Acceleration in Ohio: A Summary of Findings from A Statewide Study of District Policies and Practices

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Executive Summary

The Acceleration Policy Study was undertaken to assess current policies and practices used to make several accelerative options available to gifted students in Ohio. The study used several methods to examine practices and procedures.

A review of the literature recently published in *A Nation Deceived* (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004) was summarized and supplemented with additional references:

- A review of policies submitted in the Self Study Reports submitted to the Ohio Department of Education in 2004 was conducted in each of three areas: early entrance, grade advancement and subject matter (content) acceleration.
- A further analysis of data from the self-study was conducted to determine the extent to which district demographics and regions varied in implementation of accelerative practices.
- A series of case studies with five school districts was conducted and the resultant efforts to improve practices, the remaining barriers at the local and state level, and school building alignment and demographics were analyzed and summarized.
- A survey of practices was conducted through the Office of Exceptional Children. These results were compared with a survey of parents and practitioners regarding elements in the Written Educational Plan (WEP), another research and development study.
- Results from these efforts were reviewed and a series of policy recommendations for local districts, state rules and policies, and suggestions for guidelines were developed.

The study probes an underlying theme: accelerative options are underutilized in a great many districts in Ohio. While all districts had policies on early admission to kindergarten and first grade, (a requirement of state law) few had policies on grade advancement, or various forms of content acceleration. The policies that were in place frequently portrayed active discouragement of the practice including citations of potential harm that is unsupported in the literature.

The case studies and analysis of data suggests that districts are not systematically considering students for accelerative options except in instances where whole groups pulled out of class for accelerated study of a specific subject. It also is apparent that transitions between academic divisions such as the early grades to middle school or middle school to high school offer other barriers. High schools identify some accelerative practices such as Advanced Placement and post-secondary educational options, but may potentially limit access to these options.

Noteworthy findings also document the limitations arising from “gatekeeper” bottlenecks in implementing practices. Single decision makers are often responsible for providing options. Given the kind of resistance noted by Southern and Jones (1991), this offers a likelihood that one educator’s prejudice against acceleration may effectively deny students access to any option.

Some districts, especially in the case study schools, were aware of the need to articulate accelerative options and the need to provide a manager for students who are accelerated. However, given the large number of districts that do not encourage

accelerative practices, the majority of districts have no provision for these essential elements. Even rarer are districts with policies that document extracurricular achievement, make clear student achievements on AP or PSEOP classes, or recognize the need to provide information about accelerative experiences on WEPs.

Recommendations for local districts policies arising from this study include:

- Revisiting policies for early admission to consider birthdates later than turning age five by January 1 of the admission year;
- Selecting instruments for accelerative decisions that are on the state approved list of instruments for identification of the gifted;
- Reviewing policies to determine if guidelines are grounded in research;
- Designating a committee to assess the appropriateness of accelerative options for individual students and having expertise in the needs of gifted children represented; and
- Designating individuals responsible for managing acceleration for students.

Recommendations at the state level include the following:

- Review and revision of state policies that unintentionally limit the practice, such as language concerning early admission to kindergarten and entry into ninth grade;
- Encourage districts to collaborate with ODE to examine permanent record implications of acceleration;
- Review university admission policies in Ohio so that they adequately reflect accelerative experiences;
- Consideration of district report card items to highlight district performance in acceleration (for example, AP courses taken and scores, number of students working above grade level, and so on).

Summary of Case Study Findings

The study used a series of interviews and focus groups to ascertain the current satisfaction with accelerative practices and the representations of these practices by various constituencies in the district (school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and gifted students who had been accelerated). Generally, the focus groups were of mixed constituencies. In most districts all constituencies were present in the focus groups. In two, separate focus groups were identified (teachers and administrators, and parents). All persons were provided information concerning the waiving of confidentiality within the group.

Despite the varying nature of the groups across sites and the range of district demographics, the issues that emerged were consistent in the areas identified. Each will be addressed below.

Decision-Making

In each location, some issues arose out of the decision-making process. Even in the most advanced district, it appeared as though one individual within the district had tacit veto power. In most cases participants identified the principal, though in one it was a central office administrator. In districts using acceleration more extensively, the influence of the individual was portrayed as benign and positive, though some participants acknowledged that there was a possibility that this might not have always been the case and that changes in personnel could mean changes in the availability of accelerative options. One district offered a flow chart for decision-making that appeared much more collaborative.

Another area mentioned many participants across the case study sites related issues to instrumentation. Administrators indicated that when very specific data concerning performance was supplied, they felt more comfortable in employing acceleration. Some districts mentioned the Iowa Acceleration Scales as a beginning point for decision-making. All districts employed some formal measures (school ability and achievement). One district also identified assessments of physical and mental maturity.

