Cluster Grouping
What Does the Research Demonstrate?

What is cluster grouping?

It is defined as the intentional placement of a group of high achieving or gifted students in an otherwise heterogeneous classroom with a teacher who has both the background and willingness to provide appropriate challenges for these students.

What are the research-based benefits to cluster grouping?

- *The program is cost effective.* Cluster grouping often exists in schools which can not afford additional personnel for a gifted and talented program.
- *Students are clustered with their intellectual peers.* Rogers (1991) concluded, in her meta-analysis, that gifted students should spend the majority of their school day with students of similar abilities. Research by Schunk (1987) has shown that students learn from those who are like themselves in ability. Kulik and Kulik (1991) concluded that it is beneficial, with respect to achievement gains, for gifted students to be grouped together.
- *Special needs students and the highest achieving students are placed with teachers who have had training and are interested in meeting these special needs.* Kulik and Kulik (1984) noted that the greatest benefit for ability grouped gifted children occurred when there was curricular differentiation. Rogers (1991) noted that without training and commitment to providing appropriately challenging curricula, achievement gains would probably be insignificant.
- *The highest achieving students are removed from other classrooms, thereby allowing new leaders and achievers to emerge.* The effects of gifted pull-out programs on the students who remained in the regular classroom were studied. It was found that achievement increased in the classroom when the gifted students were pulled-out for programming.
• **Heterogeneous grouping is maintained while there is a deliberate reduction in the range of achievement levels that each teacher must teach.** In this program, grouping within the classrooms was flexible as recommended by Renzulli (1994) and Slavin (1987). Students interacted with both intellectual and age peers on a continual basis, identification categories were used for placement, and teachers had a limited range of achievement levels in their classrooms.

• **More efficient use of special education and Title I personnel is achieved by creating clusters of these students in one or two rooms instead of spreading them across five rooms.** This allowed team teaching between teacher consultants, aides, and classroom teachers, while providing targeted students with more time with specialists.

• **A high achieving group of students exists in every teacher’s classroom.** Kennedy (1989) found that low and average ability students flourish when gifted students are not present and leading the competition in the regular classroom and Schunk (1987) indicated average and low ability students use children of similar ability as models instead of high ability children. By placing the highest achievers in a single room and above average students in the other classrooms, all students had the opportunity to grow.

• **High expectations for all students are maintained across all classrooms.** In her meta-analysis of research related to teacher expectations, Smith (1980) found that teacher expectations were linked to student learning, attitudes, and achievement. In addition, Brophy and Good’s (1970) self-fulfilling prophecy model explained that students who are expected to achieve at high levels will do so, and conversely, students who are expected to achieve at low levels will not achieve at high levels.

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Research has indicated that when students are grouped into separate classes and given an identical curriculum, there is no appreciable effect on achievement. However, when the curriculum is adjusted to correspond to ability level, it appears that student achievement is boosted, especially for high ability students receiving an accelerated curriculum. Heterogeneous grouping has not been adopted by enough middle schools and high schools to conclude whether detracking produces achievement gains for anyone, and research to date cannot conclusively demonstrate that one or the other is the better way to organize students. The charge of unfairness more accurately depicts tracking's past than its present. In the past, tracking was rigid and deterministic, but today, schools assign students to tracks for particular subject areas based on proficiency. Most schools assign students based on their choices once prerequisites have been met, and transcript studies show that students may move independently up or down in each subject's hierarchy of courses depending on their performance. One criticism still appears valid. Low tracks often emphasize good behavior and menial skills, while high tracks offer preparation for college. These differences in learning environments particularly depress the academic achievement of poor and minority students. In contrast, Catholic high schools appear to provide low track students with a quality education, and they are remarkably similar in boosting low track students to higher levels. Some principles for future policies are outlined.