Clustered for Success

Cluster grouping enables gifted students, as well as all the other students, to make meaningful progress.

Dina Brulles and Susan Winebrenner

The district was losing students, and there was no mystery about where they were going. Their loss coincided with a marked increase in the number of local charter schools. And who was leaving? Mostly the highest-ability students.

From 2005 to 2010, the Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, Arizona, saw its enrollment decline by approximately 5 percent. At the same time, the number of local charter schools increased. This situation isn't unique to Paradise Valley; it's happening across the United States.

One reason for this exodus relates to No Child Left Behind. Schools in fear of facing sanctions as a result of low standardized test scores may overlook the learning needs of their high achievers (Kaplan, 2004; Neill, 2003). Many of these students have mastered at least 60 percent of grade-level standards before receiving instruction (Brulles, Cohn, & Saunders, 2010). So even though they may earn good grades, they are the least likely to make yearly academic growth without specific interventions in place (Winebrenner, 2003).

With schooling options more numerous than ever before, parents—and certainly parents of high-achieving students—now shop around for the best

educational match for their children (Parker, 2011). All parents, however, value schools that pay attention to their students with high ability because in schools like these, student achievement levels typically rise. This, in turn, attracts students from surrounding districts and recaptures those who previously chose alternative schooling options. By redirecting attention to the needs of all their students, including the gifted, schools like Paradise Valley can decrease "bright flight," entice families back, and raise the bar for all.

Issues with Gifted Education

Believing that gifted students are academic role models, some principals make an effort to place them in every class. In reality, gifted students may not be effective in helping their classmates learn because they make intuitive leaps in their thinking when more linear thinking might be more helpful to most students. In addition, many gifted students resent being placed in the role of tutor.

Gifted education programs often are controversial as well. Although parents of gifted students, believing their children deserve opportunities to reach their full potential, welcome such interventions, others often consider these programs elitist because they commonly serve more affluent white children than poor and minority children (Brulles & Lansdowne, 2009). Most schools provide intermittent services, pulling students out of homeroom classes for enrichment for brief periods during the week. When they return to their classrooms, students are sometimes required to complete the work they missed, which typically is below their challenge level.

Problems with gifted programming are exacerbated in times of budget constraints, when pull-out services and programs for advanced learners are often the first eliminated. The prevailing belief—that gifted kids will make it on their own—makes funding gifted services a low priority.

However, one practical intervention—cluster grouping—effectively addresses these challenges while providing an inclusive environment that improves all students' achievement. This method for providing gifted services is rapidly becoming more prevalent in U.S. schools.

A Manageable Model

In cluster grouping, *all* students in a grade level are grouped according to their ability and achievement levels. A cluster of either gifted or high-achieving students—one or the other—is in every classroom, along with only two or three other clusters. These remaining clusters are composed of students in the average, low-average, and far-below-average ranges. A classroom that has a gifted cluster will not have a cluster that is far below average. The classroom composition shown in Figure 1 illustrates how the model balances achievement levels and narrows the range of ability in each class.

High-achieving students frequently emerge as academic leaders when not placed with gifted students.

Enfranchising gifted students in a cluster-grouping model can provide a pathway to higher achievement for all students in the school. In addition, narrowing the range of abilities in the classroom by limiting the number of clusters—ensuring that teachers don't have two extremes in their classrooms—makes the model more manageable (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008). Research also suggests that the

cluster-grouping model gives teachers more time to work with individual students (Gentry & MacDougall, 2008).

Administrators who implement cluster-grouping models are sometimes tempted to place high-achieving students in classes with gifted students. This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, clustering all high-achieving and gifted students in one class resembles tracking and decreases the likelihood for success. All classes benefit from having high-ability or high-achieving students. Second, high-achieving students frequently emerge as academic leaders when not placed with gifted students.

The inclusive nature of cluster grouping recognizes that not all gifted students are high achievers; rather, the manner in which they acquire information necessitates a difference in instruction and curriculum. Gifted students make intuitive leaps in their thinking, require fewer repetitions to master new concepts, accelerate through the curriculum at a faster rate, and think more critically and with greater depth and complexity than students of average ability.

Cluster grouping embraces all gifted students regardless of their current levels of productivity—this includes gifted students who are twice exceptional; English language learners; and students who are culturally diverse, poor, or in the primary grades (Brulles & Lansdowne, 2008).

Student Placement

Gifted cluster groups typically consist of four to nine gifted students, who make up approximately 20–25 percent of the class. When the number of gifted students exceeds nine, a second gifted cluster classroom is often formed.

Giftedness is measured through ability tests, such as the Cognitive Abilities Test and the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, and also through IQ tests, such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. The "gifted" identification relates to students' potential for learning; it doesn't reflect knowledge that students have already acquired. Also, the gifted identification relates to overall general ability. Students who are identified as gifted are automatically placed into gifted cluster classes regardless of their areas of strength.

FIGURE 1. Recommended Classroom Composition for Cluster Grouping for a Single Grade Level

Classroom	Gifted	High Average	Average	Low Average	Far Below Average
A	6	0	12	12	0
B	0	6	12	6	6
C	0	6	12	6	6

Source: From *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All* (p. 14), by S. Winebrenner and D. Brulles, 2008, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Free Spirit Publishing. Copyright 2008 by Free Spirit Publishing. Used with permission.

Before making student placements, teachers assign their students to one of five categories (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008). Teachers determine group assignments through formal and informal methods that include standardized test data, teacher observations, and other standardized and anecdotal data.

Students are assigned to groups with the following descriptors:

- *Group 1—Gifted:* All students identified as gifted, including those not fluent in English, those who are academically nonproductive, and those who are twice exceptional.
- *Group 2—High Average:* Highly competent and productive students who achieve well.
- *Group 3—Average:* Students who achieve in the middle range of grade-level expectations.
- *Group 4—Low Average:* Students who may score slightly below grade level but who can achieve at grade level with some support.
- *Group 5—Far Below Average:* Students who struggle in most subject areas and score significantly below proficiency levels.