All the parties deemed administrative support crucial. In three districts, an additional critical element was the presence of a knowledgeable person in gifted education experienced with acceleration. This proved an anodyne to the prevailing (and unsupported) assumptions about the outcomes of acceleration. It also provided a source for dissemination of research and information about the types of accelerative options available.

Satisfaction with the Results of Accelerative Decisions

Every focus group participant across all the sites indicated that the decision to accelerate was a highly successful one from the perspectives of the parents, teachers and administrator. Key variables identified by participants responsible for that success included consultation with highly competent expertise in gifted education, supportive administrators, experienced gifted teachers and very supportive regular classroom teachers. In two sites, impetus for many accelerative decisions came from regular educators. In these districts there appeared to be a confluence of a strongly attuned subset of regular classroom teachers and a strong individual coordinator or teacher in the gifted program. This again led some to speculate that the strides made in acceleration might be non-programmatic but individually driven. The implications for this

study were that strong advocacy within districts should be developed and that policies needed to be expressed in ways that were unequivocal.

Parents expressed satisfaction with individual decisions for their children, but many tempered their approval by commenting that the normal curriculum's challenge and pace were inadequate and acceleration was a way to avoid boredom and disinterest - at least temporarily. The clearest pattern to emerge on curricular adequacy concerned the middle school years. In one district, this was considered such a low-level demand as to be a waste of time. In three of the five districts, respondents reported that the middle school level was most resistant to individualization and acceleration.

Most of the parents and school personnel did not cite difficulties from acceleration, echoing the national research literature. Some parents noted that their children had idiosyncratic problems that were unrelated to the practice of acceleration (social issues that predated acceleration, lack of appropriate interaction with peers, and so forth).

No individual interviewed or who participated in a focus group noted a problem associated with the process of acceleration (either early admission, grade advancement, or content acceleration) itself. It must be noted that the participating districts identified participants and that the selection bias might be a factor in this finding. On the other hand, the responses echoed numerous other studies in the literature that surveyed accelerants and their families concerning outcomes of accelerative decisions.

Problems with Acceleration

Though the focus groups offered nearly universally positive feedback, there were some concerns with acceleration. One was clearly the problem with internal articulation of decisions. Students might be accelerated at one level but held back at subsequent ones. Students might not be accorded sufficient credit for prior achievements, either because of insufficient recognition at higher school levels or the system did not document prior achievement adequately. Teachers at later levels of school remained unconvinced of the achievement noted by earlier grade teachers of students and would demand recapitulation of performances already documented.

All constituent groups retained a certain skepticism that achievement at one level would translate to other levels. Students who took AP classes in high school would express a concern that they should also take these classes at the university level. High school teachers expressed skepticism that material presented at earlier grades could be as rigorous or reliable as the material they presented in their classrooms.

Few districts or individuals surveyed were able to document how the student's permanent record could adequately establish many of the accelerative experiences the student may have had. In the case study districts, this was not a strong concern because the high school frequently stood apart from the curricular continuum of differentiation. For example, in the district that had clearly spent the most effort and consideration on accelerative issues, the high school had been only very intermittently and marginally involved in efforts to accelerate. This district, a model in many ways, had no coherent programs for acceleration at the high school level, though it must be noted that the secondary curriculum was highly demanding.

Barriers to Acceleration

The case studies were relatively atypical in representing barriers one might face in individual districts. The fact that the case study districts applied for grants to participate in this project signals at least some recognition within these districts that accelerative

options can be appropriate and beneficial. However, interviews and focus groups revealed the fact that parents, teachers and administrators were frequently uncomfortable with the practice, even in these districts. This was most clearly demonstrated in referral issues. When parents were the initial referring agents, they sometimes experienced difficulties with prejudicial or dismissive attitudes from school officials (teachers and principals). If teachers were the source of initial referral, the origins of concern were most likely the principal or central office administrator. At both these sources of referral, the impediments were clearly a skepticism concerning either the motive of the referral (commonly an attribution of a parent's false assertions of competence) or lack of expertise in the case of parents and teachers.

The source of the skepticism was generally from principals or central office administrators. The rationale for skepticism was generally the presumed naiveté of the nominator or, more commonly, the likelihood that the nomination would result in an avalanche of similar requests. Many parents and teachers noted the use of the term "floodgates" to characterize the potential for abuse cited by authorities in consideration of the practice of acceleration.

The negative implication of many parents asking for special consideration for their children in terms of service for the gifted may be an analogy to administrative concerns about the proliferation of other exceptional learners.

Issues for District Teachers

The interviews clearly reveal that many of the concerns of constituent groups revolve around demands on teachers in accelerative practices. For parents, generally, these are considered less central to questions of meeting the needs of their children than central issues of appropriate practice. Parents are concerned about the social and emotional effects of acceleration, even though there was a strong consensus among focus group parents that they made the right decision. Teachers and administrators harkened to concerns about demands on teacher time and the need to screen teachers from unreasonable demand on their time and efforts engaged to meet the needs of all their students. Gifted teachers and coordinators were more likely to express concern for individual gifted students, their needs and their learning characteristics.

