



# BULLETIN

## Academic Acceleration

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Pennsylvania law states that schools must provide each gifted student with an education that meets his or her individual needs (see sections 16.1 and 16.41(a) and (b)) through enrichment or acceleration or both (see sections 16.2(d)(3) and 16.41(b)(3)). This statement raises key questions about the definitions of *acceleration* and *enrichment*. The definitions are based on the level at which the student works.

**Enrichment:** Additional or different work *at grade level*

- Increase breadth
- Increase depth

**Acceleration:** Advancement to a *higher level of study*

- Increase pace
- Skip material that already is known

### Academic Concerns: How Can We Know Acceleration Won't Backfire?

Many professionals approach acceleration and enrichment as if they were mutually exclusive. In many cases, however, both acceleration and enrichment are involved in a student's educational plan. An enrichment class may address advanced concepts or complex issues not typically considered at a particular grade level. Such advanced thinking could be considered accelerative, but this class would still be primarily "enrichment" if it retained the in-grade curriculum. Similarly, a student who is accelerated may study an enriched version of advanced material.

Although the law does not require acceleration, it does require that gifted students obtain meaningful educational benefit from their instruction (see sections 16.1 and 16.41(b)(2)). There are some students for whom this can happen most easily, and perhaps only, through academic acceleration. Unfortunately, many schools resist acceleration despite research that overwhelmingly supports it. This PAGE Bulletin provides a research-based discussion of many of the questions that may arise when acceleration is considered for a gifted child.

Many concerns about acceleration focus

on possible academic outcomes down the road. Two specific questions often are raised in this regard. First, what if rapid progress through the curriculum creates gaps in a student's knowledge that are not discovered until later? Second, will a rapid pace of learning create a "burnout" situation in which the student later will lose interest in academics?

The first question highlights problems that can arise if acceleration is used haphazardly, without careful planning. Gaps in knowledge can be avoided, however, with assessment and monitoring. Before a student accelerates, it is crucial to be aware of what the student does and does not know, so that instruction can be appropriately focused. The diagnostic testing → prescriptive instruction (DT→PI) model was developed to address this issue. It involves careful testing to determine which specific topics the student does and does not know, followed by instruction designed to eliminate any "gaps" before the student advances. For example, a student may know all but one or two topics in the sixth-grade math curriculum. This student need not sit through an entire year of sixth-grade math to learn one or two new things. Instead, the student can be tutored on weak topics, then move into the seventh-grade

math curriculum. The DT→PI model also allows determination of the appropriate level curriculum for a student, based on the point at which more than just a few topics are unfamiliar to that student.

The burnout question probably arises from our tendency to view the gifted student's situation from an average student's perspective. For most children, an in-grade curriculum and a typical pace are appropriate. They provide sufficient challenge to keep the child motivated and learning, but not so much difficulty that the child is discouraged or exhausted. To accelerate such a child would be to "push" the child to keep up with a too-advanced curriculum, and would risk burnout. *For a gifted child, however, acceleration does not push the child to keep up with the curriculum; it pushes the curriculum to keep up with the child.* If the DT→PI model is followed and a student's needs are accurately assessed and addressed, acceleration simply will match instruction to the child's knowledge and abilities, thereby preventing boredom and providing the *appropriate* challenge that any child needs in order to learn effectively.

## Psychosocial Concerns: Will the Child Be Happy?

Even when parents and school



personnel are aware that a child is capable of advanced academic work, they often worry that acceleration will create interpersonal difficulties that will result in unhappiness or poor social development. Here, the issues usually fall into one of three areas: *friendship*, *self-concept*, and *missed social experiences*.

Issues of **friendship** involve apprehension about the child's ability to be accepted by older students and relate well with them. Research indicates, however, that this concern often is misplaced. Gifted children (especially those who are highly gifted, who also are those most likely to benefit from acceleration) often are better accepted by older students than by age-mates. This finding makes sense if we stop thinking of a "peer" as someone of similar *chronological* age and start thinking about similarity in *thought and understanding*. A child's friends are likely to be those who *think* similarly, with similar concerns, interests, and levels of cognitive complexity. In fact, it has been observed that gifted children often voluntarily choose older friends. Research also indicates that accelerated and unaccelerated gifted students have similar levels of extracurricular activity in high school and college. Apparently, accelerated students are able to make friends and involve themselves in social activities.



