

Frequently Asked Questions About Acceleration

Adapted from Minnesota Department of Education Acceleration FAQ developed by Wendy Behrens and Ohio Department of Education Acceleration FAQ developed by Eric Calvert

What is acceleration?

"Accelerated placement" means the placement of a child in an educational setting with curriculum that is usually reserved for children who are older or in higher grades than the child. In Illinois, forms of acceleration required in school policies include, but need not be limited to, early entrance to kindergarten or first grade, accelerating a child in a single subject, and grade acceleration.

What are the benefits of acceleration?

Research indicates that students who are properly accelerated benefit significantly, both academically and developmentally. Accelerated gifted and talented students and other high ability students tend to perform at higher levels on achievement tests and are less likely to become bored and disinterested in school than similarly able students who are not accelerated.

Why is acceleration important?

When the level of instruction is not sufficiently challenging and expectations for continued growth are low, gifted learners may settle into patterns of underachievement. These students are at risk of developing negative attitudes toward school, and may miss out on opportunities to develop executive functioning skills and psycho-social skills important to long term success.

Are schools required to accelerate instruction to meet a student's needs?

Districts are required to have procedures in place for the academic acceleration of high ability students that include an assessment of students' readiness and motivation for acceleration using multiple valid and reliable indicators. The decision to accelerate a particular student is a local decision to be made with parent or guardian involvement. When considering whether or not a student should be accelerated, the decision should be based on the question of whether an accelerated placement would improve the current placement, and not whether it would be a "perfect" placement. Some advanced students may need a combination of different forms of acceleration, differentiated curriculum and instruction, and gifted education services to fully reach their potential.

What are some indicators that a student should be considered for acceleration?

Acceleration requires high academic ability. Standardized test scores and teacher observation can provide evidence that a student has mastered the current curriculum and is ready for a faster-paced and more complex curriculum. (Colangelo et al., 2004) Motivation and social-emotional maturity are also important indications that a highly capable student may be a good candidate for acceleration. Social-emotional maturity should be considered relatively, focusing on the question of whether they student could be successful in the setting to which he or she may be accelerated.

Who should and should not be accelerated?

Most good candidates for acceleration display some of the following characteristics:

- demonstrates above average general cognitive ability;
- achieves academically in one or more subject areas a grade level or at a higher level than his or her age-mates;

- expresses a desire for more challenging instruction;
- is socially mature enough to adapt to an environment serving older students; or
- responds positively to the possibility of acceleration.

Acceleration may not be appropriate for students with some of the following characteristics:

- has an older sibling in the same school and grade level to which the student may be Accelerated;
- is sufficiently challenged by the curriculum at his or her current grade level;
- would be significantly less emotionally mature than *typical students at the grade level to which he or she may be accelerated*; or
- responds negatively to the possibility of acceleration.

Further, one type of acceleration for a student might be appropriate when another is not. A student who is very advanced in reading and writing ability but struggles in math and is of average ability in science and social studies might be an excellent candidate for subject acceleration in reading and language arts, but a poor candidate for a whole “grade skip.”

Conversely, a student who is strong in several areas might be happier and more successful if accelerated on a full-time basis so she could be with one set of peers all day and travel less back and forth between classrooms than she would if accelerated in only one or two subject areas. Near the end of the K-12 experience, some students may be ready to move on to college on a full-time basis and benefit from the opportunity to graduate high school early. Others may prefer to stay in high school and take advantage of other post secondary credit options, such as Advanced Placement (AP), dual credit programs opportunities on a partial or full-time basis.

Is acceleration the same as “grade skipping?” What are the most common types of Acceleration?

Whole-grade acceleration (commonly referred to as grade-skipping) is just one of many forms of acceleration. Other forms of acceleration include:

- early admission to kindergarten*;
- early admission to first grade*;
- Subject acceleration*/partial acceleration;
- Whole-grade acceleration/grade skipping*;
- Advanced online courses;
- concurrent/dual enrollment;
- continuous progress;
- self-paced instruction;
- combined (multi-grade) classes;
- curriculum compacting;
- telescoping curriculum (e.g. covering three years of learning goals in a two-year compacted program);
- Structured apprenticeship or mentorship experiences;
- early graduation;
- credit by examination or demonstration of mastery;
- early entrance into middle school, high school or college

(* indicates acceleration options that must be addressed in Illinois school district policies.)

How can schools determine whether whole-grade acceleration is appropriate?

The Illinois Association for Gifted Children recommends using the Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS) to evaluate students for potential whole-grade acceleration.

Won't skipping all or part of a grade cause the student's achievement test scores and grades to drop?

In most cases, students accelerated based on the recommendation of a research-based evaluation process will perform well on state achievement tests. Most students recommended for acceleration perform well above grade level prior to their accelerated placement. Research on acceleration indicates that students properly accelerated are capable of quickly catching up to their academic level peers and that any gaps in knowledge quickly disappear. Using assessments to identify any significant knowledge gaps prior to the accelerated placement, and building into the acceleration transition plan specific action steps to address any gaps identified, can help ensure success.

Is grade skipping socially damaging to students?

Gifted/advanced students selected for accelerated placement through a research-based process are unlikely to suffer negative social consequences. Studies show that they participate in school activities and view themselves positively. Their self esteem often increases as they find friends and social acceptance in the new class, although, like any student moving into a new setting, there may be a brief period of adjustment. Research on acceleration also indicates that advanced learners often feel more comfortable with their academic-level peers as opposed to their age-level peers.

What should parents do if they think their child should be considered for acceleration?

Begin by discussing your concerns with your child. If your child is interested and open to the idea, contact your child's teacher or advisor to schedule a conference. Be prepared to discuss your concerns and provide specific information as to why you believe the level and complexity of your child's instruction should be modified. Karen Rogers' book *Re-Forming Gifted Education* includes a tools for parents designed to help them gather and document information about their child's development that may be useful in discussion learning needs with the student's school.

What can school administrators do to support accelerated students?

- Create opportunities to group students based on readiness for curriculum rather than use strictly age-based grouping strategies.
- Help teachers align schedules to allow students to attend class at the most appropriate grade level based on instructional needs.
- Provide ongoing staff development opportunities so that all staff understand the unique instructional and affective needs of gifted and advanced learners.
- Challenge commonly held myths about acceleration with research and counterexamples.
- Help facilitate communication between classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, guidance counselors, parents and others so that students will receive the support they need to reach their potential.
- Where possible, place accelerated students in classrooms with teachers who are supportive of acceleration and differentiate instruction effectively.
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment period.

- Create a school climate that recognizes and encourages high expectations and continuous growth for all students.

What can teachers do to support acceleration?

- Recognize advanced children by using formal measures (tests) and informal observations.
- Provide new challenges in and out of the classroom.
- Inform parents about acceleration options and enrichment opportunities throughout the child's academic career.
- Minimize teaching students what they already know.
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment Period.
- Be proactive about integrating accelerated students into your classroom by introducing accelerated students to classmates who share their interests.

What can parents do to support their child's acceleration?

- Maintain open communication with your child and your child's teachers.
- Be aware that your child may be concerned about his or her ability to meet higher expectations and new challenges and have mixed feelings.
- Understand that acceleration may pose new challenges socially and academically.
- Reserve judgment as to the success or failure of an acceleration during the adjustment Period. Be prepared to offer extra support and encouragement as needed during the adjustment period.

Updated October 20, 2017