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THE CLUSTER GROUPING HANDBOOK

>>>Revised & Updated Edition

How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All

A SCHOOLWIDE MODEL

> Definitive guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating
> A wealth of teacher-tested classroom strategies
> Complete professional development plans

Dina Brulles, Ph.D.
Susan Winebrenner, M.S.
Foreword by Scott J. Peters, Ph.D.

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PRAISE FOR THE CLUSTER GROUPING HANDBOOK

"Dedicated teachers work tirelessly to differentiate effectively for the increasingly diverse groups of students in their general education classrooms, but they often lack the expertise and the support it takes to meet the needs of gifted students. In this revised edition of *The Cluster Grouping Handbook*, Brulles and Winebrenner provide both! Compelling, research-based rationale for the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM); specific, practical advice for implementing and maintaining high-quality cluster grouping services in a variety of settings; professional learning strategies, including a complete plan for creating a SCGM PLC; model communications with parents and other stakeholders; and much, much more—it's all here! I consider *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* to be an indispensable guide for all teachers and leaders who care about meeting the needs of gifted learners in the regular classroom, the setting where most gifted students spend the majority of their time and where educators have the greatest opportunity to improve learning for all!"

—**Sally Krisel,** Director of Innovative and Advanced Programs, Hall County School, Gainesville, Georgia, and Past President, National Association for Gifted Children

"*The Cluster Grouping Handbook* is a must-read for anyone working with gifted education! This updated resource provides the necessary tips and tools for any school or district to engage in successful implementation of the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model. The authors define SCGM across multiple settings and scenarios, providing step-by-step guidance for both new and experienced coordinators responsible for identification and services for advanced learners. In addition to the many sample forms and reproducibles, this handbook offers language for communication and support with parents and teachers, as well as realistic teaching strategies for differentiation and personalized learning opportunities so all students are challenged."

—**Michelle Swain, M.Ed.**, Director of Gifted and Advanced Academic Services, Round Rock Independent School District, Round Rock, Texas

"This book is AWESOME! Brulles and Winebrenner hit another home run with their revised and updated *Cluster Grouping Handbook*. The structure of the book is well thought out, the content is reader friendly, and the reproducible pages cover all the bases for program implementation. It is a practitioner's best friend, a guide for administrators, and a parent's hope for services that make a difference. The inclusive tone of the book also champions equity, excellence, and a commitment to do what's in the best interest of students. This resource is a professional development treasure for the field of gifted education."

—**Dr. Jaime A. Castellano**, Professor, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida

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Edited by Christine Zuchora-Walske
Cover and interior design by Shannon Pourciau

Free Spirit Publishing
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9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55442
(612) 338-2068
help4kids@freespirit.com
freespirit.com

Dedication

We dedicate this book to all educators who share our interest in helping structure and provide gifted-education services for all students, in all schools, as an integral part of the school day. We appreciate your vision and thank you for your efforts.

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Reviewers

Richard M. Cash, Ed.D.
President, nRich Consulting

Marcia Gentry, Ph.D.
Professor, Purdue University

Jason MacIntosh, Ph.D.
Gifted Coordinator, Washington Elementary School District, Arizona

Doug Orr
Associate Superintendent, Natomas Unified School District, California

Cheryl McCullough
Supervisor in Arlington Public Schools, Virginia

Joy Davis, Ed.D.
Professor, Virginia Union University

Randi Cutler
Gifted Specialist, Paradise Valley USD, Arizona

Jonathon Plucker, Ph.D.
Professor, Johns Hopkins University

Jack Naglieri, Ph.D.
Research Professor, University of Virginia

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Foreword by Scott J. Peters, Ph.D.

American schools face a daunting challenge. Students have never been more diverse and have never entered the K–12 system with a wider range of needs. Students are diverse in their preschool education, informal learning experiences, racial and ethnic backgrounds, languages spoken at home, and exposure to trauma and violence—and in countless other ways. We as educators embrace them all and do what we can to help them learn and develop. For the "regular" education classroom teacher, meeting the needs of every child is nearly impossible. The typical classroom includes students who span eight grade levels in their academic readiness. This is just one way in which students vary, and the classroom teacher—often on his or her own—must teach them all.

I was a convert to cluster grouping. Although I studied under Marcia Gentry, one of the leading researchers of cluster grouping, I never saw it as "enough" for gifted students. When I began working with schools and writing *Beyond Gifted Education*, I struggled with the logistics of how to challenge students who were two, three, four, or more years above grade-level content while still maintaining diverse, integrated classrooms. I began to see that there are too many of these students to hire our way out of the problem. If every child who is above grade level needs a separate, full-time gifted teacher, we're doomed to fail. So how do we expand the reach of the classroom teacher in order to challenge the greatest percentage of students possible? This question brought me to cluster grouping.

