

Academic Acceleration: Is It Right for My Child?

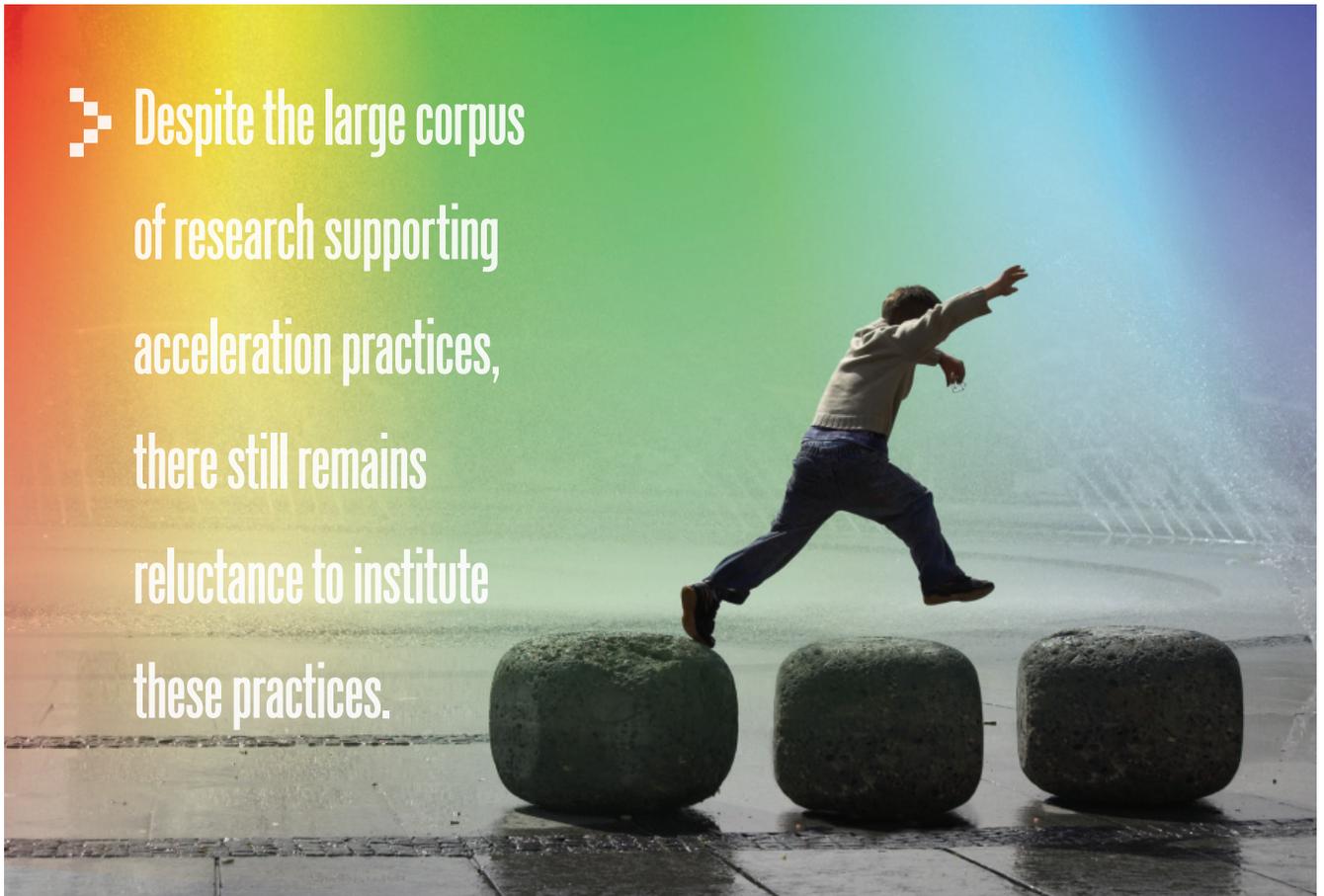
By Dr. Susan Scheibel

As the parent of a highly able child, your role is crucial in your child's education. Experience and research repeatedly illustrate the need for and value of parent advocates—as you know your child best. Be prepared to take a positive, proactive, and focused role with teachers and administrators in your child's school to find the best programming for your child. Academic acceleration should be considered as

a differentiation intervention or strategy set in a solid research foundation that allows for fit, challenge, and the development of student potential throughout the K–12 process.