Issues of Building Structure

The number and arrangement of a district's buildings did have an impact on decisions to accelerate. In general, most respondents across the case studies felt it was easier to implement acceleration within the school structure (content acceleration within a kindergarten through grade five building). Subject acceleration across building structures sometimes caused problems. One dimension was the proximity of building of different grade levels when students had to physically attend another building to access the accelerative option. However, another dimension was the reluctance of teachers at lower grade levels to provide content available normally at high levels. Both content expertise and a concern for teaching what another teacher might teach were the main reasons cited. This was true even in districts where buildings were in close proximity, but seemed to exert less difficulty than in districts with multiple buildings across several sites.

Issues of Demographics

The range of size and economic conditions across the sites also offered different perspectives on implementation of accelerative practices. Some districts were rapidly

growing. One case study district was growing at a rate of 500 students per year. The pressures of a multiple building structure were compounded by the numbers of students identified as gifted from relatively affluent and professional parents. The type of district that rapidly gains population is generally wealthier and has parents who are strongly concerned with academic excellence. This, in concert with an active and knowledgeable gifted coordinator, can provide impetus for building more accelerative opportunities.

Districts that are declining in population are frequently less affluent. The schools may not have reputations for academic excellence and, as in two of the case study districts, they may have larger groups of diverse students. In these types of districts, acceleration may not be a priority due to a view that candidates for such practices are not plentiful. One of the case study sites was small, rural and declining in population. In this type of district, the number of students considered as gifted is small. When advanced math options are considered, the pressure to maintain normal class sizes results in over-identification. Respondents in focus groups from this type of district were likely to concentrate on identification issues and issues of equity (see below). Accountability testing also surfaced in these districts as a potential barrier. Teachers frequently expressed concerns that accelerated students might miss grade level benchmarks.

Issues with Minority Gifted and Advanced Students

Though this is not a concern expressed by every district it was one that appeared quite salient in some and was an issue with statewide implications. Some of the districts noted a discrepancy in the number of students recommended for acceleration based on gender and diverse populations. While this study could not collect data on the ethnic or racial makeup of accelerated students in each category, the anecdotal evidence from the districts indicated that acceleration might be the prerogative of majority student populations. A strong indicator is that the districts that use acceleration more systematically are less culturally and economically diverse. The normal suspicion of acceleration may be compounded by concerns that options are used principally by advantaged majority students in schools.

Though only a few focus group respondents noted the issue, the instruments used for decision-making could potentially exacerbate these concerns. School ability, achievement and readiness are traditionally associated with performance correlated to economic status. In districts with few issues of diversity, this concern did not arise, or arose only when prompted. In districts with more diverse populations, it was a more central concern in formulating acceleration policy.

Summary of Survey Results

The study engaged several different survey analyses to ascertain triangulation of findings from other methodologies. The first was an analysis of demographic data from the 2004 self-report studies to the Ohio Department of Education on meeting the needs of gifted students. Districts were asked to identify policies and procedures for addressing accelerative options in a part of this report. They were asked to provide information about the policies in place in their district, the number of students served through various accelerative options, and the types of services provided. In addition, this project collaborated with another Ohio Department of Education project that surveyed parents, teachers, and gifted coordinators in the state (who were also members of the Ohio Association of Gifted Children). The survey determined how acceleration was interpreted and coordinated with written educational plans (WEPs) to provide information and guidance to students, parents and practitioners concerning service.

Quantitative data were analyzed to determine if accelerative options such as grade skipping were used more extensively by districts of differing sizes or types. What is clear is that the number of students who are grade-advanced is small; the modal number for all districts is 0. The total number reported in the state is 498 and the maximum number reported by any district was nine. Use of content acceleration is more robust with a total of 16,005 candidates. However, many of these numbers arise from whole classes of students being give access to algebra during middle school and a rarer opportunity for students in middle school to take foreign language at the high school. Very few represent pacing differences in content in the early grades. No significant differences were observed considering district size or type. It is probable that these practices are infrequently used generally and no clear pattern can be discerned statistically. It is warranted as an assumption noting the large number of districts that report 0 on most of the categories.

The WEP survey results clearly indicate that current WEPs frequently do not include information that portrays a student's current level of functioning. Moreover, rarely do they indicate current and past accelerative experiences. The vast majority of respondents felt that this would be an important addition to the WEP. This is the type of policy recommendation that cuts across these two projects.

Brief Report on the Results of the Analyses

A total of 600 schools in Ohio were involved in the analysis. Frequency analysis was conducted on the variables of “skip” (whole grade acceleration), “kind” (early admission) and subject. Descriptive statistics were analyzed for skip, kind, subject and enrollment. A simple correlation was employed to examine the relationship among the above four variables.

