Don’t Overlook Grade Skipping

You and your teachers are under ever more stress. Mandates from your district, the state, and the federal government seem to be ever mounting, even contradictory. And then there are the parents who say, “My child is bored in school!” or “I’m not happy with my child’s teacher!” Such complaints are particularly likely to come from parents of high-ability kids.

Principals and teachers can be tempted to give such complaints short shrift. After all, many educators are too consumed by the problems of low-achieving students and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates to serve them. Alas, those parent complaints are more likely to increase for a number of reasons.

First, NCLB imposes carrots and sticks for helping low-achievers reach basic competency but none for high-ability kids to live up to their potential. Also, our increasingly heterogeneous classes make it more difficult to meet the needs of high-ability students. Finally, as the full range of career options open to women, today’s cohort of teachers contains fewer teachers who are as capable of and motivated to help high-ability students live up to their potential. I’ve heard many teachers (and even a few principals) say things like, “He’s smart; he’ll do fine anyway.” Or even, “Bright kids can learn by teaching struggling students.”

Of course, such a mindset is a perfect recipe for reducing America to its lowest common denominator. Certainly some learning accrues when a bright child explains something to a low-ability child, but when bright children are denied an opportunity to learn new things at a fast pace, they wither or just stay alive instead of flowering.

High-ability students have the greatest potential to cure our diseases, discover the next Google, and become wise leaders of our government, nonprofit, and businesses. Yet, too often, we make greater efforts to appropriately educate low achievers than high-ability students.

A Practical Solution

Grade skipping instantly gives high-potential students a much more appropriate education without imposing more work on teachers than they’re likely to do. It is not surprising, then, that the research literature strongly supports the value of grade skipping:

A meta-analysis of 32 separate studies by Karen Rogers found that grade skipping results in a half-year’s additional growth in all academic subjects compared with a matched group of gifted students who were not accelerated. Rogers summarizes, “The results of all 32 studies were remarkably consistent and positive.”

A meta-evaluation of 26 other studies by the University of Michigan’s James Kulik and Chen-Lin Kulik found that accelerated gifted students outperformed nonaccelerated gifted students without incurring any significant negative social or emotional problems. Also, research by Miraca Gross found that highly gifted students who skipped a grade were more socially well adjusted than those who remained in coursework dictated by age. A wealth of additional support for acceleration can be found at the University of Iowa’s Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration (www.accelerationinstitute.org).

Given all this research, why is grade skipping infrequently used? Some educators believe that bright kids should serve as role models for slow learners even if that’s not optimal for the high-ability students. And, of course, some parents worry that children who skip a grade will suffer socially. This logic fails to consider the above research and the pain of being constantly bored and undereducated.

Steps to Successful Grade Skipping

**Academic Readiness.** Examine the student’s standardized test scores and assess the disparity between the student’s reading and math ability and the work level in his or her current class. It is not enough to look at the child’s typical coursework because many high-ability students blow off too-easy work. Instead, examine the child’s best work—for example, a project that he or she found very motivating.

Is there outside-of-school evidence of high intellectual capability? For example, learning to read before entering kindergarten or undertaking a project more cognitively complex than same-age peers can handle?

Chat with the student to determine if his or her reasoning ability appears significantly above average. Also, talk to the child’s teacher about whether he or she thinks the student is capable of doing well if skipped to a higher grade.

**Emotional Readiness.** The child needn’t be sure he or she wants to skip a grade, just not be unalterably opposed. Many kids who would be wise to skip a grade resist because of fear of the unknown, loss of friends, or desire to be like everyone else. Principals can open a reluctant child’s mind to grade skipping by:

- Encouraging the parent and child to visit candidate classrooms, assessing if the child would likely be happier...
and/or more successful in one of those classrooms;

- Coordinating efforts to have another high-ability classmate join the child in skipping a grade; and

- Asking the receiving teacher if the child could sit next to a socially savvy and kind classmate who can serve as a peer mentor.

Grade skipping helps ensure that your high-ability students live up to their potential while relieving the sending teacher of the heavy burden of trying to provide appropriate instruction for above-average students. And it can reduce the seemingly endless complaints you get from parents of bright kids.

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