

# Overview

RON BRANDT

**Ronald S. Brandt**  
Executive Editor

**Nancy Carter Modrak**  
Senior Editor

**Al Way**  
Art Director

**Jo Ann Irick**  
Associate Editor

**Pamela Dronka**  
Associate Editor

**Fran Schweiger**  
Assistant Editor

**Elaine C. Dull**  
Production Manager

**Teola T. Jones**  
Advertising Manager

**Deborah A. Johnson**  
Administrative Assistant

**Josefa Manlapaz**  
Clerical Assistant

September 1985

Volume 43

Number 1

*Educational Leadership* is intended primarily for leaders in elementary and secondary education but is also for anyone interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in schools. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this publication are not necessarily official positions of the Association. Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

ISSN 0013-1784  
Sept. 85 Stock No. 611-85398

## Success Through Adaptive Education

Would you be surprised to hear of new research evidence for the effectiveness of individualized instruction? Prepare to be surprised.

Few of us would question the proposition that instruction *must* be individualized to some extent. In recent years, though, many schools have reduced their public commitment to the concept for several reasons: parents are wary of "innovation," organizational models such as Individually Guided Education require extraordinary effort from teachers, and research results on individualization have been considered inconclusive at best.

Moreover, the effective schools movement has cast doubt on the advisability of allowing students to "progress at their own rate" because doing so creates an ever-widening gap between the faster and slower students. Joan Abrams (p. 30), Superintendent of Schools in Red Bank, New Jersey, represents a group of leaders who now proudly assert that in their schools all students at a given grade level are to be taught using instructional materials designated for that grade. Of course the materials will be easier for some students than others, but from these educators' point of view, adjusting the level of difficulty would betray the ideal of "high expectations."

If students are provided reasonably appropriate conditions for learning, the results of this single-standard approach can be striking. In Red Bank, the kind of community where students often do not learn very well, achievement has risen sharply in just six years. For example, the average reading score for 8th graders is now 10.3 compared with 7.3 in 1979. These results seem to support Benjamin

Bloom's contention that the longer students are taught using mastery learning, the more similar their achievement becomes.

But wait—a group of researchers (p. 26) have completed a statistical synthesis of 38 studies conducted over a ten year period that appears to document the utility of "adaptive education"—their term for a variety of ways of adapting instruction to individual differences.

These findings may at first seem contrary to Red Bank's experience, because adaptive programs emphasize alternatives and choice. In fact, while some of Red Bank's policies may not be acceptable to the advocates of some adaptive programs, the Red Bank program is itself a form of adaptive education: students are regularly informed of their progress on mastery of the objectives, and if they do not master an objective on their first try, they are provided different ways to learn. These two characteristics—periodic reports of mastery and provision of alternatives—are among the criteria the researchers used to define "adaptive."

What Red Bank has in common with other adaptive programs is more than—on the one hand—a willingness to let students do their thing or—on the other—a desire to impress the public with their toughness. The educators in charge of these programs have faith in the potential of each individual, plus a fierce determination to *make sure* that all their students learn.

Ron Brandt

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.