

TOTAL SCHOOL CLUSTER GROUPING & DIFFERENTIATION

A COMPREHENSIVE, RESEARCH-BASED PLAN FOR
RAISING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
& IMPROVING TEACHER PRACTICES

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2

TOTAL SCHOOL CLUSTER GROUPING MODEL: IMPLEMENTATION & PRACTICE

The Total School Cluster Grouping Model provides an organizational framework that places students into classrooms on the basis of achievement, flexibly groups and regroups students as needed for instruction (based on interests and needs), and provides appropriately challenging learning experiences for all students. This chapter describes the details and considerations necessary for successfully implementing the Total School Cluster Grouping Model.

IDENTIFICATION

Identification is a key component for all programming, and in Total School Cluster Grouping, formal identification takes place yearly, with the expectation that students will improve over time in their achievement performance. Criteria are not fixed, but rather determined by consensus that includes the flexibility to accommodate individual students and their needs. In addition to yearly identification and placement of students, the model includes flexible grouping and regrouping of students for instruction once they are placed in classrooms. Following are the general categories of achievement that facilitate yearly identification for classroom placement.

Categories of Achievement

Identification in a traditional gifted program can be fraught with problems of accountability, testing, elitism, equity, and limited space in the program. These issues do not pose problems in the Total School Cluster Grouping Model. The achievement levels of all students are identified using a combination of student performance in the classroom as identified by their teachers and achievement test results. Every year students are identified as belonging in one of five categories.

The Five Achievement Categories

1. High Achieving: These students are great at math *and* reading when compared to their age peers.
2. Above-Average Achieving: These students are great at math *or* reading, or they are pretty good at math and reading, but not as advanced at both as students identified as high achieving.
3. Average Achieving: These students achieve in the middle when compared to others in their grade level. Their achievement might be “on grade level” in many schools. In an impoverished area, they might be achieving below grade level, but at an average level for the school population.
4. Low-Average Achieving: These students may struggle with math or reading, or be slightly behind their peers in both areas. However, it also appears, that with some extra support, these students are not at risk of failure.
5. Low Achieving: These students struggle with school and face risk of failure in school. In many schools the longer they attend, the further behind they fall. These are the students for whom school seems to fail.

Another category could be developed for special needs students. However these students have already been identified, so placing them where they can succeed becomes the only concern. To facilitate this placement, the achievement levels of these students should be noted. Many students served by special education are not low achieving, and they should never be assumed to be low-achieving students. Many students may have more than one label, such as ADHD and gifted or LD and gifted. If a student has a dual exceptionality, educators should place the student in the high-achieving cluster, so that the twice-exceptional student’s strengths can be the educational focus.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to understand these identification category definitions and that the categories are based on the population attending their school. By using a local frame of reference, the system of identification can work in any type of school. If a school is “average” (is there such a school?), then an average student would be on grade level, whereas if a school is high performing an average student might be achieving above grade level. These categories are based on relative performance. The *Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students* (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, Hartman, & Westberg, 2002) might assist teachers in understanding characteristics of academically high-performing students, though the ratings should never be summed and used in an identification matrix. It is also important to understand that

- * identification categories are designed to assist with student placement in this model, not as definitive, permanent labels, or as indicators of expectations;

- * categories change as students grow, learn, and develop, so that a specific identification category might not drive instructional placement for students identified in average, low-average, or low achieving categories; and
- * identification takes place yearly for classroom placement, and students will likely improve as they progress through school.

Identification Procedures and Guidelines

Once these categories are established and explained, the process of identifying the achievement levels of students for placement in classrooms can begin. This process is labor intensive and involves several steps. First, we try to have teachers identify the performance of their students prior to examining any test performance data. The order in the process is important as both the teacher designations and the test performance will be used to identify and place students in the classrooms. If teachers check the tests to see if they are “right,” and then adjust their assessments of student achievement based on test results, the information used for placement will have too much test emphasis rather than a balance of information from both teachers and test results. This model uses tests for means of inclusion into the program, not for means of exclusion from the program, as do so many other identification systems.