As seen in the table below, the number of skip ranged from 0 to 9. The average number of skip was 0.29 and the standard deviation was 0.85. The number of kind ranged from 0 to 25. The average number of kind was 0.36 and the standard deviation was 1.65. The number of subjects ranged from 0 to 475. The average number of subjects was 7.55 and the standard deviation was 28.98.

		Skip	Kind	Subject
N	Valid	600	600	600
	Massing	0	0	0
Mean		.2917	.3567	7.5450
Std. Error of Mean		.03467	.06721	1.18321
Median		.0000	.0000	.0000
Mode		.00	.00	.00
Std. Deviation		.84920	1.64640	28.98272
Variance		.721	2.711	839.998
Skewness		4.804	10.396	9.563
Std. Error of Skewness		.100	.100	.100
Kurtosis		31.996	132.997	125.446
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.199	.199	.199
Range		9.00	25.00	475.00
Minimum		.00	.00	.00
Maximum		9.00	25.00	475.00
Percentiles	25	.0000	.0000	.0000
	50	.0000	.0000	.0000
	75	.0000	.0000	4.0000

Skip (Whole Grade Acceleration)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	498	83.0	83.0	83.0
	1.00	66	11.0	11.0	94.0
	2.00	18	3.0	3.0	97.0
	3.00	10	1.7	1.7	98.7
	4.00	4	.7	.7	99.3
	5.00	1	.2	.2	99.5
	6.00	1	.2	.2	99.7
	7.00	1	.2	.2	99.8
	9.00	1	.2	.2	100.0
	Total	600	100.0	100.0	

Kind (Early Admission to Kindergarten)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	515	85.8	85.8	85.8
	1.00	43	7.2	7.2	93.0
	2.00	24	4.0	4.0	97.0
	3.00	8	1.3	1.3	98.3
	4.00	1	.2	.2	98.5
	5.00	3	.5	.5	99.0
	6.00	2	.3	.3	99.3
	8.00	1	.2	.2	99.5
	14.00	1	.2	.2	99.7
	21.00	1	.2	.2	99.8
	25.00	1	.2	.2	100.0
	Total	600	100.0	100.0	

Subject (Individual Subject Acceleration)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	334	55.7	55.7	55.7
	1.00	56	9.3	9.3	65.0
	2.00	36	6.0	6.0	71.0
	3.00	21	3.5	3.5	74.5
	4.00	16	2.7	2.7	77.2
	5.00	17	2.8	2.8	80.0
	6.00	9	1.5	1.5	81.5
	7.00	8	1.3	1.3	82.8
	8.00	9	1.5	1.5	84.3
	9.00	2	.3	.3	84.7
	10.00	12	2.0	2.0	86.7
	11.00	5	.8	.8	87.5
	12.00	1	.2	.2	87.7
	13.00	3	.5	.5	88.2
	15.00	8	1.3	1.3	89.5
	16.00	2	.3	.3	89.8
	17.00	2	.3	.3	90.2
	18.00	2	.3	.3	90.5
	19.00	1	.2	.2	90.7
	20.00	6	1.0	1.0	91.7
	21.00	1	.2	.2	91.8
	22.00	2	.3	.3	92.2
	23.00	2	.3	.3	92.5
	24.00	1	.2	.2	92.7
	25.00	8	1.3	1.3	94.0
	26.00	1	.2	.2	94.2
	27.00	2	.3	.3	94.5
	28.00	1	.2	.2	94.7
	30.00	2	.3	.3	95.0
	31.00	1	.2	.2	95.2
	32.00	1	.2	.2	95.3
	34.00	1	.2	.2	95.5
	35.00	4	.7	.7	96.2
	44.00	1	.2	.2	96.3
	45.00	1	.2	.2	96.5
	50.00	1	.2	.2	96.7
	52.00	1	.2	.2	96.8
	53.00	1	.2	.2	97.0
	57.00	1	.2	.2	97.2
	60.00	1	.2	.2	97.3
	61.00	1	.2	.2	97.5
	65.00	1	.2	.2	97.7
	70.00	1	.2	.2	97.8

72.00	1	.2	.2	98.0
74.00	1	.2	.2	98.2
75.00	1	.2	.2	98.3
92.00	1	.2	.2	98.5
108.00	1	.2	.2	98.7
142.00	1	.2	.2	98.8
143.00	1	.2	.2	99.0
167.00	1	.2	.2	99.2
175.00	1	.2	.2	99.3
180.00	1	.2	.2	99.5
200.00	2	.3	.3	99.8
475.00	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	600	100.0	100.0	

As seen in the table below, the number of enrollment ranged from 276 to 66,532. The average number of enrollment was 2,849 and the standard deviation was 4,731.

