**TSCG Overview**

**Excerpt from *Total School Cluster Grouping* (Gentry, 2014)**

***Total School Cluster Grouping*** operates on the premise that the gifted education program will enhance the entire school. As noted by Tomlinson and Callahan (1992), Renzulli (1994), Reis, Gentry, and Park (1995), and the U.S. Department of Education (1993), the use of gifted education “know-how” has the potential to improve general education practices. The long-term study conducted by Gubbins andNRC/GT Research Team (2002) found that by employing strategies typically used in gifted programs, academic needs were more likely to become the focus of the curriculum than the typical themed units (watermelons, apples, pumpkins) that had previously presided in many classrooms. Cluster grouping, when designed appropriately, can simultaneously address the needs of high-achieving students *and* the needs of other students.

Cluster grouping is a widely recommended and often used strategy for meeting the needs of high achieving students in the regular elementary classroom. Its use has gained popularity in recent years because of the move toward inclusive education, budget cuts, and heterogeneous grouping policies that have eliminated programs for gifted students (Purcell, 1994; Renzulli, 2005; State of the States, 2011). When viewed in the larger context of school reform and extending gifted education services to more students, cluster grouping can reach and benefit teachers and students beyond those in traditional gifted programs.

Cluster grouping is generally defined as placing a group of gifted, high-achieving, or high-ability students in an elementary classroom with other students. There are many experts in the field of gifted education who recommend this approach. They often suggest a specific number of high-ability children to comprise the cluster, and they specify that the rest of the class should be heterogeneous. Further, many applications of cluster grouping are often only concerned with the identified high-ability children and what occurs in their classroom. Composition of and practices within the other classrooms are frequently ignored, as the perceived purpose of cluster grouping is to serve the identified children.

However, because cluster grouping places the highest achieving students in one classroom and affects the composition of all other classrooms, it affects all students and teachers in the school. Therefore, cluster grouping should not be viewed as only a program for gifted students, but as a total school program. Through staff development, flexible placement, and grouping integrated with the regular school structure, cluster grouping offers a means for improving curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.

***Total School Cluster Grouping*** is a specific form of cluster grouping that has a research base, theoretical rationale, and model for successful implementation in schools. Total School Cluster Grouping is guided by the following four goals:

1. Provide full-time services to high achieving elementary students.
2. Help all students improve their academic achievement and educational self-efficacy.
3. Help teachers more effectively and efficiently meet the diverse needs of their students.
4. Weave gifted education and talent development “know-how” into the fabric of all educational practices in the school.

***Total School Cluster Grouping*** considers the placement and performance of *every* student in the school together with the students who might traditionally be identified as gifted and students are placed in the clusters within the classroom to minimize the number of instructional levels. In TSCG, the achievement levels of all elementary students (gifted/high-, above-average-, average-, low-average-, or low-achieving) in the school are identified for the purposes of classroom placement and curricular modification. TSCG involves the following specific conditions.

1. Identification occurs yearly on the basis of student performance, with the expectation that student achievement will increase as students grow, develop, and respond to appropriately differentiated curriculum.
2. Identification encompasses the range of low-achieving to high-achieving students, with all student achievement levels identified.
3. The classroom(s) that contain clusters of high achievers contain no above average achieving students, as these students are clustered into the other classrooms.
4. Some classrooms may contain clusters of special needs students with assistance provided to the classroom teacher.
5. Teachers may flexibly group between classes or among grade levels as well as use a variety of flexible grouping strategies within their classrooms.
6. All teachers receive professional development in gifted education strategies and have the opportunity for more advanced education in gifted education and talent development through advanced workshops, conferences, and coursework.
7. The teacher whose class has the high achieving cluster is selected by his/her colleagues and provides differentiated instruction and curriculum to these students as needed to meet their educational needs

Researchers have noted benefits from grouping gifted students. These benefits include improved academic achievement (Brulles et al., 2010; Brulles et al., 2012; Gentry, 1999; Matthews et al., 2013; Tieso, 2005; Pierce et al., 2011), realistic perception of abilities when compared to peers (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995), appropriate levels of challenge (Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 2002; Gentry, 1999), ability for teachers to address unique social and emotional needs of gifted students (Peterson, 2003), and the ability of the teacher to better address individual strengths and weakness with a more focused range of ability levels (Gentry, 2013; Moon, 2003). Cluster grouping can offer these and other benefits to students and their teachers.

Additionally, research indicates that there are several major benefits of cluster grouping:

1. Gifted students regularly interact both with their intellectual peers and their age peers (Delacourt & Evans, 1994; Rogers, 2002; Slavin, 1987a);
2. Cluster grouping provides full-time services for gifted students without additional cost (Gentry & Owen, 1999; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993; LaRose, 1986);
3. Curricular differentiation is more efficient and likely to occur when a group of high-achieving students is placed with a teacher who has expertise, training, and a desire to differentiate curriculum than when these students are distributed among many teachers (Brulles et al., 2010; Bryant, 1987; Kennedy, 1995; Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2002);
4. Removing the highest achievers from most classrooms allows other achievers to emerge and gain recognition (Gentry & Owen, 1999; Kennedy, 1989);
5. Student achievement increases when cluster grouping is used (Brulles et al., 2010; Brulles et al., 2012; Gates, 2011; Gentry & Owen, 1999; Pierce et al., 2011);
6. Over time, fewer students are identified as low achievers and more students are identified as high achievers (Brulles et al., 2012; Gentry, 1999; Gentry 2011; Gentry, 2013); and
7. Cluster grouping reduces the range of student achievement levels that must be addressed within the classrooms of all teachers (Coleman, 1995; Gentry, 1999; Delacourt & Evans 1994; Noni, 2011; Rogers, 1993).

In addition, the professional development component of this model had positive effects not only on the students, but the teachers felt that they received both the instructional and collegial support that allowed them to become leaders in their schools (Gentry & Keilty, 2004). Staff development opportunities afforded teachers opportunities to explore instructional strategies that can be implemented successfully in cluster-grouped classrooms. Through integrating higher order thinking skills, developing critical thinking skills, compacting curriculum, using open-ended questions, accelerating students in content areas, and using several other instructional strategies, teachers reported being able to address the specific needs of their students (Gentry & Owen, 1999).

Thus, Total School Cluster Grouping provides an organizational model 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. Total school cluster grouping offers districts a method of placing students in classrooms in a manner that can help teachers better meet their academic needs and help all of their students achieve at higher levels.

**Reference**

Gentry, M. (2014*). Total school cluster grouping: A comprehensive, research-based plan for raising student achievement and improving teacher practices, 2nd Ed.* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.