Skipping Grades in Elementary School

Sometimes a child will be so bored that he'll march himself into the principal's office and beg to be skipped. In other cases, a teacher will notice that a child is far ahead of his peers, or parents will be troubled by the gnawing sense that school is just too easy for their child.

"*I'm bored*" can begin to sound like a mantra, constantly buzzing in a parent's ears.

While many schools offer fine enrichment programs, enrichment is not sufficient for some advanced students. An hour or two of challenge is not much relief for a severely underchallenged child. These students really do need a more suitable solution—usually a form of acceleration.

"No other arrangement for gifted children works as well as acceleration," says Professor James Kulik, an expert on the subject at the University of Michigan.

For more than twenty-five years, Kulik has studied how gifted children fare in schools. He knows teachers are wary of acceleration. Nevertheless, Kulik's research has made him confident that the evidence in favor of acceleration is overwhelming.

Other leaders in educational research loudly agree. To experts who look at hard numbers all day long, the case for grade-skipping seems obvious.

What Kulik notices most is that acceleration tends to have long-term positive effects. Students who are skipped are more likely to earn advanced degrees, and Kulik believes that skipping a grade is what helps students achieve.

"The overall message from these studies is unequivocal," Kulik says. "Acceleration makes a huge difference in the academic achievement of bright students."

Jenny's Letter to her teacher

In third grade, Jenny wrote this letter to her teacher, thereby initiating discussion of acceleration. The spelling is Jenny's.

Dear Mrs. S.

I find that the work I'm being given
is very discouraging because its much
to easy. Most of it I know so I do
the work catch on and
I have to wait for the others
to catch on. the grade
I'd like to go to best would
be college but since I can't
could I have something more
challenging. Say for Instence
I could go to any Grade
I want as long as
long as its in Lincoln Elementary
or Lincoln Middle School. I like to trie
5th Grade I dout it
but it would be nice to
go ther and see what its
like. I don't care if
I leave Lincoln Elementary cause
I really don't have
any thing really Inporntant
or true friends that I'd miss

Sincerely, Jenny

Reprinted from: *The Iowa Acceleration Scale*, 2nd ed., p. 16



"I'd certainly say that we're not growing up too fast because I think we're less afraid to show the children inside of us. When you go to high school that's forcing you to grow fast because everyone tries to act older than they are. Here [at the University of Washington Early Entrance Program] you don't need to. Here you're not afraid to act a little bit younger sometimes, which is really nice."

University of Washington Early Entrance Program Student
From: "Different Strokes" by K.D. Noble, T. Arndt, T. Nicholson, T. Sletten, and A. Zamora. In *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, Winter 1998/1999.

Does the Child Want a Challenge?

While acceleration may be a good move academically, it still may not be an easy move. Leaving a familiar place for uncharted territory is never an easy decision.

Motivation is an important factor. If a child is academically far ahead but does not want to skip, he probably shouldn't skip. It's the students who are craving a challenge and are thirsting to run ahead who need acceleration.

If a child begs a parent, a teacher, or a principal for challenging work, that's a strong signal that acceleration may be the right path.

Ambition Starts Early

When an eight-year-old skips a grade, there may be a surprise beneficiary—that same child, at age twenty-two. Studies have shown that students who are accelerated tend to aspire to careers requiring an education beyond a bachelor's degree at higher rates than students who haven't been accelerated.

What kind of difference have researchers found?

In 1974, 58% of accelerated students wanted a master's degree, compared to 24% of everyone else. By 1983, the gap had narrowed, as the necessity of a college education became an economic fact of life. Still, 88% of accelerated students wanted a master's degree or higher, compared to 73% of other students.

This finding has been known for a long time. Children who are accelerated become ambitious adults.

Academic Performance Progresses

Students who are accelerated do extremely well academically after they skip. On achievement tests, bright accelerated students perform just as well as bright, older non-accelerated students.

So tests show that kids who skip match their new classmates, question for question. But the real payoff comes when comparing bright students who skip grades and bright students who don't.

When a grade-skip is done correctly, the accelerated student will still be among the very best students in the new, advanced grade. That's an impressive finding because younger students are at a natural disadvantage.

Math and English performance is usually related to age. Even with the natural limits of being younger, accelerated students still score almost one full grade ahead.

Acceleration is a gift of time. For the child, skipping one year means one-twelfth of his or her time in school has not been wasted. If a child skips two years, that's a full one-sixth of his or her educational career that is spent learning rather than marking time. See Interview with Alexis Hanson, accelerated student, page 45.