	Number	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance
Skip	600	9.00	.00	9.00	.2917	.84920	.721
Kind	600	25.00	.00	25.00	.3567	1.64640	2.711
Subject	600	475.00	.00	475.00	7.5450	28.98272	839.998
Enroll	600	66256.00	276.00	66532.00	2847.7317	4730.83796	22380827.786
Valid N	600						

As seen in the table below, there were significant correlations between skip and kind, and between skip and subject; $r = 0.13$, $p < .01$, and $r = 0.248$, $p < .001$, respectively. These are probably artifacts from dual reporting of early admission to kindergarten being treated as a grade skip as well. However, the correlations between kind and subject were not significant, indicating that students admitted early are not more likely to have subsequent content acceleration. Enrollment was not significantly correlated with any of the above three variables.

Correlations

		Skip	Kind	Subj	Enroll
Skip	Pearson Correlation	1	.130(**)	.248(**)	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000	.707
	N	600	600	600	600
Kind	Pearson Correlation	.130(**)	1	.054	.034
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.187	.400
	N	600	600	600	600
Subj	Pearson Correlation	.248(**)	.054	1	-.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.187		.950
	N	600	600	600	600
Enroll	Pearson Correlation	.015	.034	-.003	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.707	.400	.950	
	N	600	600	600	600

** Correlation was significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Academic Acceleration for Gifted Students: A Literature Review and Summary

Gifted students are generally described as children who demonstrate the ability or potential to learn academic content faster than their age-level peers (Pressey, 1962). Academic acceleration is a process or intervention that either takes advantage of the student's ability to learn more quickly than age-level peers or that recognizes previous achievement. Colangelo, Assouline and Gross likened accelerative interventions to allowing gifted students to fly. The metaphor for liberation is refreshing and in contrast with many other metaphors, which have suggested that students were speeding up on dangerous roads or being pushed too hard or too fast. Educators generally justify their reluctance to provide accelerative options on "experience" and notions of "common sense," but very few of them have ever had any experiences with the acceleration of gifted students (Southern, Jones, and Fiscus), and research does not support their common sense assumptions. Metaphors and myths that liken acceleration to reckless driving, coercion, forced growth and a myriad of other characterizations have greatly contributed to educators' reluctance to use acceleration as an intervention to meet the academic and developmental needs of gifted students.

The publication of *A Nation Deceived: How School Hold Back America's Brightest Students* by Colangelo et al. has forced a renewed consideration of academic acceleration. Their position is very plain. Academic acceleration is a reasonable intervention and responsible and accountable educators must consider and use some of the various forms of acceleration to address the inevitable mismatches between the gifted students' capacities to learn and the content and pace of the general curriculum.

Separation from Peers

The degree to which acceleration will result in social separation from peers appears to be the issue that raises the greatest concern with parents, educators, and students themselves (Jones and Southern, 1991; Southern, Jones, and Fiscus, 1989a, 1989b). There is a lack of empirical research to support the notion that separation from age and grade level peers is associated with difficulties in adjustment or achievement (Kulik and Kulik, 1984; Southern et al., 1993), but the concerns almost certainly persist because the decisions to accelerate individual children are made by parents and educators with regard to an individual child. It is important to consider two issues regarding the dimension of separation. First, acceleration options vary in the degrees to which they involve separation. Early entrance to school or skipping one grade level would arguably cause less dramatic separations from chronological peers than multiple grade level placements. Students who are placed more than two grade levels above chronological peers are considered to be radically accelerated (Stanley, 1975).

Second, the degree and effects of separation can be managed and its influence can be muted. Consistent with best practices, programs which employ radical accelerations only admit students who score extremely high on appropriate entrance criteria. Support services in counseling and academic adjustment are be provided. Proponents of radical acceleration also advise that the radically accelerated student be able to reside at home or with close supportive relatives, and to maintain some social and extracurricular contact with age and grade level peers (Brody and Stanley, 1991).

Timing of Acceleration

The age at which the student is offered accelerative options is associated with additional complications. Skipping first grade might have vastly different consequences from early graduation from college. Few researchers have given careful consideration to the timing of acceleration. Some attention has been given to the timing of grade skipping. Feldhusen, Proctor and Black provided some guidelines for the employment of grade skipping. They suggested that:

- Grade advancements should take advantage of natural administrative and curricular breaks;
- Early in the year may be better than late in the year.

While the dimensions of pacing, salience, separation from peers, timing and access seem to have practical value when planning appropriate accelerative interventions, the dimensions probably do not differ unambiguously among themselves.

Complicating Issues in Accelerative Practices

There are several issues that arise when implementations of various practices are being considered. Those issues often include unintended consequences and those related to the interaction of accelerative practices and bureaucratic structures.