The Cluster Grouping Handbook is impressively practical. When I first read the book, I was surprised at how specific it was in its attention to every logistical, day-to-day action necessary to make cluster grouping work. As I read further, I began to understand that this level of practicality has come from the authors' decades of experience implementing cluster grouping in school districts, as well as helping others do the same. When you read the pages of this book, you can tell that the authors have worked through every conceivable barrier, teacher concern, parent question, and student case. Specific details, such as how to handle performance pay and how to help building principals see the value of cluster grouping, are the rule rather than the exception. How should you roll out cluster grouping? See chapter 2 as well as the provided presentations and frequently asked questions. How do teachers need to think differently about their lesson planning in a cluster grouping framework? See chapters 5 and 6. *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* is not theoretical; it addresses real challenges in a practical way with abundant suggestions and supports for common pitfalls.

I am often approached by school district leaders wondering how to get started serving advanced learners, or how they can challenge kids who need more while also furthering equity, narrowing achievement gaps, and meeting every state and national mandate. Every time, my answer is the same: cluster grouping and acceleration. Both of these interventions meet the needs of gifted students without additional staffing. Cluster grouping is not a panacea. There will be students who have needs that cannot be met through cluster grouping alone. But when educators implement cluster grouping, then pull-out programming, acceleration, and supporting students with multiple exceptionalities become easier. Cluster grouping is the foundation upon which all other advanced interventions should be built. Cluster grouping seeks to expand the reach, range, and effectiveness of the grade-level classroom, thus reserving more intense, time-consuming, and costly interventions for students who have even more advanced needs. If this sounds too philosophical or unrealistic, don't worry. *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* opens by walking you through all these program interactions in chapter 1.

As you dive into this book, I hope you'll keep in mind that the overall goal of gifted education is the same as that of K–12 education: to challenge as many students as possible as much of the time as possible. Every child deserves to learn something new every day. Cluster grouping is one way to expand the reach of a finite amount of instructional resources and staffing to challenge a wider range of learners in an inclusive and equitable fashion.

McFarland, Wisconsin, 2019

Introduction

The field of education in the United States is coming to the end of decades of reserving advanced learning opportunities only for students who have proven, through some district measure, that they are able to understand material that was designed for older learners. Educators in the United States now realize that the ways in which they have taught gifted students in the past can benefit many other students as well. The current thinking is that rigor must be woven into the majority of school experiences for all students for as much of the time as possible. There is new emphasis on problem-solving in all curricular areas and availability of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) experiences for all students. More rigorous standards and learning experiences for all students are becoming the norm.

Dr. Jonathan Plucker, gifted education scholar at Johns Hopkins University, applauds the creation of more rigorous, internationally competitive standards in the United States. He explains that when a "low bar" is used to gauge successful student achievement, gifted students might not experience the rigor they need, and their access to appropriate instructional adjustments may be limited. Plucker says that differentiation strategies must be available to students for whom the learning tasks are not sufficiently challenging (Plucker 2015).

In other words, standards-based learning is not automatically challenging enough for gifted learners, and it may not be challenging enough for other learners either. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) recommends the following interventions with any standards-based curriculum:

1. Provide pathways to accelerate standards-based learning for gifted learners.
2. Provide examples of differentiated task models to address specific standards.
3. Create interdisciplinary product opportunities to elevate learning and address multiple standards from various subject areas simultaneously.

We strongly support increasing access to truly challenging learning experiences not only for gifted learners, but also for students who may not have a history of high achievement. This book will help educators stop worrying about which students are truly gifted and instead concentrate on making all learning opportunities available for all students who can benefit from interacting with them. Any option in this book should be available to any student in any class who can demonstrate readiness for more rigorous learning. Students can, perhaps with some adjustments in the presentation of the material, be successful with the compacted and differentiated teaching techniques that have made this book so popular with the teachers and parents of gifted students.

Consider offering all students the opportunity to grow from where they are, not from where your teacher training courses say students should be. You will not harm a student by offering opportunities to complete more advanced work. Informally assessing all students to determine their entry levels into upcoming standards is just good teaching (Davidson Institute, accessed 2019). You will likely encounter students who are mildly, moderately, or profoundly gifted, and you will discover what instructional methods are most effective for varying levels of gifted ability.

