

Acceleration

NAGC recommends all schools provide advanced learners with accelerative opportunities, including moving ahead in one or more subjects (content/subject acceleration) and/or skipping a grade (whole-grade acceleration). Academic acceleration is a powerful, research-supported educational intervention for nurturing the overall development of gifted or advanced students. Acceleration promotes academic development by moving students at an educational pace matching their abilities and readiness for advanced curriculum rather than restricting them to a set grade-level curriculum based on their age (Assouline et al., 2015). NAGC also recommends that all K-12 educational settings adopt acceleration procedures and policies. These may include using available information (e.g., standardized test performance) and recognized practices such as collaboration among educators and parents to make informed decisions about moving students from one classroom to another. Acceleration policies ensure that **all** students have access to the benefits of academic acceleration.

Research Overview

More research supports academic acceleration than any other intervention for academically advanced students. An impressive body of research has documented the success of accelerated students over the past 80 years; accelerants have been compared to same-age, equally able peers as well as to older students in the new grade. In both cases, accelerated students performed significantly better academically than the comparison group. They earned good grades, frequently chose college majors related to the subjects in which they were accelerated, and earned advanced degrees at a higher rate than comparison groups. Students demonstrating high scores in a content area and participating in fast-paced summer and school-year programs have demonstrated success (Assouline & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2011; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies of whole-grade accelerated students showed they were engaged in education and continued to perform well over time. Students moving ahead in a single subject (such as mathematics) demonstrated success in that advanced course as well as in subsequent courses, and they maintained their interest in that subject, contrary to concerns about burnout. In contrast to frequently mentioned concerns about **potential** negative social ramifications of acceleration, as a group, accelerated students performed as well as, or slightly

better, than nonaccelerated students in the psychosocial arena, in the short term and even several decades later (see Assouline et al., 2015; Bernstein et al., 2021; and Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016 for a detailed examination of the research).

The extensive research base examining the effectiveness of academic acceleration has not kept pace with the increased awareness of the needs of special populations of gifted learners. For example, initial findings on accelerative interventions with twice-exceptional students show that educators and families do make modifications for academically talented students diagnosed with a disability. One study found that twice-exceptional students who had previously received either whole-grade or subject acceleration also demonstrated very high academic ability and achievement, regardless of presence of a diagnosis (LeBeau et al., in press). Although the specific diagnosis may require careful attention when considering acceleration, a diagnosis does not preclude the intervention.

Acceleration with diverse learners needs additional research. Universal screening (Card & Giuliano, 2016) helps consider more students who might benefit from acceleration. Auto-enrollment in advanced coursework, replacing systems relying on prerequisite test scores or teacher recommendations, is an additional promising practice. The Fordham report (National Working Group on Advanced Education, 2023) provided comprehensive recommendations to develop the capacities of underrepresented students including: (a) start in early elementary school and cast the widest possible net when searching for advanced students; (b) use local norms; and (c) include flexible methods of screening students for accelerated opportunities.

Research-Based Best Practices

Research-based best practices for acceleration include:

1. Develop acceleration policies to ensure that all students who might benefit are considered.
2. Utilize universal screening to include additional students, not just those individual students recommended by a teacher or family member.
3. Use a research-based instrument designed to gather objective data when making decisions about whole-grade and/or subject acceleration.

4. Employ above-level testing for subject- and whole-grade acceleration decisions. Above-level testing provides a tool for students to show their aptitudes in an objective manner.
5. Use a team approach to decision-making (especially with whole-grade acceleration), which eliminates gatekeepers who may thwart the discussion and decision-making process.
6. Include a variety of accelerative options (e.g., curriculum compacting, Advanced Placement courses, dual or concurrent enrollment, cluster grouping, mentoring programs, summer programs, online learning, ability grouping, etc.) to individualize a student's program.
7. Make transition planning an important part of the discussion around acceleration decisions. Carefully timing the acceleration, filling in academic gaps, and providing scaffolding and support helps students make a more successful transition to an accelerated placement.
8. Ensure that the accelerated placement truly provides advanced content and appropriate pacing.
9. Provide professional development for teachers and administrators, because the intervention is not typically taught in undergraduate or graduate education programs.

Practitioners may enjoy reading Johnsen et al. (2021) as well as Riegel and Behrens (2022) for careful examinations of both whole-grade and subject acceleration. Practitioners should also be aware that enrollment in a school's gifted program should not be required for consideration of acceleration, nor should enrollment in the gifted program preempt the need to consider one or more forms of acceleration for advanced students.

Conclusion

NAGC recommends all schools provide advanced learners with accelerative opportunities, including moving ahead in one or more subjects (content/subject acceleration) and/or skipping a grade (whole-grade acceleration). As a group, accelerated students perform better than equally able, nonaccelerated students. Contrary to popular belief, acceleration does not harm students socially. Objective tools and procedures for implementing acceleration are widely available. A team approach facilitates a thoughtful, informed decision-making process. Acceleration policies and procedures are critical to successful decision-making and implementation of acceleration. Written transition plans addressing academic and psychosocial needs of accelerated students help to ensure a smooth transition to an accelerated placement. NAGC recommends this practice as a critical means of meeting the needs of gifted learners.

Resources

Acceleration Institute (<https://accelerationinstitute.org>)—A comprehensive storehouse of information and resources focused on acceleration.

Assouline, S., Colangelo, N., Lupkowski-Shoplik, A., Lipscomb, J., & Forstadt, L. (2009). *Iowa Acceleration Scale: A guide for whole-grade acceleration* (3rd ed.). Gifted Unlimited—Manual, form, summary and planning sheet

Assouline, S. G., & Lupkowski-Shoplik, A. (2011). *Developing math talent: A guide for challenging and educating gifted students* (2nd ed.). Prufrock Press.

Assouline, S. G., Lupkowski-Shoplik, A., & Douglas, B. (2021). *The Integrated Acceleration System*. The University of Iowa Belin-Blank Center. (<https://accelerationsystem.org>)—Online platform for acceleration decisions

Johnsen, S. K., Simonds, M., & Voss, M. (2021). *Implementing evidence-based practices in gifted education*. Prufrock Press.—See especially Module 2: Acceleration (pp. 67-137) and the Support Materials Implementation Forms (Module 2, Form F, Form G, Form H).

Lupkowski-Shoplik, A., Behrens, W. A., & Assouline, S. G. (2018). *Developing academic acceleration policies: Whole grade, early entrance & single subject*. National Association for Gifted Children.

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Bernstein, B. O., Lubinski, D., & Benbow, C. P. (2021). Academic acceleration in gifted youth and fruitless concerns regarding psychological well-being: A 35-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(4), 830. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000500>

Card, D., & Giuliano, L. (2016). Universal screening increases the representation of low-income and minority students in gifted education. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(48), 13678–13683.

LeBeau, B., Assouline, S. G., Foley-Nicpon, M., Lupkowski-Shoplik, A. E., & Schabillon, K. (in press, 2025). Likelihood of whole-grade and subject-acceleration for twice-exceptional students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*.

National Working Group on Advanced Education. (2023). *Building a wider, more diverse pipeline of advanced learners*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/building-wider-more-diverse-pipeline-advanced-learners>

Riegel, B. D., & Behrens, W. A. (2022). Subject-based acceleration. *Gifted Child Today*, 45(4), 192–200. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/10.1177/10762175221110937>

Steenbergen-Hu, S., Makel, M. C., & Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2016). What one hundred years of research says about the effects of ability grouping and acceleration on K–12 students' academic achievement: Findings of two second-order meta-analyses. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 849–899.

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