

Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students

Parents and teachers who meet to talk about what to do with an academically advanced student will hear all kinds of advice from their school. Some of that advice makes acceleration sound scary. But that advice might be a recycling of old myths.

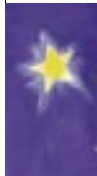
It's hard to know what's really true and what's just nonsense. Scholarly research demonstrates that much of what you hear about acceleration is false, some is partially true, and some really is true.

Myth and Truth

America has been deceived, as our title says, because we have known the truth about the effectiveness of acceleration for gifted students for decades. However, that truth has been kept from the decision-makers who set the educational policy for our country's children. Therefore, decisions about acceleration have traditionally been based upon personal biases, or incomplete and incorrect information. Amid the political wars of education, the interests of bright children have been lost.

Schools have held back America's brightest students for all kinds of reasons. The important questions now are why and how this keeps happening. From our extensive reading in current research and our interviews with leading educators who shared their experiences and expertise, we've identified twelve main reasons.

We have also provided a response to each reason, based on solid research evidence from our nation's leading universities and education experts.



What is Acceleration?

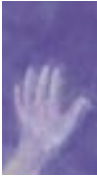
Acceleration is an educational intervention that moves students through an educational program at a faster than usual rate or younger than typical age.

Acceleration includes single-subject acceleration, whole-grade-skipping, early-entrance to school, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Acceleration means matching the level, complexity, and pace of the curriculum with the readiness and motivation of the student.

It is important to define what acceleration is not. Acceleration does not mean pushing a child. It does not mean forcing a child to learn advanced material or socialize with older children before he or she is ready.

Acceleration is really about letting students soar. Acceleration is a strategy that respects individual differences and acknowledges the fact that some of these differences merit educational flexibility. It provides cumulative educational advantage.



The myth

Acceleration is not an important issue because most students don't need it.

The reality

The importance of acceleration is not driven by numbers, but by the legitimate educational needs of high ability students. Many essential educational programs respond to need not numbers. These include the Head Start Program and bilingual education. Just because most children do not need acceleration does not diminish its importance.

No system exists that allows us precisely to figure out the number of students who need acceleration, but we have two historical indicators to frame our predictions.

(1) For many years, standardized testing has provided accurate and useful information about students' readiness for accelerated curriculum and placement. Additional indicators of readiness include: motivation, daily performance, and parent and teacher observation. This is all readily available to schools.

(2) Advanced Placement (AP) courses were originally limited to a few elite schools but have expanded to serve over a million students in 60% of America's high schools. Why not every high school?

12 Reasons Why Acceleration Isn't Accepted in America

Reason #1: Teachers lack familiarity with acceleration. Educators in most schools are unfamiliar with the research evidence on acceleration's benefits.

Response: A primary goal of this report is to eliminate this barrier. This comprehensive two-volume report brings together extensive research on acceleration, and the report is available to all schools at no cost.

Reason #2: Confidence about acceleration isn't running high. K-12 educators may know about acceleration as an intervention, but they don't feel confident in using this option.

Response: We respect that all educators make decisions that they believe are in the best interest of their students. The overwhelming evidence about the many academic and social advantages of acceleration should make educators confident enough to consider acceleration.

Reason #3: Acceleration runs counter to personal beliefs. When personal beliefs conflict with research evidence, personal beliefs win out almost every time.

Response: This report invites introspection and dialogue between educators and parents, asking them to reevaluate their beliefs concerning acceleration.

Reason #4: Age trumps everything else. For many educators, age—not readiness—has become the primary determinant for grade placement.

Response: The notion that age equates to grade is out of tune with what we know about individual differences. Research reveals that gifted students are more academically and emotionally advanced than their typical age-mates. Therefore, it makes more sense to think about readiness, rather than age, as the main determinant for grade placement.

Reason #5: Safe is better than sorry. Most teachers see non-acceleration as the safer option—they feel that doing nothing is not harmful.

Response: Doing nothing is not the same as “do no harm.” Choosing not to accelerate is itself an intervention. The evidence indicates that when children’s academic and social needs are not met, the result is boredom and disengagement from school.

Reason #6: Acceleration is not taught in Colleges of Education. These organizations, which train teachers, do not prepare teachers and administrators to make decisions about acceleration.

Response: Abundant research material is available, yet professors in Colleges of Education do not present it to future teachers. This report will help inform them. We know that faculty respect research and we hope that they will infuse this information into their course content.

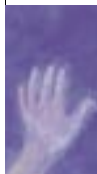
Reason #7: It’s bad to push kids. Teachers and parents see acceleration as hurrying children through childhood.

Response: Acceleration is allowing a student to move at an appropriate pace. By worrying about hurrying, a chance is missed to match the enthusiastic, passionate, bright child who has the ability to move ahead with the right curriculum. They ignore the bright student’s rage to learn.