Student placements occur each spring. Teachers from the sending and receiving grade levels work with assistance from the principal, gifted specialists, and special education teachers. To create the kind of classrooms shown in Figure 1, school staff must cluster gifted students in designated classrooms, group high-average students in classrooms that have not been assigned the gifted cluster, place average students evenly in all classrooms, place low-average students in all classrooms, and place far-below-average students in classes without the gifted cluster.

What Teachers Need to Know

Cluster grouping recognizes that gifted students need to be challenged daily in all subject areas (Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993). This requires the daily attention of teachers who have a certification in gifted education or who participate in ongoing training in that field. It also requires a sustained focus on documenting student progress, which cluster grouping facilitates.

Monitoring Student Progress

The cluster-grouping approach is similar to Response to Intervention (RTI),

which schools use primarily to benefit low-achieving students. Like RTI, cluster grouping enables teachers to diagnose a student's entry level in specific content, prescribe an intervention that will advance the student's progress, and assess the degree to which the intervention worked.

For example, a gifted cluster teacher might determine students' challenge levels by offering a pretest before teaching a new concept. After providing a few minutes of direct instruction to the entire class on a new unit of study, the teacher might give students the opportunity to take the end-of-the-unit test *before* receiving the week's instruction and completing the week's practice work. Students who score at 90 percent or higher have demonstrated that they have mastered the content and do not need to spend the week learning that material. Instead, the teacher would provide more challenging work in the same subject area to those students and assess their progress on that material.


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Advanced students must recognize that they are not doing *more* work than others, just *different* work.

Training Teachers

Schools attempting to teach gifted students in an inclusionary setting need to help teachers learn about and plan for gifted students' academic and affective needs. Although most teachers have training in differentiating curriculum and instruction, few entering the field have preservice exposure to the characteristics and learning needs of gifted students (National Association for Gifted Children, 2009). All teachers could benefit from this exposure and from additional training in differentiated instruction, which benefits all students, not only the gifted.

Administrators can focus teacher training more easily by having a designated gifted cluster teacher at every grade level. This teacher-trainer would show teachers how to pre-assess gifted learners to gauge prior knowledge in a given topic, provide instruction that takes into account gifted students' attributes and needs, encourage problem solving and divergent and critical thinking, provide classroom time for like-minded peers to work together at advanced levels, and support student-directed learning.

Differentiating Instruction

When teachers have only one or two students from a special population, they may overlook them, especially when the students appear to be doing well. Teachers are more likely to consistently differentiate curriculum and instruction for their gifted students when they have a *group* of gifted students in their classrooms.

Likewise, gifted students more readily take advantage of differentiated learning opportunities when others are working at advanced levels. They may take more academic risks and challenge one another more—not only because of their more competitive natures but also because they feel understood by their teachers (Webb et al., 2005) and more comfortable and confident learning with peers with whom they can relate (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

In gifted cluster classes, any student may try to demonstrate that he or she has already mastered the upcoming standards and thus participate in the various differentiated tasks planned for gifted students. For advanced learners, however, differentiation is only part of what they need. Effective differentiation must be accompanied by *curriculum* or *lesson compacting*, a process of giving students credit for what they already know. Compacting also occurs when advanced students are allowed to work more quickly through grade-level material. (See "A Lesson in Lesson Compacting.")

For an approach like this to be successful, students must recognize

A Lesson in Lesson Compacting

Mr. Wilkerson notices that some of his students in math always complete their practice work quickly. Having learned "the most difficult first" strategy in a recent workshop, he presents it to the class the next day.

He begins the lesson with 15 minutes of direct instruction and then explains to students that he will now be offering a new option: Those students who understand a lesson—and prove it by correctly doing the five most difficult math problems on the day's assignment—won't need to do the rest of the problems. They can work instead on an "extension page"—that is, a more challenging math activity—for the rest of the class period.

Students who attempt to do those five problems but have difficulty solving them on their own go back to the beginning of the page and try to complete all the problems. During this time, the classroom "checker" verifies the answers of those students who have tackled the five most difficult problems, thus freeing the teacher to help students who need more support.

This strategy accomplishes several important outcomes. First, the teacher doesn't waste the learning time of students who require little practice. Second, he structures sufficient time for those who need it. Finally, he frees up time to work directly with the students who most need his assistance. "Most difficult first" represents a simple solution to the challenge of teaching in classes with a range of abilities.

that they are not doing *more* work than others, just *different* work. Students must also understand that their recorded grade will not be lower than it would have been had they completed the regular class work instead of the more challenging work they tackled. Because teachers are required to assess only the grade-level standards—this is what the recorded grade reflects—they can give alternative credit to students who successfully complete extension activities.

A Solution That Satisfies All

In this time of rapidly expanding school choice, schools need to provide a challenging learning environment for students of all levels of ability and achievement. Cluster grouping creates a more rigorous and relevant school setting, encourages smart students to remain in their schools, and draws back students who have left. In addition, it provides equitable services to all students, is feasible to implement, satisfies parents, and sets the stage for higher achievement for all: EL

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EL Online

Learn how grouping can be used to promote student success in math in the online-only article "Math Groups That Make Sense" by Sandra Dean and Michael Zimmerman at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb12/vol69/num05/Math-Groups-That-Make-Sense.aspx.

Dina Brulles is director of gifted education services at Paradise Valley Unified School District, Phoenix, Arizona; dbrulles@pvschools.net. **Susan Winebrenner** is founder and president of Education Consulting Service; susan@susanwinebrenner.com.