Q &A on the GATE Cluster Model:

What Does it Mean to Place Gifted Students in Cluster Groups?

A group of three to ten identified gifted students, usually those in the top 5% of ability in the grade level population, are clustered in a mixed-ability classroom. The teacher has had training in how to teach exceptionally capable students. If there are more than ten gifted students, two or more clusters could be formed.

Isn't Cluster Grouping the Same as Tracking?

No. In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day, and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their school experience. Gifted students benefit from learning together, and need to be placed with similar students in their areas of strength. Cluster grouping of gifted students allows them to learn together, while avoiding permanent grouping arrangements for students of other ability levels.

Why Should Gifted Students Be Placed in a Cluster Group Instead of Being Assigned Evenly to All Classes?

When teachers try to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, it becomes extremely difficult to provide adequately for everyone. Often, the highest ability students are expected to "make it on their own." When a teacher has several gifted students, taking the time to make appropriate provisions for them seems more realistic. Furthermore, gifted students can better understand and accept their learning differences if there are others just like them in the class. Finally, scheduling out-of-class activities is easier when the resource teacher has only one cluster teacher's schedule with which to work.

What Are the Learning Needs of Gifted Students?

Since these students have previously mastered many of the concepts they are expected to "learn" in a given class, a huge part of their school time may be wasted. They need exactly what all other students need: consistent opportunity to learn new material and to develop the behaviors that allow them to cope with the challenge and struggle of new learning. It is very difficult for such students to have those needs met in heterogeneous classes.

Don't We Need Gifted Students in All Classes So They Can Help Others Learn Through Cooperative Learning, Peer Tutoring, and Other Collaborative Models?

When gifted students are placed in mixed-ability groups for cooperative learning, they frequently become tutors. Other students in these groups may rely on the gifted to do most of the work and may actually learn less than when the gifted students are not in their groups.

Adapted from: *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All* by Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles

Won't the Creation of a Cluster Group Rob the Other Classes of Academic Leadership?

Research on role modeling (Schunk, 2007) indicates that to be effective, role models cannot be drastically discrepant in ability from those who would be motivated by them. When gifted students are grouped in their own cluster, they have the benefit of working with one another and new leadership emerges in the other non-cluster classes. As classes are formed, be sure the classes without clusters of gifted students include several highly capable students. Teachers and administrators can expect measurable achievement gains across all classes.

Won't the Presence of the Clustered Gifted Students Inhibit the Performance of the Other Students in That Class, Having a Negative Effect On Their Achievement?

When the cluster group is kept to a manageable size, many cluster teachers report that there is general improvement in achievement for the entire class. This suggests the exciting possibility that when teachers learn how to provide what gifted students need, they also learn to offer modified versions of the same opportunities to the entire class, thus raising the level of learning for all students, including those who are gifted. The positive effects of the cluster grouping practice may be shared with all students over several years by rotating the cluster teacher assignment among teachers who have had gifted education training and by rotating the other students so all students eventually have a chance to be in the same class with a cluster group.

What Specific Skills Are Needed by Cluster Teachers?

Since gifted students are as far removed from the "norm" as are students with significant learning difficulties, it is necessary for teachers to have special training in how to teach children of exceptionally high ability. Cluster teachers should know how to:

- Recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students;
- Create a learning environment in which all students will be stretched to learn;
- Allow students to demonstrate and get credit for previous mastery of concepts;
- Provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material;
- Incorporate students' passionate interests into their independent studies;
- Facilitate sophisticated research investigations;
- Provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class.

What Are the Advantages of Cluster Grouping?

Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students just like them in the class. They are more likely to choose more challenging tasks when other students will also be eligible. Teachers no longer have to deal with the strain of trying to meet the needs of just one precocious student in a class. Teachers are also much more likely to provide appropriate learning opportunities if more than one student will benefit. The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day.

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