Accelerating Gifted Children

The two-volume report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students*, released in September 2004, reports that America’s schools routinely avoid academic acceleration, the easiest and most effective way to help highly capable students. The report presents a review of abundant research on acceleration over the past 50 years that is uniformly positive and in stark contrast to the negative attitudes that have resulted in anti-acceleration practices.

The report delineates 18 types of acceleration, including those that are most worrisome to educators: early entrance to school; grade-skipping; and subject-matter acceleration (*e.g.*, a third-grade girl taking math with fourth graders, but returning to third grade for all other subjects and activities). In our experience, the issues regarding acceleration are most pronounced in the elementary school settings.

There are a number of reasons why elementary school principals are reluctant to accelerate gifted students. The most salient include:

- Limited familiarity with research on acceleration;
- Personal philosophies that children should be kept with their age group;
- Belief that acceleration “hurries” children out of childhood;
- Fear that acceleration hurts children socially;
- Political concerns about providing equal opportunities for all children; and
- Concern that other students will be offended.

The good news is that all of these reasons are put to rest by research evidence indicating that young children who are ready benefit from acceleration both academically and socially. This includes early entrance to school and grade-skipping, the two areas of major concern for elementary school principals. Acceleration does not hurry children out of childhood, but instead places them at levels they are ready for.

“**For academically gifted students, acceleration is an effective—and cost-effective—way of meeting their learning and social needs.**”

Curriculum equity provides appropriate experiences based on a student’s learning readiness, and there is no evidence to support the fear that accelerating students has a negative effect on others.

**What Can Principals Do?**

We think the message of *A Nation Deceived* is vibrant and liberating. Principals want to do what is best for students. What they need is accurate information. Here are some steps they can take:

- **Distribute copies of *A Nation Deceived* report to your staff.** This report is free and available online at www.nationdeceived.org.
- **Have discussions with teachers regarding attitudes about acceleration.** Are their attitudes consistent with what we know from the research? If not, challenge them to provide the basis for their attitudes.
- **Evaluate your school policies in light of the research.** Are they flexible? A no-exceptions rule for early entrance to kindergarten or first grade goes counter to research on early entrance. While age is a good indicator of readiness for the vast majority of children, it is not for a minority of highly able children.
- **Understand that grade-skipping can be a positive, not only academically but socially.** There is a scale to guide educators in making a good decision about grade-skipping. It is called the Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS) and is available through www.giftedbooks.com. The IAS has been used by many elementary schools and has received very high praise from principals, teachers, and parents.

To have young children disconnected from school is not in their best interest. Yet, some bright students feel disconnected because the curriculum is well below their readiness level. For academically gifted students, acceleration is an effective—and cost-effective—way of meeting their learning and social needs. We hope the *Nation Deceived* report will promote a new conversation in America’s schools and between school staff and parents. We welcome your reactions to the report.

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**HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT**

You just read an argument for the acceleration of gifted children in elementary school by the authors of a new, research-based report. Do you agree that principals should have discretion to admit children early and permit grade-skipping? If not, what are your reasons? Share your thoughts and comments at www.naesp.org/speakingout/.