What do gifted students need?

Gifted students have been defined as those who possess exceptional abilities in any area of learning that significantly exceeds age-level expectations (Winebrenner, 2001). Taking into account that grade-level standards inform instruction, we realize that many gifted students will not make academic progress during any given year unless interventions occur. One important idea often misinterpreted is that teachers are not necessarily responsible for teaching the standards; they are only responsible for demonstrating that students have mastered the designated grade-level standards (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008).

Assuring that systems are in place that allow gifted students to make academic progress requires administrative planning and intervention. When school-based learning is described as making yearly academic progress, the students most likely to be “left behind” are those with exceptionally high ability, our gifted learners. Educators and parents generally assume that students who earn good grades and score highly on standardized achievement tests are learning; however, many gifted students have mastered the majority of grade level standards prior to receiving instruction (Brulles, et al., 2010).

When teaching advanced learners, teachers can use formative assessments to document previously learned standards. Students demonstrating mastery of grade level standards then need more challenging curriculum and instruction that allows them to advance academically. Providing this challenge calls for accelerated curriculum and opportunities to study grade level concepts at deeper and more complex levels than their age peers.

The background presented here demonstrates the need for a paradigm shift for educators. To help teachers instruct all students at their challenge levels, we must first implement grouping strategies. Teachers are more likely to use formative assessment data to form flexible learning groups in their classrooms when they have a group of students who require differentiated instruction in order to experience academic growth. The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM) facilitates this process.

The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model

The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model is an inclusion model wherein students with exceptional learning needs are integrated into mixed-ability classrooms. In this model, classroom teachers are trained to provide appropriate differentiated learning opportunities for those needing additional challenges. Similar inclusion models have been used for decades to provide services to students who have been identified as having exceptional educational needs and for English language learners. The same philosophy is equally beneficial for gifted students.

The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model represents a method for providing full-time academic services to gifted students with no financial impact to the district. In the
SCGM, all students are grouped based on their ability and achievement levels. Classroom compositions are carefully structured with two main goals: to ensure a balance of abilities in all classes in the grade level, and to reduce the learning range found in any given classroom (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008).

When cluster grouping, gifted-identified students are purposefully placed into mixed ability classrooms. Ideally, a group of four to nine gifted students is clustered with a teacher who has had—or will receive—training in understanding and responding to their exceptional learning needs. When there are ten or more gifted students in a grade level, a second gifted cluster class may be designated. Grouping gifted students together helps teachers challenge them more easily. High-achieving students (who are not identified as gifted) are placed into the other classes at the grade level so that all classes include students of high ability and high achievement.

Implementing the gifted cluster grouping model

Classroom placements for the upcoming school year occur at end of each school year following spring gifted testing. When making placements, teachers from the sending and receiving grades work with the building principal, teachers who have had gifted education training, and special education teachers. Prior to placing students into classrooms, teachers assign all students in the grade to one of the categories that follows. Each grade level team then assigns all students to classrooms.

Grouping categories:

- **Group 1—Gifted**: All gifted-identified students, including those who are not fluent in English, not productive in school, and twice-exceptional gifted students.
- **Group 2—High Average**: Highly competent and productive students who achieve well in school.
- **Group 3—Average**: Students achieving in the average range of grade-level standards.
- **Group 4—Low Average**: Average students who are able to achieve at grade level with some support.
- **Group 5—Far Below Average**: Students who struggle in several subject areas and score below proficiency levels on academic measures.

The cluster group of gifted students (Group 1) is placed in a classroom with the designated gifted cluster teacher for that grade level. High-achieving students (Group 2) are then evenly placed into the classes that do not have the gifted students. Students from Groups 3 and 4 are then placed into each class, and students in Group 5 are placed into all classes the except the gifted cluster class. With this placement method, no teacher has the full spectrum of abilities. Narrowing the range of achievement levels in every class allows teachers to focus their efforts more productively (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008).

Rationale supporting the SCGM
Some may question whether cluster grouping represents a form of tracking. In the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model, all classes have high ability or high achieving students. Within each grade level, groups are configured so that heterogeneous classes are the norm and equitably balanced.

Gifted students benefit from learning together (Brulles, et al. 2010; Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 2002); research documenting these benefits supports cluster grouping (Brulles, 2005; Brulles et al., 2010; Gentry, 1999, 2006; Rogers, 2002). Students identified as having high ability better understand and accept their learning differences when there are others in the class who share similar traits (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Learning together on a daily basis can encourage these students to pursue in-depth study of their interests.

**Why cluster grouping models work**

Gifted students typically learn new content more quickly than their chronological peers. Cluster grouping provides them with opportunities to engage in intellectually stimulating endeavors with others who are equally capable of learning at advanced levels, increasing possibilities for measurable academic progress (Gentry, M. 1999, 2010; Brulles, et al., 2010).

When a teacher has a cluster of gifted students, planning for appropriate provisions becomes more realistic. The pacing of instruction and the depth of content that gifted students need is made possible through compacting curriculum and providing extended learning opportunities to the group. For this to occur, the gifted cluster teacher must have on-going training in how to teach exceptionally capable students in the cluster model (Winebrenner & Devlin, 2001; Winebrenner & Brulles, 2008).