Teacher assessments will identify students who fail to test well, but who perform well in class. Teachers, in general, know their students. Occasionally, teachers will fail to identify as gifted (or high achieving) students who fail to do their work, who are unorganized, or who are defiant. There are many reasons for not identifying this type of student, not the least of which is that such a child might take a spot away from a more “deserving” child. In this model, there is no limit to the number of spaces in the high-achieving cluster. If a child scores well on the test, but does not perform well in class, he or she will be placed in the high-achieving cluster by merit of his or her test scores, thus the test is used to include students who teachers might not otherwise identify for placement. We suggest using a local norm of 90th to 95th percentile in both math and reading for automatic inclusion into the high-achieving cluster. Other high achievers will be so designated by their teachers regardless of their test scores. In the event of a teacher who over-nominates, have that teacher rank the nominated students in order of greatest need.

To include students as above-average achieving, educators can use a local norm of 90th to 95th percentile in math *or* reading or 75th percentile in math *and* reading. Again, teachers will include others who exhibit (but do not test with) above-average performance.

By using both teacher ratings and achievement scores, a system of checks and balances is developed. Through this method it is possible for a student who didn't test well to be identified, and conversely, a student whose classroom performance did not reflect his or her ability could be identified as high achieving or above average on the basis of achievement scores. Due to the holistic approach and flexible nature of this identification process, cut-off scores and matrices should not be employed. The use of cut-off scores may cause educators to misidentify students by placing too much emphasis on one factor. Using a matrix focuses on a combination of rigid factors rather than fluid pathways to identification. Students are simply identified and placed into classes by the people who know them best and have their best interests in mind.

Other Considerations

When teachers designate the achievement levels of their students, so too, should they designate which students need to be separated from each other, which students have behavior problems, and specific students who receive special assistance in areas such as math, reading, language, speech, etc. If parent requests for placing children in particular classrooms are usually honored, it needs to be made clear, for reasons forthcoming (see *Developing Class Lists and Reaching Out to Parents*), that placement might not be possible.

Student Data Cards: An Example from Practice

Participants at our current study site have developed a Student Data Card based on these identification procedures, and they have found the cards to work quite effectively. Teachers use the cards to record all the information pertinent to placement and bring the completed cards to a grade-level placement conference. A sample Student Data Card is depicted in Figure 2.1. This card can be adapted for use in other districts based on local information and placement considerations.

DEVELOPING CLASS LISTS

The information gathered in the identification process is used to develop draft class lists for the following school year. Teachers have used Student Data Cards, index cards, or sticky notes with all the information on each student included on the card. Teachers can stick them to a wall, table, or door and easily move them among the classes until an ideal solution is reached by the grade-level team. Other teachers

Student Data Summary Card						
School Year: _____						
Name: _____		Current Grade: _____		Projected Grade: _____		
Gender: M F		Race: _____				
	Language Arts	Math	Science			
State Test						
NWEA						
Final Reading Grade: _____						
Final Math Grade: _____						
Running Record A-Z: _____						
Identification Category (circle one):						
High Achieving	Above Average	Average	Low Average	Low		
Special Education (achievement level): _____						
English Proficiency Level:	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Discipline Issues:	Never	Seldom	Often			
Attendance Issues:	Never	Seldom	Often			
Other Comments: _____						

Figure 2.1. Sample student data card.

have computerized the information, and still other educators simply work from a printed class list. Whatever the method in developing class lists, the goals of the process are to

- ** reduce the number of achievement groups that each teacher has in his or her classroom while still maintaining some heterogeneity,
- ** cluster the high-achieving students in one classroom,
- ** place a group of above-average students in each of the remaining teacher’s classrooms,
- ** cluster students needing special services in classrooms (if appropriate) with resource personnel assistance,
- ** honor parental requests for specific teachers when possible and if it follows building or district policy,
- ** evenly distribute behavior problems among all classrooms so that no teacher has more than his or her fair share of difficult students, and
- ** involve teachers in developing the class lists.

Using these goals as a guide, an administrator, secretary, counselor, or coordinator can begin to develop the draft class lists. Once the drafts are completed, the current grade-level teachers and an administrator or coordinator should sit down

and review the lists with the above goals in mind. During this placement conference, which can initially take an hour or two, the teachers (who know both their colleagues and their students) should review the lists for appropriateness. Teachers should feel free to suggest and make student placement changes. The only rule concerning moving students is that like-labeled students must be “traded” among the classrooms. For example, an average student from Classroom A can be traded for an average student from Classroom B to create a better student-teacher fit. An average student cannot be traded for an above-average, below-average, or any other category student. Once all the changes have been made, the lists can be finalized.

