to learn staff interests, growth areas, and concerns.
- Identify strengths and leadership within your team. Who can mentor, and who needs extra support?
- Acknowledge special talents and backgrounds so every teacher feels seen from day one.

2 Create choice and flexibility

- Offer a menu of session topics, breakout options, or project groups—let staff select what fits their role or goals.
- Include pathways for new educators, veterans, specialists, and coaches.
- Design hands-on activities, discussion groups, and planning time for different preferences and energy levels.

3 Scaffold engagement

- Use varied reflection tools: quick writes, peer discussions, visual notes, or digital responses—suit all comfort levels.
- Allow teachers to set individual or team goals for the first month.
- Invite questions and ideas in multiple formats—slips, sticky notes, or anonymous submissions.

4 Foster connection and support

- Pair staff for peer coaching or mentor relationships—match by experience, subject, or learner needs.
- Schedule regular, short follow-ups to check on implementation, gather new needs, and celebrate growth.
- Recognize small wins and innovative efforts publicly to build trust and motivation.

5 Reflect and adjust

- After each session or week, collect quick feedback (one-minute check-ins or digital polls).
- Be ready to pivot topics, pacing, or groupings based on what you learn.
- Review your process with leadership or a trusted colleague for improvement.

Differentiated planning for teachers is not just best practice—it's the cornerstone of a thriving, motivated school community. Every action you take to honor adult learning needs directly impacts student success. Keep this handbook visible as a blueprint for leadership that makes everyone feel included, capable, and ready to grow.

SECTION 1

Know your teachers

For Leaders: Principals, Department Heads, Coaches, and PD Organizers

Purpose: Build trust, map strengths, and set the stage for a diverse and supportive team. This worksheet is designed for group workshops or individual planning, with options for quick checklists, deeper prompts, and skill-mapping templates—choose what fits your context.



Quick actions for getting to know your staff

- Distribute a “Getting to Know You” interest survey to all staff.
- Schedule brief 1:1 meetings or small group check-ins with returning and new teachers.
- Gather data on teacher certifications, strengths, passions, and prior leadership roles.
- Identify staff who can serve as mentors or who need extra support.
- Note special skills (languages, tech-savvy, curriculum expertise) relevant to your initiatives.
- Discuss school/district priorities (diversity, new programs, special populations) openly during team meetings.



Self-reflection & prompts

(Use as a worksheet during a leadership workshop or before the school year)

- List 3 things I want all staff to feel as part of our community:

- Who on our team brings strengths in (fill in initiative, e.g., math coaching, literacy, SEL)?

- Where do we have gaps? (Consider diversity, grade levels, experience, special programs)

- Which new teachers or staff need mentorship, and who might be a great mentor?

New staff: _____ Mentors: _____

- What special talents or backgrounds do our staff share that align with district goals?



Teacher team map template

(Print one per team, department, or school)

Staff Name	Special Skills/Certs	Interests	Mentor/Needs Mentor?	Role in Initiative



Tips for use:

- Use this worksheet at your back-to-school retreat or first leadership meeting.
- Revisit as you learn more about your team or as new staff join.
- Adapt columns and prompts to highlight diversity, language skills, or local initiatives.

Leaders who map their team strengths and connections early create a climate of belonging, promote equity, and lay the groundwork for differentiated, meaningful growth for every educator.

SECTION 2

Create choice and flexibility

For Leaders: Principals, Department Heads, Coaches, and PD Organizers

Purpose: Ensure every teacher's professional learning experience is differentiated—just like great classrooms. Use this section to plan how you'll offer voice, choice, and tailored engagement for your diverse staff.



Action steps for differentiated PD & PLCs

- Design a menu of session options, each meeting different grade levels, subjects, or career stages.
- Provide time and space for small-group work—let staff join groups aligned to their interests or growth areas.
- Offer synchronous (live) and asynchronous (self-paced) session choices.
- Alternate activity types (hands-on, discussions, mini-lectures, planning time) so every learning style is honored.
- Integrate choice boards or station rotations during professional development days.
- Ensure materials and examples reflect the diversity and special programs in your school/district.



Guided planning prompts

(Fill in during team meetings or solo planning—adapt for your context)

- Sessions our staff can choose from this year:

- Flexible grouping ideas (by role, expertise, or goal):

- Ways we'll provide multiple formats or paces:



Session design table

(Use this worksheet to map out differentiated PD offerings. Print one per event or week.)

Session/Group	Intended Audience	Format/Mode	Key Focus/Skill	Flexible/Optional ?



Tips for use:

- Return to this page each time you plan PD or PLCs to keep differentiation central.
- Invite staff input on choices—use exit surveys to learn what options to offer next time.
- Adjust as you learn more about what supports and challenges your educators.

Differentiated professional learning fosters trust, ensures every teacher sees themselves in the plan, and keeps momentum strong for student success all year.