High achieving students also benefit in this model, as they have new opportunities to become academic leaders. Without gifted students in their classes, high achieving students are no longer overshadowed by the presence of highly verbal, highly competitive classmates. Parents of high average students appreciate the prospects their children have for demonstrating leadership skills and shining academically, perhaps for the first time in their school experience.

Surprising to some, gifted students do not make the best academic leaders because of their ability to learn more quickly and with less effort than others. Teachers recognize that many gifted students are abstract learners who make intuitive leaps in their thinking processes. They make connections between ideas and concepts that others do not make. They do not always follow the same linear-sequential steps as others when solving problems or reaching conclusions. Therefore, they are frequently incapable of guiding others who learn in a more traditional manner, and are often impatient with classmates that learn more slowly than they.

**Equitable services for all students**

Effective gifted cluster teachers learn to recognize and nurture behaviors typically demonstrated by gifted students. Gifted cluster teachers need training to create differentiated learning environments in which:

- All students have opportunities to work at their challenge levels.
• Differences in learning needs are respected.
• Flexible grouping based on readiness, interests, and learning styles occurs.
• Students can demonstrate and receive credit for previous mastery of standards.
• Opportunities for faster pacing of new material are offered when needed.
• Students’ areas of interests are incorporated into their independent studies.
• Research investigations are facilitated.
• Technology is incorporated into differentiated learning opportunities.

When teachers differentiate effectively, there is general improvement in overall achievement for the entire class (Saunders, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner & Devlin, 2001). This suggests that when teachers learn how to provide what gifted students need and provide similar opportunities to the entire class, expectations and the levels of learning are raised for all students (Gentry & Kielty, 2001).

Teachers recognize that differentiation strategies effective with gifted students are also effective with other students. Likewise, the benefits of Response to Intervention (RTI) practices can also meet the differentiated learning needs of gifted students. RTI methods used for struggling students incorporate a similar philosophy as methods in the SCGM. Teachers assess the students’ entry level with the designated standard, choose a method of teaching that will move the student forward, apply the method, and then assess the degree to which the method worked. A similar rationale drives instruction for all students in the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model.

The SCGM can be structured to accommodate all school settings. It can either stand alone or complement other gifted education services in the school. This model may be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas, but the structure will vary. The numbers of gifted identified students and sections at each grade level influences the number of gifted cluster classes in the grade level.

**Educational impacts of the SCGM**

Cluster grouping addresses the academic and affective needs of gifted students and facilitates effective instruction for teachers working with all students. When incorporated well, cluster grouping can provide full-time, cost-effective services for gifted students in a manner that addresses their learning needs on a daily basis. Unlike other prevalent models used for serving gifted students, The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model enfranchises previously under-represented populations including, English Language Learners, culturally diverse students, twice-exceptional students, non-productive gifted students, and gifted students in the primary grades.

Some administrators choose to rotate teachers into the gifted cluster teacher role on a two- to three-year schedule so that all teachers have similar experiences and training. Teachers find that once they have become proficient using the methods and strategies effective in the SCGM, they continue using those methods with all their students regardless of whether they are the designated gifted cluster teacher in any given year.

**Supporting Gifted Cluster Teachers**
Schools transitioning to cluster grouping models may face some initial obstacles. Parents accustomed to their gifted children receiving pull-out services may feel they are losing services when the pull-out programs are eliminated. Additionally, there may be pressure from parents to have their high-achieving children (who are not identified as gifted) placed in a gifted cluster classroom. Gifted students moving into the district or those identifying as gifted during the school year may present additional concerns. Suggestions on handling these situations include:

- Providing training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities in all classes.
- Emphasizing that gifted students in this model can expect differentiation, acceleration, or enrichment to occur in all content areas, all day, every day.
- Helping others understand that gifted students need to spend time learning with intellectual peers in order to progress academically.
- Rotating the cluster teacher assignment every two to three years among teachers who have had appropriate training so parents see that all teachers are capable of teaching gifted students.
- Developing a method for screening students when they enroll during the school year and providing comprehensive gifted testing every spring prior to making placements for the upcoming school year.
- Ensuring that gifted cluster teachers consistently compact and differentiate the curriculum. Administrators must expect gifted cluster teachers to maintain the integrity of the program and provide the support needed to be successful.

**Conclusion**

Cluster grouping small groups of gifted students into otherwise heterogeneous classes represents one manageable way to provide gifted education in our schools during these challenging economic times. Implementing the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model can be relatively easy to manage. However, success in the model requires administrative support and a commitment to training teachers. Schools that have successfully implemented the model have been able to retain families of gifted students in their schools. Administrators have documented that families who had left the school seeking more challenging educational settings for their gifted students return when the school proactively plans ways to maximize the potential of their gifted children.

**Resources**

For additional information on the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model, contact:

Susan Winebrenner - [www.susanwinebrenner.com](http://www.susanwinebrenner.com)
Dina Brulles - [www.giftededucationconsultants.com](http://www.giftededucationconsultants.com)

The cluster grouping handbook: How to challenge gifted students and improve achievement for all [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com).

**Credit line:**
Contents of this article are based on *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All* by Susan Winebrenner, M.S., and Dina Brulles, Ph.D., © 2008.

**References**


Delisle, J., & Galbraith, J. (2002). When gifted kids don't have all the answers. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.