As the parent of a gifted child, you know your child's unique needs best. You know how your child actively responded to your actions and words as a very young infant; communicated, learned, and demon-

➤ Despite the large corpus of research supporting acceleration practices, there still remains reluctance to institute these practices.



strated advanced talents at a younger than typical age; and read letters and words from a car seat as you traveled around town. You know your child is sensitive, caring, and fair-minded. You may even have heard family and/or friends comment on how your child seems to grasp so much so quickly. Truly you know your child best, and you are your child's best advocate, and one strategy to consider is academic acceleration.

Academic acceleration is an individual, educational intervention that allows a learner to progress through the educational system at a faster rate or younger age than typical learners based on appropriate level of challenge. Many forms of academic acceleration address academic needs, provide academic challenge, and allow students to complete traditional schooling tailored to each child's academic and social and emotional readiness. Grade-based acceleration strategies shorten the number of years a learner remains in the K–12 system before entering a college, university, or other postsecondary training (Rogers, 2004). Subject-based acceleration exposes the learner to advanced content, skills, and understanding before the expected grade level in specific content area or areas (Rogers, 2004).

Acceleration Strategies

Academic acceleration can be by grade or by subject. The following strategies can be woven together over time to serve the needs of a student and family (NAGC, n.d.; Southern & Jones, 2004).

- *Acceleration in college*—is employed with dual enrollment or credit by examination. A university professor or instructor can also determine advanced instruction.
- *Advanced Placement (AP)*—designed by the College Board, it allows high schools to offer courses that meet criteria established by institutions of higher education. College credit may be earned with the successful completion of an AP exam in specific content areas. (Check with individual colleges and universities regarding their policies on AP courses.)
- *Combined classes*—consists of two grades. For example, a second/third grade split class can offer younger students the opportunity to interact with older peers and be exposed to advanced content.
- *Concurrent/dual enrollment*—typically involves high school students taking college courses, often for college credit. The term can also be applied to middle-grades students taking high school courses and earning credit toward high school graduation.

- *Continuous progress*—refers to students who complete and master content and then are given further work at an accelerated pace in comparison to their classmates.
- *Correspondence courses*—allow students to participate in instruction outside of school. These courses are typically delivered online.
- *Credit by examination*—permits a student to receive credit for a course by completing a test of mastery or an activity.
- *Curriculum compacting*—considers a student's proficiency in the basic curriculum, and allows him or her to exchange instructional time for other learning experiences.
- *Early admission to kindergarten*—is allowed depending on the school district or state. A child may enter kindergarten prior to the minimum age for entrance.
- *Early admission to first grade*—can result from skipping kindergarten or accelerating a child through kindergarten and into first grade.
- *Early graduation*—includes graduation from high school or college in less than 3½ years. This is achieved through additional coursework, dual enrollment, or Advanced Placement courses.
- *Extracurricular programs*—encompass a variety of programming options that result in advanced instruction or credit toward graduation.
- *Grade-skipping*—permits a child to skip a grade or grades at the beginning or during the school year.
- *Mentoring*—allows a community member to share his or her expertise with a student who has similar interests in a particular field or career.
- *Telescoping curriculum*—covers the same amount of materials or activities in less time, thereby allowing more time for enrichment activities and projects that better suit the interests, needs, and readiness levels of gifted students.

Research to Guide Your Decision and Advocacy

Decades of research demonstrate the need for, and benefits of, gifted education strategies and programs. These include the use of acceleration, enrichment, curriculum enhancement, and differentiated curriculum and instruction, which all have been shown to increase the achievement of high-ability learners. Despite the large corpus of research supporting

acceleration practices, there still remains reluctance to institute these practices. Borland stated:

Acceleration is one of the most curious phenomena in the field of education. I can think of no other issue in which there is such a gulf between what research has revealed and what practitioners believe. The research on acceleration is so uniformly positive, the benefits of appropriate acceleration so unequivocal, that it is difficult to see how an educator can oppose it. (as cited in Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004, p. 16)

Rogers (1999) offered evidence that supports acceleration, specifically in science and mathematics:

- Gifted students are significantly more likely to retain science and mathematics content accurately when taught 2–3 times faster than the “normal” class pace.
- Gifted students are significantly more likely to forget or mislearn science and mathematics content when they must drill and review it more than 2–3 times.