Unintended Consequences

Many in the educational community view acceleration with some skepticism (Southern et al.). It becomes increasingly likely that the practices (especially those of grade skipping and the various forms of early entry) will be employed with a great deal of reluctance. Southern and Jones contend that educators will provide more rational accelerative options and will learn more about acceleration if, in their planning for acceleration, they try to anticipate issues that may later become problems. Parents and teachers for that matter make relatively few dramatic decisions about a student's educational opportunities. As Colangelo et al. (17) warn, "Fear of a wrong decision sometimes prevents a right decision." The likelihood of many problems can be reduced if there is careful planning, assessment, placement of necessary resources and consistent monitoring of progress and well-being. Most difficulties that have occurred in accelerative options are attributable to lack of prior preparation (Southern and Jones,2004).

Interaction with Bureaucratic Entities

The final area of concern about types of acceleration involves the interaction of outcomes of acceleration with impinging rules and regulations. For example, while it may be permissible to allow gifted students to enter post-secondary options programs in middle and high school, they might also risk their loss of athletic opportunity or eligibility in middle school and high school. The unforeseen outcomes of acceleration are a natural issue of the interplay of regulation and the age/grade assumptions of modern American education. It is generally assumed that a student will be of a certain age in a certain grade. A large range of school policies and practices are built upon this expectation. Planning for acceleration should also consider the possibility that with acceleration gifted students may find themselves in bureaucratic and social environments that have very different expectations.

Results of Acceleration

Rogers (2004) reviewed 380 studies of the various forms of acceleration and found that all most all forms of acceleration have been found to have direct and positive effects on academic achievement. While some forms of acceleration such as correspondence, distance, and online learning were considered in only a few studies and did not have demonstrable direct benefits, there were likely to have been some important indirect benefits. It is, however, significant that there were no negative effects there were clearly associated with any of the types of acceleration.

Policy Implications from Review of the Literature

Two conclusions of an extensive review of the literature are inescapable. One is that acceleration (in its many forms) has proven to be an effective and powerful intervention for use with gifted students. It is also a fairly cost-effective mechanism to begin to meet their needs. The second conclusion is that it is typically underused. While the reasons have been detailed above, and are reviewed extensively in Southern, Jones and Stanley (1994), schools, parents and laypeople are consistently worried about using acceleration, especially in its most salient forms.

Education and in-service training for educational professionals begins to answer the question. However, it is also going to be necessary to put into place policies at the state and local levels that encourage employment of accelerative options. Requiring districts to develop local policies for a wide variety of accelerative options makes acceleration more visible and more likely to be considered as a tool. By establishing state level policies, a statement is taken in favor of these practices, and that acceleration is not just moving a student to a different placement but moving content to the student in the most effective and efficient way. Districts need to make access to interventions easier and more parent-friendly and change the perception that a single gatekeeper should make unilateral decisions about access.

State policymakers also need to encourage the practice by rewarding districts that employ progressive interventions. Noting these options on state report cards or providing status recognition for districts encourage other schools to follow these practices.

Analysis of School District Acceleration Policies

W. Thomas Southern and Eric D. Jones

A review of 601 policies submitted by districts in response to the District Self-Report revealed a number of issues that should be addressed. Districts were instructed to submit policies related to early admission to kindergarten and first grade. They were also asked to submit policies dealing with grade advancement (skipping) and content and other forms of acceleration. The submissions were reviewed and categorized with the following results:

Early Admission to Kindergarten and First Grade

All the districts reviewed had early admission to kindergarten policies. Fewer districts submitted early admission to first grade. Those that did tended to copy the procedures for admission to kindergarten and substitute first grade for kindergarten. This led to an interesting phenomenon. Since the language in NEOLA (see 1 below) used state law, it did not copy the expanded language of October 1 to January 1 in the kindergarten language. Thus early admission to first grade was for students born before September 30 for whom the district could waive kindergarten. Policy documents were of four types.

1. The first were variations on a policy document written by NEOLA Inc., a service for schools furnished for a fee. These policies refer to Ohio Revised Code and state procedures that address students with 1) birthdates between October 1 and January 1, 2) mental age, 3) an IQ criterion, 4) social and emotional development and 5) district personnel responsible for final decisions. In some instances districts have further refined the policy by modifying the IQ cutoffs, specifying IQ cutoffs for October, November and December birthdays. Others further specify percentiles and other thresholds for admission. Some policies specify one individual (the building principal usually) and others specify a larger team of members.
2. The second type seems to originate from the Ohio School Boards Association. It calls for percentile scores on a “psychological evaluation,” performance in social and emotional and fine motor development in the upper 50 percent of the proposed placement, and agreement by the examiner and the building principal. Nearly all asserted the need for a trial period with an evaluation of the placement after a certain time period. Variations on these policies include raising percentile thresholds, involving more decision-makers, specifying the instruments to be used, and expanding or contracting the number of weeks for re-evaluation. In some instances, the policy indicated that the cost of assessment could be required of parents.
3. A third form was identified, but its origin was not determined. It consisted of a specification of personnel responsible for the decision (usually a team), citation of Ohio Revised Code (ORC) rule numbers, individual IQ tests, physical factors, social and emotional development, vocabulary, maturity and the level of performance (superior). Similar variations to those mentioned above appeared. IQ score thresholds and specifications of team members might differ.
4. A fourth type of policy was determined to be locally derived. As might be expected these policies varied widely, however reviewers determined a couple of general types of policy were apparent. One type was written in an effort to facilitate local decisions in instances where early admission was requested either