We recommend using an asterisk to highlight any student who is placed in a classroom for a specific reason. The asterisk denotes that the student may not be moved. When a request for change is made (usually to someone in the office), the person taking the request can quickly glance at the class lists and easily move unasterisked students in the same identification categories. If a request comes in for a change that would require moving an asterisked student, we recommend that school personnel tell the parent or guardian that making a change is not currently an option, but that it would be possible to revisit the request after four to six weeks of school. Usually, the student will acclimate to the class during that time period. If after four to six weeks of school, the placement is not working for the student, a change should be considered. (For more on this topic, see *Reaching Out to Parents*.)

By using these procedures for placing students into classrooms each year, the goals for developing the classes can be met. Tables 2.1-2.4 depict how the placement might look for a particular grade level in a school with two to five classrooms per grade level. If the number of classrooms exceeds five per grade level, then teachers can consider designating two classrooms per grade level in which to place high-achieving students. In large schools of ten or more classrooms per grade level, three or more high-achieving cluster classrooms might be needed. Please keep in mind that the number of high-achieving students will vary from year to year, as will the numbers of student in all achievement categories. Since the model’s goal is to enhance the achievement of more students over time, it can accommodate any number of high achievers.

As students progress through the grade levels and as teachers identify more students who begin to achieve at higher levels, it may be necessary to add additional classrooms to accommodate the increased numbers of high-achieving students. By grade five in our study school, teachers faced a decision about whether to have one self-contained classroom of high-achievers or to have two classrooms with clusters

of high-achieving students. Such a situation presents a positive problem in a school: what to do with all of the students who achieve at such high levels? In this school the fifth-grade team of teachers discussed the situation and decided to have one teacher teach all of the high-achieving students, thus creating a self-contained class in the fifth-grade. Had there been another fifth-grade teacher who wanted a cluster of high-achieving students, they could have just as easily decided to create two cluster classrooms in grade five. Each solution would have worked. We should note that the other four classrooms each had a large number of above-average students and a small number of low-achieving students, as student achievement had increased during the three program years.

As displayed in Tables 2.1-2.4, the range of ability levels has been significantly reduced from what one would likely find in a typical heterogeneous classroom that was computer generated or in a classroom in which the students were distributed evenly in order to be “fair” to the teachers. In this model, we recognize that having a similar number of different types of students in classrooms is not fair: it creates too wide a range of achievement levels for teachers to effectively meet the diverse needs of their individual students. The reduction in the range of achievement levels allows for a more focused and academically appropriate curricular approach, thus increasing the chances that individual students’ academic needs will be met.

Table 2.1. Third-grade Students Grouped Into Five Classrooms.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	Room 5	3 rd -grade Total
High-achieving	11	0	0	0	0	11
Above-average	0	7	7	7	7	28
Average	8	8	8	8	8	40
Low-average	4	4	2	4	6	20
Low	0	6	6	4	0	16
Special Education	2*	0	2	2	4**	10
Total	25	25	25	25	25	125

*These students are Learning Disabled *and* Gifted.

**These students are Learning Disabled and see the same teacher consultant who spends 4 half-days per week working in this classroom.

Total School Cluster Grouping & Differentiation

Table 2.2. Second-grade Students Grouped Into Four Classrooms.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	2 nd -grade Total
High-achieving	8	0	0	0	8
Above-average	0	7	7	7	21
Average	10	10	10	10	40
Low-average	5	0	5	5	15
Low	0	8	0	3	11
Special Education	2*	0	3**	0	5
Total	25	25	25	25	100

*These students are Learning Disabled *and* Gifted.

**These students see the same teacher consultant who also helps the classroom teacher.

Table 2.3. Fourth-grade Students Grouped Into Three Classrooms.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	4 th -grade Total
High-achieving	6	0	0	6
Above-average	0	7	6	13
Average	10	10	10	30
Low-average	8	0	6	14
Low	0	8	0	8
Special Education	1*	0	3**	4
Total	25	25	25	75

*This student is twice-exceptional.

**These students see the same teacher consultant who also helps the classroom teacher.

Table 2.4. Fifth-grade Students Grouped Into Two Classrooms.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	5 th -grade Total
High-achieving	6	0	6
Above-average	0	7	7
Average	10	10	20
Low-average	7	0	7
Low	0	6	6
Special Education*	2	2	4
Total	25	25	50

*Placement of special education students is done based on individual students' needs.

