Minnesota Department of Education

Acceleration of Gifted Students

Frequently Asked Questions

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No bird flies too high if he soars with his own wings.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

What is acceleration?

Acceleration is an intervention that moves students through an educational program at a more rapid rate than their age-mates. The goal of acceleration is to tailor the level and complexity of the curriculum to the ability and academic readiness of individual children *(Colangelo et al., 2004*).

What are the benefits of acceleration?

Research indicates that students who are properly accelerated benefit significantly, both academically and emotionally. Accelerated gifted and talented students and other high ability students perform at higher levels on achievement tests and are less likely to become bored and disinterested in school than similarly able students who are not accelerated.

Why is acceleration important?

When the level of instruction is not rigorous and expectations are low, gifted learners may settle into patterns of underachievement. These students are at risk of developing poor organizational/study skills and far worse, may not reach their full potential.

Are schools required to accelerate instruction to meet a student's needs?

Yes, districts are required to have procedures in place for the academic acceleration of gifted and talented students that include an assessment of students' readiness and motivation for acceleration and a match between the curriculum and the students' academic needs. Furthermore, every Minnesota child is entitled to an appropriate and challenging education.

Who determines whether a student should be accelerated?

The decision to accelerate a student is a local decision. (Minn. Stat. §120B.15 (c)). The law includes a provision requiring school districts to adopt procedures for the academic acceleration of gifted and talented students. These procedures must include an assessment of students' readiness and motivation for acceleration and a match between the curriculum and the students' academic needs. When considering whether or not a student should be accelerated, the decision should be based on the question of whether an accelerated placement would improve the current placement, and not whether it would be a "perfect" placement. Some students may need a combination of different forms of gifted education services to fully reach their potential.

What are some indicators that a student should be considered for acceleration?

Acceleration requires high academic ability. Standardized test scores and teacher observation can provide evidence that a student has mastered the current curriculum and is ready for a faster-paced and more complex curriculum. *(Colangelo et al., 2004)* Motivation and social-emotional maturity

are also important indications that a highly capable student may be a good candidate for acceleration.

Who should and should not be accelerated?
Most good candidates for acceleration display some of the following characteristics:

- demonstrates above average general cognitive ability;
- achieves academically in one or more subject areas a grade level or at a higher level than his or her age-mates;
- expresses a desire for more challenging instruction;
- is socially mature enough to adapt to an environment serving older students; or
- responds positively to the possibility of acceleration.

Acceleration may not be appropriate for students with some of the following characteristics:

- has an older sibling in the same school and grade level to which the student may be accelerated;
- is sufficiently challenged by the curriculum at his or her current grade level;
- would be significantly less emotionally mature than typical students at the grade level to which he or she may be accelerated; or
- responds negatively to the possibility of acceleration.

Further, one type of acceleration for a student might be appropriate when another is not. A student who is very advanced in reading and writing ability but struggles in math and is of average ability in science and social studies might be an excellent candidate for subject acceleration in reading and language arts, but a poor candidate for a whole "grade skip." Conversely, a student who is strong in several areas might be happier and more successful if accelerated on a full-time basis so she could be with one set of peers all day and travel less back and forth between classrooms than she would if accelerated in only one or two subject areas. Near the end of the K-12 experience, some students may be ready to move on to college on a full-time basis and benefit from the opportunity to graduate high school early. Others may prefer to stay in high school and take advantage of other post secondary credit options, such as Advanced Placement (AP), College in the Schools (CIS), College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) opportunities on a partial or full-time basis.

Is acceleration the same as "grade skipping?" What are the most common types of acceleration?
Whole-grade acceleration (commonly referred to as grade-skipping) is just one of 18 forms of acceleration. Other forms of acceleration include:

- early admission to kindergarten*;
- early admission to first grade;
- grade-skipping*;
- continuous progress;
- self-paced instruction;
- subject-matter acceleration/partial acceleration*;
- combined classes;
- curriculum compacting***;**
- telescoping curriculum*;

- mentoring;
- extracurricular programs;
- correspondence courses*;
- early graduation;
- concurrent/dual enrollment*;
- advanced placement*;
- credit by examination;
- acceleration in college; or
- early entrance into middle school, high school or college

* A common form of acceleration *(Colangelo et al., 2004)*

How can schools determine whether whole-grade acceleration is appropriate?
Minnesota schools determine policies and procedures for the evaluation of students for acceleration. Best practice suggests the consideration of test scores, teacher observation, evaluation by a school psychologist and input from the parents and student. A common tool used to gather information to evaluate and consider student acceleration is the Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS).

Won't skipping all or part of a grade cause the student's achievement test scores and grades to drop?
In most cases, students accelerated based on the recommendation of a research-based evaluation process will perform well on state achievement tests. Most students recommended for acceleration perform well above grade level prior to their accelerated placement. Research on acceleration indicates that students properly accelerated are capable of quickly catching up to their academic-level peers and that any gaps in knowledge quickly disappear. Using assessments to identify any significant knowledge gaps prior to the accelerated placement, and building into the acceleration transition plan specific action steps to address any gaps identified, can help ensure success.

