

Research-Based Best Practices and Recommendations for Talented and Gifted Services in Portland Public Schools

Compiled by the Portland Public Schools Talented and Gifted Advisory Council
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The purpose of this document is to briefly summarize research-based practices for providing educational services to Talented and Gifted (TAG) students; it focuses on two established practices: ability grouping and acceleration. Recommendations, based on the research, are provided for improving TAG services in Portland Public Schools.

Addressing the quality of TAG services is important to PPS because the District is losing enrollment. Some of the loss of students may be reversed by following proven, cost-effective steps to improve TAG services; these methods have been implemented in other districts across the country and are supported by research. Improvements in TAG services have increased enrollment in other districts (Sausner); in a survey in an urban east coast school district, 58% of parents with children in private school reported that programs for gifted students would lead them to consider sending their children to public schools (West).

Improving and providing consistent services to TAG students is aligned with the PPS strategic plan vital sign of "accelerated achievement expected of all." The well-planned implementation of best practices for TAG education across the District will provide TAG students with the opportunity to learn and achieve every day. This is especially significant because TAG students and other students who exceed benchmarks have some of the lowest achievement gains of all PPS students. In addition, studies have estimated that nearly half of all gifted students are underachievers (Peterson & Colangelo).

The District is obligated under state mandates to provide TAG services; providing services in a thoughtful, consistent manner based on practices grounded in current research will help the District meet state mandates and decrease the likelihood of complaints. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, TAG students deserve no less than the District's best efforts.

Acceleration:

Moving students through the curriculum at rates faster than typical; includes single-subject acceleration, grade skipping, early entrance to school, AP courses

What the Research Says

- Acceleration is the most effective curriculum intervention for TAG students. A review of 380 studies revealed that almost all forms of acceleration result in growth in achievement (Colangelo, et al; Rogers).
- Acceleration is low- or no-cost (Colangelo, et al).
- Single subject acceleration and curriculum compacting provide positive academic gains for gifted students (Colangelo, et al; Rogers).
- 32 studies demonstrate that whole grade acceleration has positive academic effects for gifted students (Colangelo, et al).
- For many gifted students, acceleration provides a better maturity match than non-accelerated programs (Colangelo, et al).
- Tools are available for identifying students who will benefit from acceleration: above-grade-level tests and the Iowa Acceleration Scale (Assouline, et al).
- Early entry into kindergarten or first grade is very successful for students who have been carefully selected (Colangelo, et al).
- Highly gifted students benefit academically and socially from radical acceleration (two or more years above chronological grade) (Colangelo, et al).

- Students who take AP courses are more successful in college (Rogers).

Recommendations

- Communicate to teachers and principals that acceleration is the most effective intervention for TAG students.
- Create a culture within the District where acceleration is accepted and not seen as unusual.
- Encourage or require use of tools to determine if single subject or whole grade acceleration is appropriate.
- Continue to support a process for assessing students for early entry.
- Continue to support the ACCESS program for highly gifted students and other programs that serve large numbers of TAG students, such as Winterhaven.
- Offer algebra and geometry in all middle and K-8 schools.
- Expand AP course offerings in the District.

Discussion

Accelerating students who are ready to learn above grade-level content is a powerful and cost-effective method to meet the needs of many TAG students. Decades of research and hundreds of studies have overwhelmingly found positive effects of acceleration. However, within the District, there seems to be a pervasive lack of awareness about this research. Many teachers and principals mistakenly believe that placing children with older students will be socially or emotionally harmful, despite evidence to the contrary.

There are four types of acceleration that can easily be employed in the District: whole grade acceleration, single subject acceleration, early admission to kindergarten, and early high school graduation. Teachers and other District personnel should be encouraged to consider acceleration as an option, and procedures should be set in place to use research-based criteria (such as Assouline, et al) to evaluate students. In addition, by establishing common reading and math times within a school building, single subject acceleration can easily be accommodated. Some District elementary and middle schools have successfully implemented this practice. This should be mandatory across the District.

The simple and low cost practice of acceleration will clearly benefit students, and may make some teachers' jobs easier since they will not need to teach to such a wide range of levels within a class.

Grouping Options:

Placing students together based on prior achievement in particular curricular areas

What the Research Says

- Ability grouping is a powerful tool in the education of TAG students (Kulik & Kulik).
- Cluster grouping in elementary school (placing the top 5-8 intellectually gifted students in a grade in the same classroom) provides academic gains (Rogers).
- Full-time grouping through special classes or even schools shows substantial effects in academic growth. (Rogers).
- Undifferentiated whole class instruction not only causes a decline in the achievement of high ability learners, but also negatively affects those in the middle. (Rogers).

Recommendations

- Incent principals to foster a culture in which grouping is an integral part of TAG services.
- Require elementary school principals making classroom placement decisions to group TAG students. (A common practice currently in PPS is to "sprinkle" TAG students evenly among the classrooms.)
- Require elementary and middle schools to have a common reading time and math time to enable regrouping across classrooms for those subjects.

- Encourage or require professional development so that at least one teacher per grade per school has TAG training to accommodate a cluster of high ability students.
- Require middle schools to group TAG students.
- Continue to support the ACCESS program for highly gifted students and other programs that serve large numbers of TAG students, such as Winterhaven.
- Provide honors-level English and history for all high school grades.
- Grant school choice priority to TAG students so they can transfer to schools to be grouped with intellectual peers.

Discussion

Grouping students of like ability, wherever the students fall on the ability level, allows for better, more focused learning. Rapid learners can proceed at their own fast pace with interaction with other rapid learners sparking new questions and developing new perspectives. The same is true for students of different abilities who generally feel more free to ask questions when the pace is closer to their own.

Grouping comes in many sizes. Studies indicate strong gains for high ability students in separate schools or separate classes. Where that is not possible, cluster grouping may be the best option. Between five and eight TAG students could be placed in one classroom with a teacher who has agreed to work with them and has training and experience in teaching high ability learners.

Here the students could be more free to bounce ideas off each other and work at a more rapid pace. Concerns about elitism and of TAG students losing touch with other students are real, but are tempered by several classroom realities. Even students of high ability have differences among themselves in ability. Some studies even show that putting the TAG students together drops the self-esteem of some of the students, at least temporarily. They are suddenly with others who are equally quick and the realization that others share similar gifts may be disorienting at first. In addition students with high ability in math may have less in reading (and vice versa). The students would be in appropriate clusters based on their ability so there wouldn't be a static elite.

Grouping by ability also fosters leadership formation in all ability groups. Sometimes high ability students are like large trees with little able to grow in their shadows. The studies show that self esteem grows in the other ability groups when the high ability students are less prominent.

Teacher Training and Resources and Materials: Recommendations

- Inform teachers about the research in educating TAG students. Many teachers have no training in gifted education, or are relying on out-dated concepts or anecdotal information.
 - Develop a comprehensive staff development program for all staff who are involved in the education of TAG students.
 - Provide teachers with curricula to support TAG students.
 - Establish a consistent curriculum across the District for TAG.
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Sources Cited

Note: We did not attempt to review all the existing research on gifted student education. Rather, this document mostly relies on two excellent meta-summaries of the research (Colangelo, et al, and Rogers).

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