As noted in the Tables 2.1-2.4, a cluster of students with learning disabilities exists in one classroom, and that classroom teacher receives assistance. This manner of inclusion brings the special education teacher into the classroom, integrating her into the general education classroom. The students who receive special services are, in effect, clustered as well, and this arrangement affords them a peer group rather than singling them out as the only kid in class who is different and who receives special services. In turn, the special education teacher is a master of differentiation and can help ensure that methods and materials are appropriate for the varied achievement levels of the students. Whether to cluster special needs students is a district decision.

It should be noted that each year presents a new continuum of student needs. Some years will seem “normal” in their distribution of students achieving at various levels (e.g., a few students at each end of the normal curve and most students near the center). Other years may present quite a different situation such as those depicted in Tables 2.5 and 2.6 on the following page. These tables contain actual data from a school in which the numbers of students at the various achievement levels did not follow a normal distribution. The school depicted in Table 2.5 had an unusually high number of both high and low achievers. Teachers agreed at the placement conference to reduce the number of students in Classroom 5 to help this teacher attend to a large cluster of low-achieving students. The special education teacher worked beside the teacher in this classroom and helped her differentiate for the special education students. In addition, this teacher had full-time services from a Title 1 aide. Because she had only two achievement levels, she was able to provide differentiated services to both groups of students.

Table 2.6 shows three first-grade classrooms. Due to the make-up of this grade level, each teacher’s class has two achievement levels, rather than the more common range of five achievement levels. This arrangement should make planning, teaching, and differentiation easier for these three teachers. In this example no children had yet been identified for special education services, hence their absence from the table.

Note that in these situations, some teachers only had two distinct achievement groups in their classrooms. Be flexible as you place students after assessing the numbers of students who achieve at the different levels in the entire grade. A unique aspect of the Total School Cluster Grouping Model is that there are no preconceived notions about how many students can or must be identified as “gifted.”

Admittedly, time and energy are involved in identifying students and developing class lists. The payoff occurs in the following year in the classroom when each teacher can more effectively reach his or her students due to the decrease in

Total School Cluster Grouping & Differentiation

Table 2.5. Third-grade Students Grouped Into Five Classrooms: Atypical Year.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	Room 5	3 rd -grade Total
High-achieving	10	10	0	0	0	20
Above-average	0	0	7	7	7	21
Average	0	8	8	8	0	24
Low-average	16	0	0	9	0	25
Low	0	6	10	0	10	26
Special Education	0	2*	0	2	4**	8
Total	26	26	25	26	21	124

*These students are Learning Disabled *and* Gifted.

** These students are Learning Disabled and see the same teacher consultant who spends 4 half-days per week working in this classroom; the teacher consultant will work in the classroom with the teacher. Her class size has been reduced.

Table 2.6. First-grade Students Grouped Into Three Classrooms: Atypical Year.

ID Category	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	1 st -grade Total
High-achieving	6	0	0	6
Above-average	0	5	5	10
Average	14	0	0	14
Low-average	0	15	0	15
Low	0	0	15	15
Special Education	0	0	0	0
Total	20	20	20	60

the number of achievement levels in each classroom (facilitating more efficient use of differentiation strategies). A realistic timeline for identifying and making placements is depicted in Table 2.7. Some districts set aside an afternoon for placement conferences, others hold these conferences after school or during a staff meeting time slot, and still others have used common grade-level planning time. One school in our current study has teachers from all grade levels sit at tables in the cafeteria during a half-day professional development time (provided as required by state law). Such an arrangement facilitates discussion about students both within and among the various grade levels.

Table 2.7. Sample Timeline for Identifying and Placing Students.

When	Action	Time
Late Spring	Teachers complete identification using the 5 categories	1-2 hours within a 1-2 week window of time
Late Spring	Coordinator or administrator develops draft class lists	2-4 hours
Late Spring	Teachers have placement conferences and finalize lists	1-3 hours

Placing New Students After School Starts

All schools receive new students at the beginning of the school year, but occasionally students enroll mid-semester or mid-year. Because records often take several days to reach new schools, resulting in an absence of information about the academic skills of a new student, we suggest conducting a quick assessment of reading and math skills when new students enroll. Educators can then place new students tentatively into classrooms until records arrive and student performance can be more fully assessed. Teachers should explain to parents or guardians that the initial classroom placement is temporary and that a permanent placement will be made within two or three weeks. In the vast majority of the cases, the initial placement will work just fine. In cases of extremely low or high achievement, a move might be warranted.

