

“All children deserve to learn something new every day.”

DR. JULIAN C. STANLEY

Acceleration Works

Academic acceleration can be divided into two broad categories:

CONTENT-BASED ACCELERATION. This is when gifted students are accelerated by subject area, often in only one subject. They stay in their assigned grade with children their own age but are given more difficult material. Or they might move to another classroom for part of the day. A gifted second grader, for example, takes math with third or fourth graders and then returns to the second-grade classroom for the remainder of the day. A third-grade gifted reader spends time with a fourth-grade reading group before returning to the third-grade class. Acceleration is in a specific subject, and the advanced content is delivered to an identified group of gifted students.

In middle school, gifted students may be bused to math and science classes in a nearby high school in the morning, then returned to middle school for afternoon classes or to pursue advanced material in a certain subject. The main point: The gifted students remain with their age peers but receive advanced instruction in the area, or areas, where they excel. In high school, gifted students take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate® classes, often earlier than other students. They might be taking some online classes or courses at a nearby community college.

“Content-based acceleration is the most flexible form of acceleration for schools to employ since it can be applied to individual learners or to groups,” notes Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska.

GRADE-BASED ACCELERATION. This is when highly able, highly motivated children are placed in higher grade levels than typical for their age. This is commonly called “grade-skipping,” though it also can apply to children who enter kindergarten or first grade early, or to students who enter college early. This form of acceleration puts bright students with students older than they are but who are their intellectual peers.

“That’s the heart and soul of acceleration. It’s not to take children out of step but to put them in step with what they’re ready for,” says Dr. Nicholas Colangelo of the University of Iowa.

A recent review by Dr. Karen Rogers of research involving more than fifty thousand students in accelerated learning programs came to a very clear conclusion: Gifted students in accelerated programs make notable academic gains. Given a chance, they flourish, regardless of the type of acceleration provided.

The other inescapable finding: Students in almost all acceleration programs also advance socially and emotionally, especially those who are mentored.

“When students are closely matched with what they’re ready to learn—and it never has to be perfect—the odds are that they will achieve more,” Dr. Colangelo notes. “One of the main causes of underachievement isn’t that the work is too difficult, it’s that the work is below what the student is ready to learn. And when a student becomes disengaged because he or she is bored, you see considerably less achievement.”

People who worry about accelerating a gifted student often forget how commonplace acceleration once was in American schools. Gifted learners—Martin Luther King Jr. and Sandra Day O’Connor are two examples—graduated from high school early and went on to college.

“It was not considered remarkable,” says Dr. Jonathan Plucker from the University of Connecticut. “When you were ready, you moved on. I think setting the context—helping people realize that acceleration is something we’ve used for generations in this country and that it has served us exceptionally well—will help people become more comfortable with it.”

Dr. VanTassel-Baska notes that people accept tutorials as “a legitimate way to challenge gifted children at home and school. Yet good tutorials were one of the first forms of acceleration ever used, a mechanism that allowed students to move at an appropriate rate through their school subjects, based on readiness.”

Types of Acceleration

1. Early Admission to Kindergarten
2. Early Admission to First Grade
3. Grade-Skipping
4. Continuous Progress
5. Self-Paced Instruction
6. Subject-Matter Acceleration/Partial Acceleration
7. Combined Classes
8. Curriculum Compacting
9. Telescoping Curriculum
10. Mentoring
11. Extracurricular Programs
12. Distance Learning Courses
13. Concurrent/Dual Enrollment
14. Advanced Placement
15. International Baccalaureate Program
16. Accelerated/Honors High School or STEM Residential High School
17. Credit by Examination
18. Early Entrance into Middle School, High School, or College
19. Early Graduation from High School or College
20. Acceleration in College

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