Alternatives to Acceleration Are Weaker

Many schools address the learning and social-emotional needs of gifted students in a variety of ways. Some of the better known approaches include ability grouping, enrichment activities, pull-out resource rooms, classroom differentiation, independent projects, and cooperative learning. Schools also look to special-topic projects, field trips, chess, and competitions to enhance the learning opportunities for students. All of these approaches have their place and their advocates.

Some of the needs of high-ability kids can be met by these enrichment-type supplementary provisions. We respect that these are important and beneficial activities that contribute to the education of a wide range of students. Anything that helps students is a plus, and in our experience, facilitators of these activities do an excellent job of maximizing the effectiveness of enrichment approaches. We support these approaches as options.

However, for high ability students none of these approaches has produced the compelling research evidence earned by accelerative options. Even ability grouping, which has considerable research support, is shown to be effective for high ability kids only when the curriculum is accelerated.



"Adult surveys of gifted individuals reveal that they do not regret their acceleration. Rather, they regret not having accelerated more."

From Lubinski, D., Webb, R.M., Morelock, M. J., Benbow, C. P. (2001), "Top 1 in 10,000: A 10-year follow-up of the profoundly gifted," in *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, *86*, 718–729.

Is enrichment enough? Because enrichment keeps students with their age-peers, teachers don't worry about it harming children socially or emotionally. However, when enrichment for gifted students does not include a faster pace and higher level of work, it is simply not effective as an intervention.

Just putting gifted kids together—but not accelerating the curriculum—has minimal academic benefit. The key component is the accelerated curriculum.

Sometimes talented students are taught in a separate class, but they're not accelerated. Researchers investigating the effects of this found something stunning. If the talented students were given the same curriculum as the regular class, the effect on their academic performance was zero.

There was absolutely no academic benefit to that specially-grouped math class that was not doing advanced math. So a room full of bright students, without more challenging material, does absolutely nothing academically.

If the special group had a differentiated curriculum, there was some academic benefit, but not as much as acceleration.

Clearly, the best way to maximize the academic performance of bright students is to maximize the pace and level of the curriculum.

By the numbers

Every year, 200,000 seventh-grade and eighth-grade students take the SAT or ACT college entrance exams. The majority score as well as high school seniors, who are usually four or five years older.

But the academically stronger members of that pool of 200,000 young test-takers (middle-school students)—those who score at or above the average score for high school seniors—are especially gifted. Those students can absorb a whole year's worth of high school in three weeks, researchers say.

In fact, a few of the very highest scorers on the SAT, as middle-school students, can actually absorb a year's worth of high school in just a week and a half.

Social Concerns

Most parents worry less about academic effects than about friends for their children. But the image of the brilliant loner who has no one to talk to is not what researchers have found.

Studies show that accelerated students participate in school activities and view themselves positively.

Understanding the interaction between self-esteem and acceleration is complex. The research is not clear on whether or not enhanced self-esteem leads to higher achievement, or higher achievement leads to enhanced self-esteem.

When bright children learn in a class of students who are not as bright as they are, their academic self-esteem can get a bit inflated. When they are accelerated to be with students who know as much as they do, they develop a more realistic self-perception and their self-esteem may dip a little for a short time. This is sometimes called the Little-Fish-Big-Pond effect.

Usually, that change in academic self-esteem doesn't last very long and confidence returns quickly. An added bonus is that accelerated students' self-esteem receives quite a boost as they find friends and social acceptance in the new class.



Deciding to Skip: *The Iowa Acceleration Scale*

Deciding whether or not to skip a grade is always a complex decision. However, there are proven systems to help educators make that choice. One method, *The Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS)*, is used by schools in all 50 states as well as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

The *IAS* has ten sections, and it takes all kinds of factors into account—like the age of the child, the offerings of the school, and whether a sibling will be in the same grade. The ten-part scale starts with general school and family information, moves to IQ, sibling information, and the student's personal feelings about acceleration. Then school history and various ability, aptitude, and achievement tests are included. Finally, a cumulative score from all of these factors is calculated.

The *IAS* can be a tremendously helpful guide to parents, teachers, and principals who are trying to weigh all the factors in a decision to accelerate. The *IAS* comes with a detailed manual that explains all ten sections, and it includes case studies and samples of completed forms. The *IAS* also comes with a summary of the relevant research for educators and parents who would like to read more about how to decide whether to accelerate.

The clear format of the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* lets schools collect all the relevant data in a structured way. The *IAS* is easily affordable for all districts.

The Iowa Acceleration Scale and the *IAS Manual, 2nd edition*, are available from Great Potential Press, or www.giftedbooks.com