TEACHER SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT

One perceived challenge in the initial implementation of a Total School Cluster Grouping Program might involve which teachers teach which classrooms of students. In examining schools that have implemented cluster grouping, we have recognized some basic “truths” concerning how to select and appoint educators to teach the high achieving (and other) cluster classrooms.

First, the teacher in the high-achieving classroom must want to work with these students and commit to differentiating the curriculum to provide these students with appropriately challenging curriculum and instruction. Second, this individual must commit to learning about how to work with these students through coursework, workshops, licensure, or degree programs. Third, if selected to teach this classroom, the appointment is not a lifetime appointment, but it will last for a minimum of three years. Three years provides the teacher with a first year to learn how to facilitate the high-achieving students, a second year to

perfect it, and a third year to enjoy it. Of course, during those three years, if a teachers finds that this assignment is not his or her strength or if someone leaves the position, another interested teacher can fill the position. At the end of three years, the appointment will be revisited in the context of the grade level and consideration will be given to other teachers who have an interest in working with high-achieving students. We recommend a rotating appointment to offer others the opportunity to teach the high-achieving students and to reduce the appearance of exclusivity. However, change at the end of three years occurs only if another teacher wants the opportunity and commits to the training.

In this model, if implemented as described, more students are likely to be identified each year as talented; thus the demand for teachers to work with high-achieving students will increase over time. Further, districts that implement between-class grouping in math and/or reading will need more teachers who have the desire and skills to teach the high-achieving cluster, high-achieving math group, and high-achieving reading group. The high-achieving cluster teacher need not also teach both advanced math and advanced reading. In fact, by involving more than one teacher at each grade level in the delivery of advanced instruction and content, more teachers will develop skills in working with high-achieving students and perceptions of one class as the advanced class are diminished.

We suggest establishing some parameters and an application processes for initially designating teachers who will teach the high-achieving cluster classrooms. These would include knowledge and background, experience and skills, and willingness to engage in additional educational training concerning gifted child education. One district used the simple application depicted in Figure 2.2 to document teacher interest in teaching this cluster classroom.

We also suggest that grade-level teachers sit together and discuss openly who is interested in teaching this classroom. Often the grade-level educators can work together to make the designation. If they do, such a discussion can avoid the appearance of special treatment or questions surrounding the process of who was selected and why he or she was chosen to teach this classroom. Buy-in to the classroom assignment by one's colleagues increases the chances for success and reduces misperceptions and jealousy. Further, once a teacher has a classroom containing a cluster of high-achievers, we recommend that grade levels meet on a regular basis to discuss and plan together. We also recommend that the teacher of the high-achieving cluster be candid with his or her colleagues about exactly how hard he or she works to keep up with the high achievers. Occasionally, perceptions exist that

APPLICATION FOR TEACHER OF HIGH ACHIEVEMENT STUDENT GROUP	
Name	<hr/>
Detail your experience working with high-achieving students.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
List relevant education and background in working with high-achieving students (include course-work, workshops, conferences, degrees, certifications, etc).	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Grade levels you are willing to teach: K 1 2 3 4 5 6	
Are you willing to wait 3 years for this appointment? Yes No	
If yes, during the time before the appointment, what actions would you take to increase your knowledge in this area?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Explain why teaching this group of students interests you.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Figure 2.2. Sample teacher application.

the high achievers are easy and well-behaved students. However, these perceptions are far from the truth. It would be a mistake for the teacher of the high achievers to give the impression that he or she has all the great kids and that he or she is having a delightful year, when in fact, he or she is likely working harder than ever before.

Ideally, some teachers on staff will have certification or licensure and experience in working with gifted or high-achieving students. Frequently, this case is not the reality. In selecting educators to teach the high achievers, the first criterion needs to be willingness to engage with these students, followed closely by a willingness to obtain expertise about working with these kids. If licensure or certification exists in the state, then the teacher should be given a window of time in which to obtain it. Obtaining expertise need not be dictated simply by what exists in a geographic region, although many areas around the country have on-campus degree or licensure programs in gifted education and talent development. Purdue University offers its licensure courses (a series of five, three-credit, courses) on-line and at reasonable in-state tuition rates for all distance education students (www.purdue.edu/geri), and the University of Connecticut offers a Master's degree in gifted education on-line (www.gifted.uconn.edu). The National Association for Gifted Children (www.nagc.org) has Professional Achievement Certificates in which teachers develop a personal growth plan to gain expertise in working with high-achieving children. Most states offer state conferences in the area of gifted education, and several top-quality summer institutes provide in-depth study in gifted education (e.g., the University of Connecticut's Confratute [www.gifted.uconn.edu], Purdue University's DISCOVER! [www.geri.education.purdue.edu], and Boise State University's Edufest [www.edufest.org]).