in a supportive or neutral manner. The other type was obviously constructed to discourage parents from pursuing early admission. The former type used a variety of instruments, a group decision-making process, and reasonable cutoff scores. The latter type used language that introduced a variety of alarmist statements, such as "many parents regret having started their children early and later request their child be held back a year." These policies also frequently included "FAQ" type entries that provided spurious and misleading research (anecdotal stories and false information about what the research showed about early admission) or emphasized the potential "disastrous" consequences of the practice.

The consequences of the review of early admission policies are that there are several areas of concern raised in the policies themselves. These can be characterized as access, unrealistic or non-empirically supported criteria, lack of specifics in terms of instrumentation or policy, extraneous procedures required, active discouragement of parents, and featuring false or misleading information. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Many of the policies provided an appearance that a single gatekeeper would arbitrate the process. This was the principal or superintendent in most instances. While many of these administrators may have highly positive views of early admission, many others do not (Southern, Jones, and Fiscus). In some policies parents were required to have a counseling session before assessment would even commence. This was generally included in district policies that actively discouraged the practice implying strongly that the session would present negative information about early admission. If administrators view any potential early entrant as the first drop in a potential downpour of requests, they may take steps to limit the practice. In addition, these officials may be under informed about the nature and needs of gifted students and therefore minimize the child's needs.

Many policies had unrealistic criteria for early admission. For example, several districts cited a requirement for a 125 IQ score for admission while others specified requiring 125 for October birthdays, 130 for November ones, and 135 for December birthdates. There is no support for this notion in the literature at all. Similarly, some districts required 98 or 99 percentile performances on nationally normed instruments. Most testing experts recognize scores at this level are fairly unreliable and will not accurately discriminate ability. In fact, some of the ceilings for early grade testing will not report scores at this level, thus all will fail to meet criteria. Still other policies asked for assessments unrelated to success for early entrants. One policy specified the size of the child being at the 50th percentile; another recommended that the child had begun the process of erupting permanent teeth at ages 12-16 months ahead of average. Neither of these is confirmed as a valid requirement in research literature. A further error in some policies is the use of matrices to make decisions, a process that assigns points for various types of performance and admits students on the basis of a summed score. This is not only a poor practice; it is one that violates state law.

Many policies did not specify instruments and procedures for decision-making at all. For example, "the board will designate a procedure," but none was indicated in the provided documents; or, some described instruments as "a suitable test of academic ability," but none was specified. In an age where we have specific approved instruments for gifted identification, this is an oversight that should be addressed.

Several districts indicated that they would assess constructs that are either too difficult to measure, lack reliable instrumentation, or are too vague and open to subjective

judgment. For example, some districts indicated the early entrant should have a “fully formed personality.” This was to be judged in conversation with the school psychologist or principal. Other policies mention maturity or education readiness, concepts that are extremely vague. What constitutes maturity is usually the absence of maladaptive behavior, but adults observe children’s behavior and label it as mature or not in idiosyncratic ways. What appears mature of adaptive to one observer may seem immature and maladaptive to another. While it might be valuable to assess behavior by observation in real contexts, the procedures mentioned or implied may lack rigor and reliability.

One issue that appears quite difficult is the active discouragement of parents by school officials. If early admission to kindergarten or first grade is to be viewed as a potential way to address gifted students needs, this is unacceptable. For example, one district provided guidelines to parents that included the following: “Remember you are not simply making a decision about next year, you are making a decision about the rest of you child’s life.” Another suggests that early admission is most often sought as result of the needs of the parents, not of the child. Such language is intimidating and demeaning to parents. Moreover, it implies that anyone who seeks early admission is operating out of personal convenience and not out of concern for the child.

In many instances, unvarnished untruths are provided. One district asserted that early entrants would suffer if they were physically smaller than their peers, but research has refuted this statement. One district suggests the child should be growing more rapidly than chronological peers and should have an advanced notion of number concepts. Again, neither of these items has empirical support. Obviously this kind of misinformation makes early admission difficult and anxiety-producing. One district distributed a flier about acceleration that contained the following quote: “Probably after birth, entrance to school is the most anxiety-provoking situation encountered by the child.” Given this type of attitude, this statement may be true for students at this particular school.