Colangelo, et al. (2004) further synthesized decades of research on the topic of academic acceleration. Their findings are summarized as follows:

- Acceleration has been well researched and documented.
- Acceleration is the best educational intervention for high-ability (gifted) students.
- Acceleration is consistently effective with gifted students.
- Acceleration is highly effective for academic achievement.
- Acceleration is usually effective in terms of social-emotional adjustment. (p. 2)

With a keen focus on the socioaffective impact of acceleration supports, Neihart (2007) recommended the following best practices in support of highly able learners:

- Acceleration should be routine for highly gifted children. All highly gifted children should be evaluated for grade skipping, in particular.
- Acceleration options should be available for capable students. No school district or school administrator should have a policy that prohibits accelerative options for students, including grade skipping.
- All school districts should have written policies and procedures in place to ensure that acceleration options are available in all schools and to guide parents and teachers in the steps to follow for referral and evaluation of students.
- Students who are being considered for acceleration should be screened for social readiness, emotional maturity, and motivation for acceleration. A tool, such as the Iowa Acceleration Scale, may help to select candidates for acceleration.
- When possible, students who are grade skipping or making an early entrance to college should do so as part of a cohort. There appear to be benefits to cohort acceleration that are more difficult to replicate when students go it alone. (p. 336)

Advocating for Your Child

Your role as an educational advocate is to foster the academic and social-emotional development of your child using available resources for academic acceleration. The great news is that while the road may not be smooth, there are a range of tools, guides, individuals, educators, and programs to help you along the way. Your task is to find the right information, people, and programs to parent your high-potential child.

Although you cannot control the educational system or the minds of teachers or administrators, you can be guided by more than 30 years of solid research, best practice, and amazingly passionate individuals in the field of gifted and talented education. Begin the process today by thoughtfully considering these 10 guiding points:

- You know your unique child. Observe and listen.
- Advocate clearly for your child based on each year’s needs, and as necessary.
- Empower your child to believe, self-advocate, and share with someone her needs and feelings.
- Every learner has the right to learn something new and be challenged.
- Get involved in the school to build knowledge, trust, contacts, and credibility.
- Do your homework. Educate yourself about gifted education, gifted learners, and best practice.
- Research school districts, policies, online programs, Talent Search opportunities, schools, and teachers to find the best fit for your child.
- Present trusted and well-researched information and be prepared when you meet with teachers, administrators, and policy makers.
- Talk and communicate about acceleration and support others. Pay it forward.
- Intervene when you know there’s a problem. Think and problem solve outside the box each year and as necessary.
- Create safe environments for your child. Empower, but do not enable.

It is never too early nor too late to support your child’s educational growth. Although early intervention is preferred, begin right now today to do what is best for your child. Make a commitment today to listen to your heart, your gut, your child, and other wise parents, and become an active, informed decision maker in the educational process for your child’s growth and well-being. Start today. ☺

References

- Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America’s brightest students* (Vols. 1–2). Iowa City: The University of Iowa, Belin-Blank

Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

- National Association for Gifted Children. (n.d.). *Frequently used terms in gifted education*. Retrieved from <http://www.nagc.org/GlossaryofTerms.aspx>
- Neihart, M. (2007). The socioaffective impact of acceleration and ability grouping: Recommendations for best practice. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 51, 330–341.
- Rogers, K. B. (1999). Research synthesis on gifted provisions: Update of a best-evidence synthesis of research on accelerative options for gifted students. In N. Colangelo, S. G. Assouline & D. L. Ambrosio (Eds.), *Talent development: The Proceedings from the 1991 Henry B.*

and Jocelyn Wallace National Research Symposium on Talent Development (pp. 406–409). New York, NY: Trillium Press.

- Rogers, K. B. (2004). The academic effects of academic acceleration. In N. Colangelo, S. G. Assouline, & M. U. M. Gross (Eds.), *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students* (Vol. 2, pp. 47–58). Iowa City: The University of Iowa, Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.
- Southern, T., & Jones, E. D. (2004). Types of acceleration: Dimensions and issues. In N. Colangelo, S. G. Assouline, & M. U. M. Gross (Eds.), *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students* (Vol. 2, pp. 5–12). Iowa

City: The University of Iowa, Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

Author's Note:

Susan Scheibel, Ed.D., is the parent of three, a passionate gifted education advocate, and the past president of the Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented (CAGT). She completed her graduate studies at the University of Northern Colorado. She is a member of the Colorado Coalition for Gifted; the Colorado Educational Success Task Force; the State Advisory Committee for Gifted Student Education; and the Colorado Academy of Educators for the Gifted, Talented, and Creative.

© 2012 National Association for Gifted Children



Resources To Develop Your Child's Unique Abilities

Center for Talent Development Northwestern University

Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS):

Above-grade-level testing can identify gifted students' strengths and track growth. Follow-up resources and programs help parents and educators chart a customized academic plan.

Gifted LearningLinks: Individualized, online courses for gifted students of all ages. Rigorous enrichment and credit bearing honors and AP® classes supplement in-school learning.



**NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY**

EXPLORE ALL OUR PROGRAMS ONLINE

www.ctd.northwestern.edu • 847/491-3782