A Note from the Authors About This Update

For this revised and updated edition of *The Cluster Grouping Handbook*, we have refreshed its content for a new age of required standards focused on depth and rigor. Cluster grouping used with gifted-education techniques can benefit not only students formally identified as gifted, but all students. In this second edition, we include updated information on the following topics:

- grouping variations in the SCGM
- building a school culture that supports the SCGM
- using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy to create tiered lessons
- differentiating instruction by developing depth and complexity through the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework
- providing ongoing professional training through gifted-cluster coaching, developing a gifted resource site, and using social media
- communicating through cluster-teacher email groups and gifted parent newsletters
- the office's role in monitoring teachers' professional growth
- analyzing achievement data and evaluating programs in the SCGM

Why Meet the Learning Needs of High-Ability Students?

On a day-to-day basis, the highest-ability students usually receive the least amount of their teachers' time. Because of their high test scores and grades, these students are expected to make it on their own or with a minimal amount of guidance.

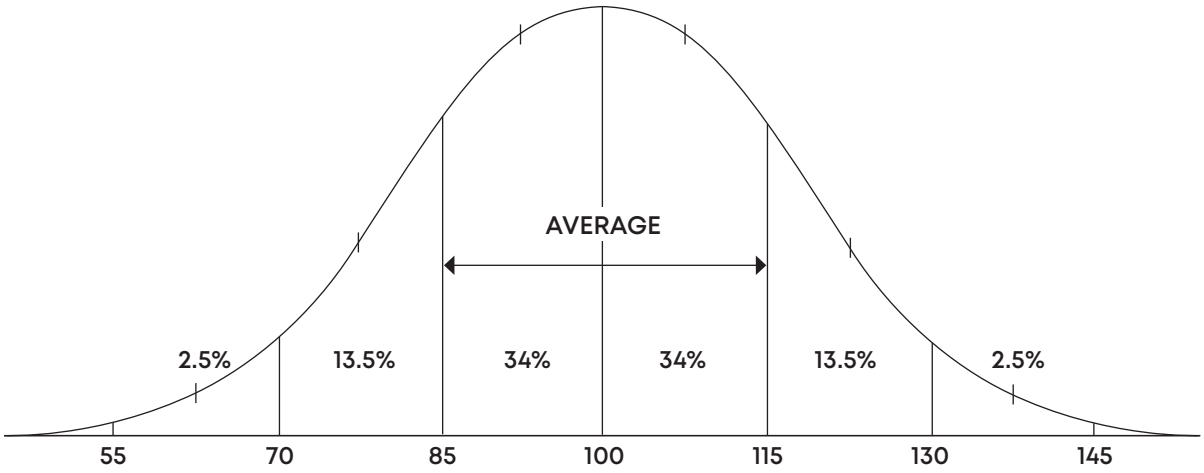
The inequity of this situation, and what can be lost as a result, is strikingly illustrated by a bell curve showing the percentages of students at different ability levels. The bell curve may create unease among some educators, but we use it for one purpose only: to demonstrate that the learning needs of students at both ends of the learning continuum are identical.

Examine the bell curve in figure 1. To teach a class of students, effective teachers usually plan the content, pacing, and quantity of instruction based on what is known about typical students of the age and grade for that class. In a mixed-ability classroom, these are the students in the middle of a heterogeneous group—the students of average abilities on the bell curve. In this same classroom, there are some students who come to the grade level missing many of the basic understandings that typically would have been acquired in earlier grades. These are the students to the left on the bell curve. A third group of students are also part of this classroom: those who are ahead of their grade-level peers in what they know and can do. These are the students to the right on the bell curve.

When teachers discover struggling students in their class—those left of average on the bell curve—they make instant adjustments to their teaching methods. They may slow the pace a bit. They may lessen the amount of work for some students. They may change the methods they use to accommodate the learning styles of struggling students. They may change the way in which they interact with the students and pair them with partners who can work well with them. They may adjust the content to reinforce prerequisite concepts not learned in earlier grades.

Teachers make these necessary adjustments because the students' learning needs differ from the average. Now imagine folding the bell curve in half, left to right. You will see clearly that gifted students are as far removed from average on the right side of the curve as are struggling students on the left side. This fact alone provides a clear justification for the same intervention to accommodate their needs—an adjustment

FIGURE 1 **Percentages of Students at Different Ability Levels (Based on IQ Scores)**



of pacing, content, workload, and approach to teaching and learning. Gifted students need a faster pace, less practice with grade-level standards, an understanding of their independent work style, a teacher who is comfortable acting as a guide and coach, and opportunities to work with partners who have similar learning ability, style, interests, and preferences. They need this not because they are gifted, but because they are *not average.*

Grade-level standards describe what typical students should be able to learn at a certain age. When we accept the fact that gifted children are able to learn at levels that exceed their chronological age expectations, we immediately understand why grade-level standards must be adjusted for them. We do this because gifted students, like students who struggle to meet the standards, diverge from the norm.

