

FLYPAPER

Gifted students need a “continuum of services” now more than ever

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Teachers are now planning instruction for the new school year. But very quickly after their pupils arrive, many will realize that some students will not be adequately challenged by the grade-level curriculum typically assigned for the class. Some will already have mastered that material and are ready to move on.

Accelerating students beyond grade level requires that schools implement methods for determining their learning levels, group them based on learning needs, then accelerate learning accordingly. This is especially true in today’s classrooms, where teachers face a widening range of achievement and readiness, partly due to fractured learning during the pandemic. One fifth-grade teacher may have students learning two-digit addition while others are ready for algebra. This is a recipe for some students going ill-served, uncompensated, and under-challenged.

Systems need to be in place to support teachers facing such a range of achievement levels by providing a continuum of services. That means looking at: 1) identifying students’ immediate learning levels; 2) determining how services for advanced learning opportunities can be tiered; and 3) finding a match between program offerings and students’ needs. This requires flexibility in services, placements, and programming to allow for continual entrance, exit, and re-entry points.

Consider what a continuum of services might look like at the three key levels: the district, the school, and the classroom.

At the district level. Paradise Valley Unified School District in Arizona, where I worked, enrolls 33,000 students, including almost 5,000 “gifted and talented” learners. We built a reputation for supporting such pupils via a continuum of services. That made it possible for the district to provide for, and appropriately challenge, all students with high ability and high achievement. They move in and out of the various programs throughout their school years, depending on their learning needs at the time. This procedure has been sustained by the district for nearly two decades. That’s because it works.

At the school level. Grouping practices at the building level can take many forms. These include ability grouping, cluster grouping, within-class grouping, within-grade-level grouping, cross-grade-level grouping, pullout groups, and more. “Walk to math” illustrates a common grade-level grouping practice that costs nothing to implement and can be easily supported by school administrators. In this model, the teachers in the grade level all teach math at the same time of the day, with each teaching at a different level. This enables students to progress when ready, based on their demonstrated mastery of the content. When students are constantly regrouped based on readiness, the risk of negative stigma for changing classroom placements is minimized—as the

changes include all pupils at all levels. This continual regrouping practice allows for more focused instruction and encourages acceleration for students who need it, as well as catch-up and grade-level for other pupils.

At the classroom level. We know that highly effective teachers continually monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. Not every district or school arranges for grouping and accelerating curriculum and instruction for gifted and talented students, and even when they do, most of the burden falls on classroom teachers, as they provide the actual instruction.

Some resist grouping students for instruction, despite much research attesting to its efficacy. Grouping students can appear political or discriminatory when poorly designed and poorly communicated. Some are also reluctant because they do not feel confident that they can do a first-rate job of designing and implementing groupings.

Flexibly grouping students can be messy at first, and doing so requires professional learning opportunities, guided planning, and administrative support at the building level. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. In my book *A Teacher's Guide to Flexible Grouping and Collaborative Learning*, written with Karen L. Brown, we suggest the following when implementing grouping practices:

- Develop flexible learning groups based on student needs and readiness.
- Use data to form flexible learning groups.
- Plan tiered lessons for the flexible groups within a class.
- Design individualized classwork and homework that challenge all learners.
- Build a communication network for parents to monitor students' progress.

School administrators should anticipate challenges in implementing grouping practices due to the burden this places on scheduling classes and assigning staff. Principals need teacher buy-in, which sometimes means shifting mindsets. It also requires reflecting on whether existing instructional practices are positively impacting instruction for all students, especially those who are capable of learning beyond their grade levels.

Ultimately, principals need to provide transparency in placement processes and communicate their plans and rationale to parents. They must emphasize that grouping configurations are not permanent placements; they are flexible and responsive to student needs.

Grouping students for targeted instruction on a daily basis is effective and necessary for those at the highest achievement levels. The recommendations above lay the groundwork for incorporating a continuum of services that involves grouping and regrouping students at the district level, the building level, and within the classroom.

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