If more educators want to teach high-achieving clusters than classrooms exist, we suggest encouraging expertise attainment by all teachers interested in teaching high-achieving students. Ultimately, the general education program will benefit, and a three-year rotation can be developed. As the model continues over the course of several years and the need for additional cluster teachers increases, qualified teachers will become available.

Occasionally, the opposite problem exists, one in which no teacher wants to teach the high-achievers. In this case, the administrator should speak individually to each educator at that grade level to determine why no one is showing interest in the position. Often someone does really want to take on the challenge, but may not want to say so in front of the group. An interested teacher might feel afraid that colleagues will be jealous or that he or she is not qualified for the position. If this is the case, then the administrator can "appoint" the teacher to teach this class and allay any fears the teacher may have about the position. If, on the other hand, no one wants to teach these children, then it might be possible to reassign a teacher from another grade level. However, if teachers from other grade levels also feel the same way, then this

administrator needs to do more work to create buy-in before attempting the model. Perhaps taking a year in which staff would read this book and other articles about the topic and take time for discussion and problem solving would encourage buy-in.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

As with any educational program, a model is only as strong as its theoretical underpinnings, research basis, and the people who implement it. This statement also holds true for Total Cluster Grouping. In order for this model to succeed, it requires knowledge of the students for whom the model is provided, a willingness to collaborate, and continuous professional development. In addition, the implemented model should reflect the community and cultures of the school in which it is developed.

Administrators

Strong administrative support is essential for effective implementation. The identification process alone will require time outside of class for teachers to identify and assign students to classrooms. With administrative support, this time can be made available. Administrators also play a key role in that this model affects the entire grade level and school. Without the leadership and support of the school's administrative team, from the school counselor to the principal, cluster grouping cannot be successfully implemented.

Administrators work closely with the public, and they should consider the role of parents in the support of this model. We suggest that parents be a part of the planning committee to help facilitate communication about and understanding of the model and how it will help teachers better meet the needs of students of all achievement levels. Some districts have developed a pamphlet that they send home to families (see Figure 2.3), others hold meetings, and still others answer parent questions as they arise. Administrators, working with their staff, can determine what will be most appropriate in the context of the school and community.

Data Collection and Evaluation

Districts that take the time, effort, and energy to implement a Total School Cluster Grouping Program should not do so without a plan to evaluate the effects and efficacy of the program. Most districts gather data on an annual basis. Evaluation need not be an additional burden; it can be a planned use of existing data and efforts.

Total School Cluster Grouping & Differentiation

What about other clusters besides high achieving?

By adopting the cluster model for elementary classroom assignment, the needs of all groups of students are taken into account.

Students in classrooms that do not have high achievers included will benefit because they will not be overshadowed, perhaps, by the high achieving students. In that way, other students can find that they, too, can achieve at higher levels.

The methods of addressing the needs of all students will be the same—differentiating of instruction and assessment in order to meet the needs of everyone.

Teachers will be able to differentiate more effectively with fewer skill levels in the same classroom, and all students will benefit.

This model maximizes learning for all students.

If I continue to have questions, where do I go?

The building principal of the school your child attends is in the best position to answer any questions you might have.

Converse Elementary: Valree Kinch, Principal
395-

Sweetser Elementary: Mike Keaffaber, Principal
384-

Swayzee Elementary: Terry Renbarger, Principal
922-

**Oak Hill
United School
Corporation**

*An Explanation of the
Total School Cluster Grouping
Model to Determine
Classroom Assignment*

Outside pages (1 and 4) of brochure

The Model

A group of parents, teachers, and administrators was formed in 2005 to study the issue of providing focused services for high achieving students.

As a result of that study and the assistance of professionals in the field, the "cluster grouping" model was selected as the preferred method of differentiating instruction and serving students at the elementary level in the Oak Hill United School Corporation.