Meeting the Needs of All Students: The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM)

This book presents a unique approach to help schools meet the needs of all students, including those who are gifted. It is called the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM). The practice of cluster grouping students has become the most commonly used method for serving gifted students throughout the country. This has occurred most likely because the method can provide full-time academic services to gifted students without major budget implications, and it has the potential to raise achievement for all students in the grade levels that are clustered.

With the SCGM, educators group gifted students into classrooms based on their abilities, while placing all other students according to their achievement levels. Cluster grouping with the SCGM is different from other cluster grouping methods because the SCGM carefully structures classroom compositions with two main goals: (1) to ensure a balance of abilities throughout the grade level *without returning to the practice of tracking* and (2) to reduce the learning range found in each classroom.

Figure 2 on page 4 shows an example of how these two goals can be accomplished by dividing the students at a given grade level into five groups. (For a more detailed explanation of forming clusters and placing them in classrooms, see chapter 1.) In the chart, Group 1 are the identified gifted students, who will be clustered together. Group 2 are high-achieving students who are not gifted but are very capable

learners. These students will be clustered and placed in the classes that do not have the gifted cluster. (Clustering gifted students and high-achieving students not identified as gifted in separate classrooms is a key component of the SCGM that has been shown to expand academic growth for both groups.) Group 3 are students with average* academic performance. These are students who typically perform at grade level. Group 4 are students whose performance is below average. These are students who typically perform below grade level. Group 5 are students who produce work that falls considerably below grade-level expectations, or those with significant learning challenges. Students who are identified as twice-exceptional—those who are gifted and also have a learning challenge—are placed in Group 1. So are identified gifted students who are not fluent in English. As shown in figure 2, typical gifted-cluster classrooms will include students from Groups 1, 3, and 4; the other classrooms at the grade level will include students from Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5. Ideally, no classroom will include both gifted students *and* students who perform far below average, so the achievement range in all classrooms will be narrower than that of a randomly heterogeneous classroom.

How does this type of clustering differ from tracking? The two main differences are that, in the SCGM, all classes are heterogeneous, and they provide all students a varied curriculum. Teachers offer opportunities for moving faster or going deeper into the curriculum consistently to the entire class, which means there are times when some students in the gifted-cluster group (Group 1) will be experiencing differentiation and times when they won't. There are also times when students not identified as gifted can benefit from available differentiated learning opportunities.

This is different from a tracking system, in which all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day and are rarely exposed to learning experiences that extend their expected achievement ranges. In a tracking system, students are assigned a set curriculum based on their ability level, and they generally do not veer from that curriculum. With schoolwide cluster grouping, every class in the grade level has students with a range of learning abilities and achievement levels. In order to reach that range, teachers naturally have to modify or extend the grade-level standards.

In the SCGM described in this book, all classes have high-performing students. While one or two classes have a cluster of gifted students, all other classes have a cluster of high-achieving students who, while not identified as gifted, can easily serve as positive academic role models. In a cluster model, learning opportunities are open to all students

FIGURE 2 **Example of Classroom Compositions for the SCGM (for a Single Grade Level)**

Classrooms	Group 1: Gifted	Group 2: High Achieving	Group 3: Average	Group 4: Below Average	Group 5: Far Below Average	Totals
A	6	0	12	12	0	30
B	0	6	12	6	6	30
C	0	6	12	6	6	30
Totals	6	12	36	24	12	90

*The term *average* is relative and refers to what is average for a school's specific population.

in the class, and teachers use their students' entry points, or readiness, to determine levels and pace of curriculum. Teachers are trained in differentiation and curriculum compacting, students receive ongoing assessment, and the results of schoolwide cluster grouping are continually evaluated.

What the Research Says About Cluster Grouping

Research documenting the benefits of keeping gifted students together in their areas of greatest strength for at least part of the school day supports the philosophy behind schoolwide cluster grouping (Brulles 2005; Kulik and Kulik 1990; Rogers 2002; Pierce et al. 2010; Brulles, Cohn, and Saunders 2010). Moreover, the research suggests that all students, including those categorized as average and below average, thrive when placed in heterogeneous classes according to the guidelines of the model (Gentry 1999; Brulles 2005; Pierce et al. 2011; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010).