Reason #8: New friends are hard to make. Educators fear that children who are accelerated will not adjust well socially to the new class.

Response: Social adjustment in a school setting is a complicated issue. Some accelerated children do not adjust easily or immediately. Children who have felt out of place with students of their own age may need time to develop social confidence.

Although the evidence on social success in accelerated settings is not as clear-cut as the evidence on academic success, it is still much more positive than negative. Acceleration broadens the friendship group. Many gifted children gravitate to older children, so making friends becomes easier.



The myth

Acceleration is for the wealthy.

The reality

Talent cuts across all demographics: ethnicity, gender, geography, and economic background. Acceleration is most beneficial to students who come from modest homes because parents who are wealthy are able to provide for their children extra opportunities that are challenging and accelerated. Acceleration levels the playing field of opportunity because any cost to the family or school is minimal.



“As an African-American

who has had considerable experience working with minority children and students from poverty backgrounds, I have always been a proponent of focusing on strengths rather than deficits in children. I support acceleration as an effective intervention for minority students as well as students from poverty backgrounds who are ready for such challenge.”

Professor Donna Y. Ford, Vanderbilt University

Who should be accelerated?

In this report, we have used synonymously terms such as bright, gifted, high ability, and highly able. All of these terms indicate that the students who would benefit from acceleration are exceptional in terms of academic ability and readiness.

All acceleration requires high academic ability. Standardized test scores and teacher observations provide evidence that a student has mastered the current curriculum and is ready for faster-paced and more complex coursework. But curriculum mastery is the first of many characteristics which should be taken into consideration in deciding if a child is ready for acceleration. Parents and educators will want to think about a child's motivation, social-emotional maturity, and interests when considering if acceleration is appropriate.

There are at least 18 different types of acceleration and parents and educators may find that while one type is a good match for their child, another is not. For example, students who skip grades need emotional maturity as well as academic ability in order to be successful. With single-subject acceleration, however, the more important criterion is academic ability, and social-emotional maturity is less of a concern.

How many students should be accelerated?

Today, no one has the answer to this question. We know that large numbers of students participate in Advanced Placement (AP) programs across the United States. But we have no way of knowing how many participate in other types of acceleration. And because acceleration has not been largely accepted in America's schools in the past several decades, we don't know how many could and should participate. In time, with a new acceptance of acceleration and more information available, there should be statistics to guide us in determining the prevalence.

Reason #9: Individual kids are less important than equal opportunity for all. Individual differences have been sacrificed in the political battles and culture wars about schooling.

Response: When educators confuse equity with sameness, they want all students to have the same curriculum at the same time. This is a violation of equal opportunity.

When it comes to acceleration, the majority of children do not need it. In fact, it would be a disadvantage for them both academically and socially. But for the children who need it, acceleration is their best chance for an appropriate, challenging education.

We know a lot about assessing ability and creating programming tailored to accommodate individual differences. The cornerstone of education is the flexibility to recognize the needs of the individual child. This flexibility is sometimes lost, however, when political and cultural pressures homogenize the learning needs of individuals and we pretend that there are no meaningful learning differences.

Closing our eyes to children's educational differences is neither democratic nor helpful. Every classroom teacher knows that children have distinct academic and social needs. Acceleration is a respectful recognition of individual differences as well as a means for addressing them.

Reason #10: It will upset other kids. Teachers sometimes fear that accelerating a child will diminish the self-esteem of other students.

Response: This is an important issue. Whatever we do in schools should be based on a respect and concern for all students. In fact, this level of sensitivity is one of the things that makes America special.

However, kids are used to seeing age-peers progress at different rates in many settings such as sports and music. In school, the idea of accelerating one or two children is not likely to negatively affect the class.

Reason #11: There will be gaps in the child's knowledge. Teachers are concerned that accelerated students will have gaps in their understanding of concepts.

Response: We accelerate students because they are well ahead of their age-peers in their academic development and knowledge. Gifted students are swift learners and any gaps quickly disappear.

Reason #12: Disasters are memorable. Unsuccessful cases of acceleration exist, but the numbers have been exaggerated as have the reasons for lack of success.

Response: Good news doesn't make the news. Bad news, on the other hand, sells papers and travels fast in communities. People will repeat stories or greatly exaggerate the situation about an unsuccessful acceleration, even without first-hand knowledge. Researchers acknowledge that acceleration is not perfect and some situations may be less than ideal, but such cases frequently stem from incomplete planning or negative attitudes.

We need to respect that even an intervention that is very positive is not fail-safe. A few poor decisions do not negate the importance of considering acceleration as an option. Excellent planning can minimize failures.

The bottom line: Acceleration works. It must be included in the conversation about how to educate a highly capable child. It is time we stopped deceiving ourselves and our children.