

What is Cluster Grouping?

A group of three to six identified gifted students, usually those in the top 5% of ability in the grade level population, are placed together in a mixed-ability classroom with a teacher who has had training in how to teach exceptionally capable students.

Marcia Gentry (1996) found three common themes in the many variations of cluster grouping:

- A group of 3 to 10 gifted students is placed in a classroom with students of other achievement levels
- The reason for cluster grouping is to differentiate curriculum
- The teacher of the cluster should have background, training, and experience in working with gifted students

Benefits of Cluster Grouping

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

- Gifted students regularly interact with their intellectual peers *and* age peers
- Cluster grouping provides full time services for gifted students without additional cost
- 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
- Removing the highest achievers from most classrooms allows other achievers to emerge
- Cluster grouping reduces the range of achievement levels that must be addressed within the classrooms of all teachers

Research Findings (Gentry 1999)

- Although the cluster grouping program was originally designed to provide differentiation of content and instruction for gifted students, positive effects were also found on the achievement of all students in the treatment school
- During the three program years, students involved in the school using cluster grouping were more likely to be identified as high achieving or above average and fewer students were identified as low achieving
- A significant increase in achievement test scores of all students was found when these students were compared to similar students from a comparison district

Identification and Classroom Configurations

Each year in May, information was gathered from teachers, parents and achievement tests.

- Teachers indicated their students' academic performance as *high-achieving*, *above-average*, *average*, *low-average*, or *low* using the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics for Superior Students (Renzulli et al)
- Teachers indicated those students who received special education or Chapter 1 services
- They noted students who had behavior problems or who should be separated.

Achievement test scores on the ITBS were compared with the teacher ratings and discrepancies were discussed, providing a system of checks and balances. Placements were determined *without using cutoff scores*. A typical configuration might look like this:

	High Achieving	Above Average	Average	Low Average	Low
Teacher A	6		12	12	
Teacher B		6	12	6	6
Teacher C		6	12	6	6

- After three years, the treatment school showed academic gains in all groups, not just the gifted student cluster.
- By narrowing the range in every classroom it was easier for teachers to plan appropriate instruction.
- All classrooms had high achieving students, but by removing the highly gifted and clustering them into one classroom, the other classes had new academic leaders emerge. Specialists were better able to target their support and resources.
- The school also used cross-grade grouping for math and reading. Students were re-grouped often based on learning needs, not age. This avoided tracking and also gave teachers contact with different student groups. The cluster teacher wasn't necessarily assigned to the highest reading or math group. It was based on teacher expertise in the various subjects.

Qualitative Factors

Through interviews it became obvious that several other factors contributed to the success of this program:

- Teachers created positive classroom environments in which high expectations were held for all of their students
- Teachers used a variety of strategies and various forms of grouping to challenge and meet student needs
- The program was supported by strong administrative leadership
- Teachers had continuing professional development and growth opportunities in which most teachers chose to become involved
- Both teachers and administrators worked collaboratively and indicated confidence in their colleagues' abilities

Teacher Quotes

One thing I remember is how skeptical I was at the beginning because I'm not a risk-taker. I thought the same thing a few other people thought--oh, you take those top kids out and I'm not going to have any spark. And that was so far from being true. I see lots of sparks in my room.

When you pull those really high kids out--those who always have their hand up first and jump in with the answers--when you get rid of those students by putting them together in a cluster classroom--the other kids have a chance to shine. They take risks more often and see themselves as being leaders of the group. They are no longer frightened to offer answers.

The kids were more deliberately placed, so we didn't have as broad of a range and didn't have to deal with the extremes. I also had an aide and a teacher consultant, which helped to meet the needs of the students who were struggling.

I've learned so much from (the cluster teacher), and I adapt many of the strategies that she uses with her high achievers and use them with my LD and low achievers. I don't think that gifted education is just for gifted students.

By using achievement grouping, we are able to challenge the high achievers and meet the needs of the low achievers without having the low achievers or the high achievers feel like they had been singled out. We are able to adjust our curriculum and instruction to meet the individual needs of the students at their levels.

Sources

Gentry, M. & Owen, S. (1999). An Investigation of the Effects of Total School Flexible Cluster Grouping on Identification, Achievement, and Classroom Practices. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 43 (4), 224-242.

Winebrenner, S. & Devlin, B. (2001). Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students: How to Provide Full-time Services on a Part-time Budget. *ERIC EC Digest*, #607, Arlington VA.

Compiled by Terri Bawden
Enrichment Coordinator
Wenatchee School District