SECTION 3

Scaffold engagement for every teacher

For Leaders: Principals, Department Heads, Coaches, and PD Organizers

Purpose: Support meaningful participation for all staff by offering varied ways to engage, respond, and reflect. This section helps plan differentiated involvement so every educator feels comfortable and heard.



Action steps for scaffolded engagement

- Offer multiple reflection options (written, verbal, artistic, digital) at each PD or PLC session.
- Encourage teachers to set personal or team learning goals—short-term and ongoing.
- Use entry tickets or start-of-session prompts to surface prior knowledge and interests.
- Allow for anonymous contributions—use sticky notes, online polls, or suggestion boxes to gain honest feedback.
- Plan for various comfort levels: some will share in large groups, others thrive in pairs or solo work.
- Make time for processing: include brief pauses for thinking or jotting notes.



Guided prompts for engagement planning

- What reflection choices will I offer (e.g., quick write, group share, sketch note)?

- How will I gather entry thoughts from participants?

- Ways to support both outgoing and reserved staff:

- How will teachers track or revisit their growth goals?



Engagement mapping table

(Print and use to track engagement strategies for your PD or PLCs.)

Session/Activity	Reflection Options	Participation Methods	How Feedback is Collected



Tips for use:

- Adapt strategies for your group's size, culture, and current needs.
- Periodically ask staff what participation strategies helped them feel most involved.
- Use quiet feedback tools to draw out every voice—not just the most vocal.

Scaffolded engagement ensures all educators—not just a few—are part of the school's learning and growth. Differentiation here is the key to an inclusive, thriving professional culture.

SECTION 4

Foster connection and ongoing support

Purpose: Ensure teachers feel supported beyond the first days by developing mentorships, feedback loops, and peer collaboration that sustain growth all year.



Action steps for sustained support

- Pair experienced teachers with new staff, or match by areas of expertise and interest.
- Build time into schedules for regular peer coaching, co-planning, or collaborative lesson study.
- Create a calendar for monthly check-ins and informal feedback sessions.
- Use staff meetings or digital forums to celebrate successes and address challenges together.
- Track who is receiving (and providing) support, ensuring no one is left out.



Guided prompts and planning

- Which pairs or teams would most benefit from mentoring?

- How will you ensure follow-up and accountability for ongoing growth?

- Ways to celebrate individual and team accomplishments:



Support system mapping table

Teacher/Team	Mentor/Peer	Area of Focus	Scheduled Check-Ins	Notes/Follow-Up

SECTION 5

Reflect and adjust

Purpose: Keep differentiation responsive—use feedback and reflection to improve your plans and help teachers (and leaders) grow together throughout the year.



Action steps for reflection & adjustment

- Collect quick feedback after every major PD or PLC (poll, sticky notes, digital survey).
- Review which strategies or groupings worked best and adjust future sessions accordingly.
- Schedule time each month or quarter for staff to share what's helped them most.
- Solicit suggestions—ask, “What else can we do to support your learning?”
- Revisit your workbook mid-semester to update plans and celebrate growth.



Guided reflection prompts

- What feedback did I receive on our last differentiated session?

- What new needs or interests have surfaced among staff?

- What will I do differently next time to better support our team?



Reflection/Feedback collection table

Date	Strategy/Session	Staff Feedback	Changes for Next Time	Growth Observed / Wins

Differentiated Back-to-School Night planning guide for teachers

Purpose: Help you design a Back-to-School Night presentation that highlights how you'll meet the unique needs, backgrounds, and strengths of every student—showing families you value equity and personalized learning from day one.



Quick steps for a differentiated presentation

1. Welcome every family

- Prepare a friendly introduction that shares your appreciation for diversity in your classroom.
- Ask families to share one thing that helps their child learn best (in person, sticky note, or digital form).

2. Showcase your approach to differentiation

- Explain—in clear, simple language—how you adapt lessons and support for different learners (e.g., small group work, varied activities, tools like M2 for personalized help).
- Share how students have voice and choice in how they learn and show understanding.
- Mention systems for translation, scaffolding, or enrichment as needed.

3. Invite family partnership

- Provide specific ways families can support differentiation at home (e.g., encouraging questions, sharing what strategies work best for their child).
- Let families know you're eager to communicate and partner about their child's needs throughout the year.



Teacher checklist

- ☐ Prepare a short slide or talking point about your commitment to meeting each student's needs.
- ☐ Include one or two real examples of differentiation in your classroom (rotations, alternative assignments, use of tech).
- ☐ Invite families to tell you about their child's strengths and needs—provide paper, digital surveys, or an open email invitation.
- ☐ Clearly share your contact info and communication preferences.
- ☐ Close by thanking families for their partnership in supporting EVERY learner.



Tip

A differentiated Back-to-School Night presentation helps families feel welcomed and reassured that you're focused on what makes every child unique—building trust and partnership for the year ahead.