The upshot is that while all districts have policies, many do so only because early admission to kindergarten is mentioned in the ORC. The distribution of districts with formulaic responses does not seem confined to a district demographic or to regional location. Wealthier suburban schools, for example, might have well developed procedures or they might simply have derived policies from state law or obtained it from one of the sources cited above.

Whole-Grade Acceleration Policies

These were rarer still. As a rule these policies did not follow a standard format gleaned from an organization. The closest to a whole-grade policy was one derived by a number of districts, which copied sections of the Ohio rule and used them as a basis for showing options (presumably looking at it for the WEP as well). There were also several districts that included copies of the Iowa Acceleration Scale (and a couple of instances nothing else). Some districts provided samples of parent and teacher behavioral checklists to help assess a candidate. Most that were presented had elements that included the following:

- Who could propose acceleration;
- Teams of decision-makers
- Procedures for assessment;
- Procedures for monitoring the success of the intervention.

These elements, of course, varied widely. Many districts purchased and adopted the NEOLA policy, which stated, "Following sound principles of child development, the Board discourages the skipping of grades." At the other end of the scale, a district policy presented a decision-making flow chart with detailed instructions of who would be involved, what type of information should be included, when it should be collected, and how evaluation would proceed. Most districts included some portions of state law (including copying the early admission policy and removing ages).

What seems clear is that many districts are resistant to grade acceleration and more or less ignore it. Some are actively hostile to it. In these districts, it would seem unlikely that they would engage in the practice at all. In the districts where policy seemed to be well-thought, there appeared to be more acceptance of this intervention. As with early admission, no pattern of district type was apparent. Some of the best came from a university-centered community, as did some of the worst. Some of the best came from suburbs, as did some of the worst.

Policies on Other Types of Acceleration

Policies on subject matter acceleration, mentors, independent study, telescoped curricula and so forth were even less well represented in the analysis. Similar patterns that were noted in grade acceleration emerged again. When these types of options were mentioned, there were fewer pejorative implications than one would find associated with grade acceleration. Exceptions to this were districts that projected bias, emphasizing the difficulties and drawbacks to content acceleration. One policy required parents to respond in writing to their wish to proceed with acceleration, in spite of warnings from school administration, followed by a conference with the principal before beginning the intervention. This was not a widespread response. Probably the most frequent themes were the determination of whether the option matched the learning needs of the child, procedures for documenting the experience, and case management. Two or three districts had exceptionally complete policies. With the exception of educational options, the policies did seem to involve gifted education personnel. As with the prior policies, no pattern of district region or demographic emerged.

Implications

There are some clear implications from the policy review. These can be categorized into policy assistance, in-service needs, model policy development and dissemination, and modifications in state policy. Each is described below:

1. Some assistance should be provided to districts to discuss what elements should be present in policies of each type. For example, districts should be using instruments from the state-approved list for the gifted. They should be provided information about the types of information that can be reliably assessed and who is competent to do so. The districts should also be provided information about access to the process and encouraged to broaden decision-making beyond the one or two invested persons mentioned in many policies. Included in the process should be someone with knowledge of the nature and needs of gifted students. Clear procedures should also be delineated for conducting assessment and placement. One individual, preferably one with expertise in the area of gifted education, should be designated to provide support and evaluation of the placement. In processes such as content acceleration and independent study, this person should help in documentation and articulation of various interventions.
2. Districts need materials for providing professional development to in-service educators about research in these accelerative practices. This should include data about the benefits, and findings that debunk many of concerns and anxieties reflected in some of these policies. An important addition would be a table of commonly held beliefs about acceleration that are simply not based on empirical findings. For example, physical size of the early entrant or individual being grade-skipped is virtually irrelevant to the success of the placement. After all, the smallest student in a room is not always the youngest, nor is the tallest always the most advanced.
3. Model policies for each of the accelerative options should be developed. The policies could be presented in a template form that allows districts the opportunity to tailor them to their size, economic situation, etc. These could be disseminated through superintendents and gifted coordinators to reach most of the districts.
4. State policies should be modified to reflect expectations that acceleration is an intervention that is desirable. They should also remove barriers to progress in this area. A very preliminary list of efforts should include:
    - Mandate written policies for, minimally, content acceleration, grade advancement, educational options, and PSEO;
    - Require district policies to use decision-making procedures that do not have a single “gatekeeper” for acceleration decisions. Additionally, specify an appeals procedure;
    - Require districts to use instruments for assessment of academic ability and achievement from the state approved list;
    - Require districts, if they count a student as served on a WEP, that accelerative experiences be documented on the WEP;
    - Allow students to take Ohio Achievement Tests ahead of their grade placement;
    - Require districts to provide numbers of students participating in various accelerative options;

- Provide districts with information about educational options;
- Consider report card entries that highlight accelerative options as markers of success, such as, numbers of student working in content above grade level, PSEO participants, AP enrollments and exam scores.

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