**Self-concept** concerns can take either (or both!) of two opposite forms: a fear that acceleration will give students "big heads" and an inflated sense of their abilities, and a fear that acceleration will harm gifted students' self-concepts by introducing them to highly able peers. Of these two possibilities, the second is the more realistic—but even it is unlikely to create serious problems. Social comparison theory states that people often use others as a standard by which to measure their own performance. Those who perform better than their "comparison group" will have higher self-concept than those who perform worse than the comparison group. Herbert Marsh has used the term "Big Fish Little Pond Effect" to discuss social comparison effects as they apply to gifted students' academic self-concepts. Indeed, there is evidence that gifted students who are grouped with other highly able students (through acceleration or ability-grouping, for example) experience temporary decreases in their academic self-concepts. When the overall level of students' academic self-concepts is considered, however, it appears that gifted students' academic

self-concepts remain positive even after entrance into special educational programs; students do not suddenly



develop negative self-concepts when their comparison group changes. One possible interpretation of this finding is that students develop a more realistic, healthy self-concept when they are exposed to highly able peers. Further, acceleration apparently is associated with no change at all in non-academic areas of self-concept.

Adults who fondly remember experiences such as their high school prom may worry that accelerated students will suffer by missing out on such **social experiences**. This concern is relevant primarily to students who are whole-grade accelerated. A student who enters college early will not have a prom; one who skips grades in elementary school will be unable to drive and date when classmates are ready to do so. Researchers have asked accelerated students for their feelings about such matters. Early college entrants in one study responded that, while they did not enjoy situations such as those described above, the many benefits of entering college early made up for the atypical social experience. In other studies, college students and graduates who had accelerated expressed very high levels of satisfaction with that decision and indicated that they would accelerate again if they could start over.

## Methods of Implementing Acceleration

To be successful, acceleration must both meet the student's needs and fit into the structure of a school system. A student may require acceleration across the board (i.e., whole-grade acceleration) or only in certain subjects (i.e., subject-specific acceleration). Either way, there are a variety of implementation options, many of which cost little or nothing and require no special facilities, making them possible for rural and/or poorly funded schools. The following table categorizes some common options according to the type of acceleration they can facilitate: *whole-grade acceleration*, *subject-specific acceleration*, or *either*.

**Whole-Grade Acceleration**

- Early entrance to school (i.e. kindergarten or first grade)
- Grade-skipping
- Early entrance to junior high, high school, or college
- Special schools for gifted students (e.g., magnet, charter, cyber)

**Subject-Specific Acceleration**

- Moving to another classroom for a specific subject
- Online, correspondence, or special summer courses
- Concurrent enrollment (e.g., in middle school and high school)
- Advanced Placement classes or other self-contained classes for gifted students

**Either**

- Curriculum telescoping
- Combined classes (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in one classroom)
- Credit by examination
- Non-graded classes

(Adapted from Rogers, 2002 and Southern & Jones, 1991)

**Deciding to Accelerate**

Throughout this Bulletin, the argument is made that acceleration is an effective educational option for gifted students. This does not mean, however, that it is right for every gifted student. So how do you decide whether acceleration—especially whole-grade acceleration—will meet the needs of a particular child? Following are some important questions to ask as you begin to consider acceleration:

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
◆ Does the child want to accelerate? .....	Yes	No
◆ Is the family supportive of the child’s acceleration?.....	Yes	No
◆ Do you have IQ test results indicating that the child is gifted (e.g., score of 130 or higher)? .....	Yes	No
◆ Do you have in-grade achievement test results indicating that the child’s academic performance is higher than that of a typical student?.....	Yes	No
◆ Do you have above-level test results indicating that the child is performing at a higher grade level?.....	Yes	No
◆ Does the child get along with other children? (Note: Older children count! Some gifted children get along better with older children than with age-mates).....	Yes	No
◆ Does the child get along well with teachers? .....	Yes	No
◆ Does the child have opportunities for interaction with same-age children in non-academic settings (e.g., scouts, sports, theatre, music)? .....	Yes	No
◆ Does the school support the child’s acceleration? .....	Yes	No
◆ Does the receiving teacher support the child’s acceleration? .....	Yes	No
◆ Is the school willing to work with the family to ensure the continued appropriateness of the child’s education? .....	Yes	No
◆ If the child skips a grade, will he or she be placed in an older sibling’s classroom? .....	No	Yes
◆ Is it important to the family that the child be “#1” in his or her class? .....	No	Yes
◆ Is it important that the child be involved competitively in strength-based sports? .....	No	Yes

A useful guide to working through these and other issues related to acceleration is the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplak, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2003). This instrument provides research-based information about acceleration and a systematic guide to decision-making. The complete kit (manual and 10 record forms) is available through Great Potential Press ([www.greatpotentialpress.com](http://www.greatpotentialpress.com)).

## **An Often Overlooked Question: What May Happen If the Child is *Not* Accelerated?**

We often think of acceleration as a big decision, and so we think about all the things that might go wrong if a child is accelerated. What we may fail to consider, however, is what might go wrong if the child is *not* accelerated. Gifted children who are forced to tolerate boredom in the classroom are at risk for a number of problems, including underachievement, development of poor study habits, and declining interest in school. They may come to believe that the need to work hard at something means they are stupid or incapable in that area. The choice *not* to accelerate a student is a big decision, too!



### **For Further Information**

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