Benefits of Total School Cluster Grouping

- ⇒ Research shows that cluster grouping improves student achievement among students from all achievement levels.
- ⇒ This model allows students with similar academic needs to work together during part of every day.
- ⇒ Clustering provides teachers with a structure for adjusting the curriculum and instruction to the achievement and skill level of the child.
- ⇒ This tool allows teachers to serve all students effectively and differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students.
- ⇒ This model maximizes learning for all students.

How are students placed in a cluster?

All students are identified for small group instruction in a cluster group. Results from several grade level appropriate assessments such as NWEA, ISTEP+, DIBELS, STAR Reading, STAR Math, and teacher recommendations all play a role in this determination, as well as the special needs of individual students.

Will students stay in the same cluster throughout their elementary experience?

While cluster groups are generally stable, the assessment of students is an ongoing part of providing the best educational experience. These groups are flexible enough to allow changes as needed to better meet the needs of the student. Re-evaluation of all students is done annually.

How will instruction be differentiated for students who have demonstrated that they are ready to handle much more challenging work?

Most students at a particular grade level fall within a fairly narrow range around what most professionals would define as grade-level skills. This will vary with the content area, the skill, and the student. Some students enter a grade level already having mastered many of the skills typically taught at that grade level. Those high-achieving students need additional challenge.

Instruction for students in the high-achieving cluster in grades one and two will focus primarily on mathematics and literacy development. In grades three through five, students will have more opportunities to integrate and apply skills in the content areas of science and social studies as well. In grade six, expectations for students in this cluster will be defined for the content areas of mathematics, science, reading, writing, and social studies.

An annual plan for mathematics instruction for this group of learners will be determined through the use of a thorough pre-assessment of skills already mastered. Once the grade level skills yet to be mastered have been identified, students will move through this work at a faster pace. They will then study skills that are outlined in the Indiana Standards for the next grade level, using above grade level materials. In addition, students will be challenged to solve more complex, difficult problems and will be pushed to develop higher level thinking skills. These students will progress through above-level materials as time allows, but will not necessarily be expected to master all of the standards at the next grade level.

In the areas of language arts, science, and social studies, additional challenge will be provided through project selection, the choices and options offered to the students, and the materials used for instruction. These students will also be expected to read and discuss more advanced literature. Curriculum for this group will be extended to develop the depth of understanding of a topic or theme in keeping with the students' strengths and capabilities.

Inside pages (2 and 3) of brochure

Figure 2.3. Brochure for parents explaining the Total School Cluster Grouping Model. Used with permission.

To fully understand the program's effects on all students, data from all students, not just those identified as high achieving, must be examined. We recommend maintaining records of identification categories over time to help understand if the program results in more students being identified as achieving at higher levels and fewer students being identified at lower levels. This task is as simple as setting up a spreadsheet workbook containing students and their identification categories over time, or adding a column to the district database on each student if such a database exists. Identification data coupled with individual student achievement scores can provide an informative picture of how the program functions. Comparing these data with baseline data or data from a school in the district not using cluster grouping can provide more insights into the actual effects of total school cluster grouping. Identification data and achievement data examined together with classroom practices and school climate data can provide a comprehensive program evaluation from which adjustments and improvements can be made.

Meeting with staff to discuss what works and what needs to be improved can also result in program improvements. For example, in our study school, teachers suggested clustering the learning-disabled students and team-teaching them. This suggestion resulted in an effective addition to the program that allowed colleagues to work together to address the special needs of these students.

Underrepresented Populations

Another important consideration involves whether the students identified as high-achieving proportionally represent the demographic student population of the district and school in which the program exists. The field of gifted education is plagued by the under-identification of children from certain minority groups (i.e., African American, Latino/a, Native American) and of children living in poverty (Gentry, Hu, & Thomas, 2008). In this model, such under-identification is easily dealt with as no limits are placed on how many children can be "identified." In other more exclusive models with limits on the number of seats in the gifted program, identifying a child from poverty who has potential might result in services denied to another child who already achieves at high levels. In the Total School Cluster Grouping Model, both of these children can be identified and receive services. An examination of who is identified as high achieving at the beginning of program development (as a baseline) will provide valuable information concerning the equity of access to programming efforts. Over time, as they develop skills and confidence, more children should be identified as high achieving. The proportion

of children identified as high achieving from diverse cultural backgrounds and from poor socio-economic backgrounds should be a part of the increase and mirror the population of the school as a whole. If the program does not develop in this manner, then school personnel should intervene, include in the high-achieving clusters children who show potential, and provide children from underrepresented populations with the extra support they need to reach their individual potentials.