Is grade skipping socially damaging to students?
Gifted/advanced students selected for accelerated placement through a research-based process are unlikely to suffer negative social consequences. Studies show that they participate in school activities and view themselves positively. Their self esteem often increases as they find friends and social acceptance in the new class. Research on acceleration also indicates that advanced learners often feel more comfortable with their academic-level peers as opposed to their age-level peers.

What should parents do if they think their child should be considered for acceleration?
Begin by discussing your concerns with your child. If your child is interested and open to the idea, contact your child's teacher or advisor to schedule a conference. Be prepared to discuss your concerns and provide specific information as to why you believe the level and complexity of your child's instruction should be modified.

What can school administrators do to support accelerated students?
- Help teachers align schedules to allow students to attend class at the most appropriate grade level based on instructional needs.
- Provide ongoing staff development opportunities so that all staff understand the unique instructional and affective needs of gifted learners.

- Help facilitate communication between classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, guidance counselors, parents and others so that students will receive the support they need to reach their potential.
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment period.
- Create a school climate that recognizes and encourages high expectations and continuous growth for all students.

What can teachers do to support acceleration?

- Recognize gifted children by using formal measures (tests) and informal observations.
- Provide new challenges in and out of the classroom.
- Inform parents about acceleration options throughout the child's academic career.
- Minimize teaching students what they already know.
- Make school a positive experience for all students…including the brightest. *(Colangelo et al 2004)*
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment period.

What can parents do to support their child's acceleration?

- Maintain open communication with your child and your child's teachers.
- Be aware that your child may be concerned about his or her ability to meet higher expectations and new challenges.
- Understand that acceleration may pose new challenges socially and academically.
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment period.
- Be prepared to offer extra support and encouragement as needed during the adjustment period.

Glossary of Terms

Acceleration: Acceleration is an intervention that moves students through an educational program at a more rapid rate than their age-mates.

Acceleration in College: The student is awarded an advanced level of instruction at least one year ahead of normal. This may be achieved through dual enrollment programs (PSEO or CIS), the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or the determination of the college teachers and administrators.

Achievement Test: A measure of developed skill or student knowledge at a given grade level. High achievement scores usually indicate a mastery of grade-level material and the readiness for advanced instruction.

Advanced Placement (AP): The student takes a course (traditionally in high school) that may confer college credit upon successful completion of a standardized examination and acceptance by a post-secondary institution.

Combined Classes: The student is placed in a multi-grade classroom. While not, in and of itself, a practice designed for acceleration, this placement may allow younger students to interact academically and socially with older peers.

Concurrent/Dual Enrollment: The student takes a course at one level and receives credit for a parallel course at a higher level (e.g., taking algebra at the middle school level and receiving credit at both the middle school and the high school level or taking a high school chemistry course and receiving credit for a university course upon successful completion). Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and the College in the Schools (CIS) program are examples of increasingly popular options for Minnesota students.

Continuous Progress: The student is given content progressively as prior content is completed and mastered.

Correspondence Courses: The student enrolls in coursework delivered outside of normal school instruction. Instruction may be delivered traditionally by mail. Increasingly, other delivery mechanisms such as Internet-based instruction and televised courses are being offered.

Credit by Examination: The student is awarded advanced standing credit (e.g., in high school or college) by successfully completing some form of mastery test or activity.

Curriculum: The set of courses, and their content, offered at a school or university.

Curriculum Compacting: A strategy in which student introductory activities, drill and practice are reduced to allow the student to pursue more advanced content instruction or participate in enrichment activities.

Early Admission to Kindergarten: Student enters kindergarten or first grade prior to achieving the minimum age for school entry set by the district of state.

Early Admission to First Grade: Either the result of early entrance to kindergarten or admission directly to first grade.

Early Entrance Into Middle School, High School or College: The student completes two or more majors in a total of four years and/or earns an advanced degree along with or in lieu of a bachelor's degree.

Enrichment: Exposure to new ideas, skills and concepts or an extension of school curriculum.

Extracurricular Programs: Students elect to enroll in coursework, after school or summer programs that confer advanced instruction and/or credit.

Early Graduation: The student graduates from high school or college in three-and-a-half or fewer years. Generally, this is accomplished by increasing the amount of coursework undertaken each year in high school or college, but it may also be accomplished through dual/concurrent enrollment.

Grade-Skipping: A student is given a grade-level placement ahead of his/her chronological-age peers.

Mentoring: A student is paired with a mentor or expert tutor who provides advanced or more rapid pacing of instruction.

Self-Paced Instruction: The student proceeds through learning and instructional activities at a self-selected pace.

Staff Development: Opportunities to enhance an educator's knowledge and skills.

Subject-Matter Acceleration/Partial Acceleration: Student is placed in classes with older peers for a portion of the school day in one or more content areas.

Telescoping Curriculum: Student is provided instruction that entails less time than is normal (e.g., completing a one year course in one semester, or three years of middle school in two). Telescoping results in advanced grade placement and is planned to fit a precise time schedule. Curriculum compacting, on the other hand, does not necessarily advance grade placement.

References and resources for further study

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