REACHING OUT TO PARENTS

In our work with this program during the past two decades, we have found that educators are often worried about how to explain this model to parents. First, let us say that concerned parents are an asset and not a liability. Often the questions parents ask serve to increase accountability and educational quality. Parents can become strong advocates for effective programs like Total School Cluster Grouping if they are provided with information about the program. Thus, developing brochures and presentations that explain the program to parents (as shown in Figure 2.3 on page 32) is a very good idea.

We have found in our work that the best approach in dealing with parents is one of open communication. First, parents often want to understand how (and why) students are identified for placement in particular classrooms. School personnel should start by explaining that *all* classroom teachers differentiate curriculum and instruction, and that the Total School Cluster Grouping Model enables *all* teachers to better address the educational and affective needs of *all* their students. Program leaders can go over the achievement categories with parents just as they do with teachers, but without the educational jargon. Stress that the categories

- * are not fixed,
- * are used for placement purposes,
- * reflect the child's achievement in school at that time relative to others in the same grade, and
- * are a combination of observed performance and achievement measures that are used to include, not exclude, students in achievement groups.

Next, they can explain that students will be grouped for instruction based on skill levels in reading and math to promote optimal learning and growth. If the school supports regrouping among classes within the grade, parents will want to know about that practice as well. Program leaders should describe how all classrooms will contain students who achieve at above-average levels and explain how

this arrangement as well as regrouping by skill level promotes academic growth for all levels of students. School personnel should ensure that parents understand that students will be re-identified each year and that the number of students who can be identified at high-achieving levels is not limited. In addition, many parents like to hear about accountability; therefore, program leaders should be sure to stress the research findings on the model and the school's plan for tracking program effects.

Second, sometimes issues arise when parents request that their child be placed in a particular classroom. This request presents a problem only when the student for whom the placement is requested achieves at an above-average level and the parents are requesting that he or she be placed in the high-achieving cluster classroom. In this model, it is important to place above-average achieving students into other classrooms (not the high-achieving cluster classroom). When such requests occur, we suggest that school personnel explain to parents how their son or daughter's achievement level compares with other students who will be in the cluster of high-achieving students. Even though their child has been identified as above average, he or she will likely fall among the bottom of the high-achievers. A year of being in another classroom among his or her academic peers may contribute to academic growth and boost academic self-confidence. In fact, the child may be among the top students in the class. School personnel can remind parents that differentiation will occur in *every* classroom and *all* students will be challenged. In addition, students will be re-identified each year for appropriate placement. Finally, if the parent is not satisfied, school personnel can schedule another meeting after six weeks to assess whether the student is thriving in his or her placement. We have found that after approximately six weeks, most students (and thus most parents) are happy with their classroom experience. But, if after six weeks the placement does not appear to appropriately address the child's needs, then a move should be considered.

Third, issues can arise when parents perceive that all of the quality educational experiences occur in the classroom with the cluster of high-achieving students. For a successful implementation of this model, all classrooms must offer students appropriately challenging and engaging learning experiences and proudly display the results of those experiences. All classroom teachers should employ differentiation strategies and engage in gifted-education pedagogy. All classroom teachers must have high expectations of their students. A trip down the hall in an effectively cluster-grouped school should reveal few differences among classrooms to the casual observer. In other words, all classrooms should be enriched, and all students should be engaged in projects and learning experiences that address their interests

and talents. Such engagement will help promote achievement among all students in the school. (These strategies are addressed in Part II of this book.)

Finally, once students are in the cluster-grouped classrooms, sometimes parents raise concerns about the work being too hard or their children experiencing frustration. This initial bump in the road is a normal occurrence. Teachers should emphasize that it presents an opportunity for students to learn to work hard and rise to meet challenging curriculum. It is much better for students to be challenged and receive marks below 100% than for them to move through school obtaining great grades with little effort (Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002).

The identification and placement of students is an important and time-consuming task. Likewise, assigning teachers to classes is vitally important to program success and buy-in. However, it is what takes place after placing students and assigning teachers to particular classrooms that really makes the model successful. In Chapter 3 we address all aspects of professional development from initial training to on-going and in-depth support. We also discuss classroom practices, the use of grouping, and the role of teachers in the Total School Cluster Grouping Model. In Chapter 4 we discuss how the Total School Cluster Grouping Model fits with other gifted and school-based initiatives.