The SCGM is an inclusion model that integrates students with exceptional learning needs into mixed-ability classrooms and expects teachers to provide appropriate differentiation opportunities for any students who need them. An inclusion model has already been in use for many years as a method of providing special education services to students who have been identified as having exceptional educational needs. However, it is only when a class has a noticeable group of gifted students—a cluster—that teachers will be most likely to accommodate *their* exceptional educational needs. When there are only one or two gifted students in a class, teachers tend to assume the students are learning as long as they are getting high grades. As a result, teachers may minimize or overlook gifted students' need for expanded learning opportunities. Teachers are also likely to count on these students to help other students with their learning, a practice that robs gifted students of opportunities to move forward in academic areas.

Cluster grouping requires that teachers differentiate instruction. Differentiation occurs when teachers modify the curriculum and their instructional methods in response to the needs, strengths, learning styles, and interests of individual students so that *all* students have an opportunity to learn at their full potential. To be successful, the gifted-cluster teacher must have ongoing training in how to teach high-ability students in the cluster model (Winebrenner and Devlin 2001; Brulles 2005; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). The SCGM creates a setting for providing appropriate instruction that is feasible for teachers and for enhancing the likelihood that differentiation will take place.

The SCGM: Who Benefits, and How?

The SCGM offers an educational approach that benefits all stakeholders in the school community — students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Grouping gifted children in a regular classroom can provide academic, social, and emotional advantages to the students and make teaching gifted students more manageable for teachers. Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students like them in the class. They are more likely to choose challenging tasks when they can do that work in the company of other students. Teachers attuned to differentiating instruction are more likely to provide appropriate learning opportunities for gifted students and for other students as well. The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day. Parents who are satisfied that their children are experiencing consistent challenge at school are more ready to work cooperatively with the school and the teachers and less likely to remove their children from their schools in search of a better option.

Benefits of the Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model

- serving the learning needs of gifted students in a full-time program that delivers consistent curriculum compacting and differentiation opportunities without major budget implications
- grouping gifted students together in otherwise heterogeneous classes with a teacher who has special training in how to meet their unique learning needs
- facilitating the emergence of new academic leaders in classes that do not contain a gifted cluster
- providing another component to existing services available for gifted students in the school
- improving support to classroom teachers from special education and gifted support staff who have fewer teachers' schedules to work with
- improving student performance by communicating higher expectations for all students, by reducing the range of achievement and ability in all classes, and by providing staff development in gifted education for all teachers on staff
- increasing gifted-education opportunities for primary-grade gifted children, for gifted students who are not fluent in English, and for gifted students who may not be experiencing success in school
- increasing overall achievement at the grade levels that use cluster grouping
- raising expectations for all students by opening access to classroom opportunities historically reserved for identified gifted students only
- retaining families who may otherwise, as a result of feeling that their gifted children's needs are going unmet, choose to remove their children from the school and place them in a different school or provide homeschooling

Impact of the SCGM on Gifted Students

Gifted students who are clustered demonstrate high achievement because they experience more consistent challenge in their learning activities. Their scores on achievement tests show forward progress—rather than lost ground, as has been the case in some schools where gifted students are not placed in clusters or are not consistently challenged in other ways.

When gifted students are purposefully clustered in otherwise heterogeneous classes, rather than split up so that each class has one or two gifted students, teachers are much more likely to notice their learning needs. They also enjoy more attention to their social and emotional needs because of the specialized training the teachers receive.

Cluster grouping also makes it more likely that gifted kids will work to their full potential and take advantage of available differentiated learning opportunities, because they will have other students to work with on these advanced learning tasks. Having serious competition from other students like themselves, they begin to develop more realistic perceptions of their abilities and to better understand and accept their learning differences. With so many opportunities to work and learn together, gifted students become more comfortable working at extended levels of complexity and depth in a given subject or topic. Their willingness to take risks in learning experiences increases when they spend time with others who share the same interests, have similar abilities, and can also benefit from the available differentiation opportunities.

Impact of the SCGM on English Language Learners

Cluster grouping offers exciting opportunities for schools to meet the needs of gifted English language learners (ELL students). When gifted students are served only in a pull-out model, gifted students who are not proficient in English

are frequently kept out of gifted services because they cannot work at the same pace and level as the gifted students already proficient in English. With cluster grouping, extended learning opportunities are available in the regular classroom. When ELL students with high learning potential are present in classes that offer consistent challenge, they make faster progress attaining English fluency and academic achievement.

A significant increase in achievement in students of different ethnic groups can also be expected from using cluster grouping (Brulles 2005; Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). These findings result from classes in which teachers can be more focused and effective in their teaching. Another reason for the achievement gains is that gifted-education training required for gifted-cluster teachers helps teachers set high expectations for *all* students—and students respond positively to these high expectations.

Impact of the SCGM on All Students

Students at all ability levels benefit from the SCGM because in this model, teachers receive more training in how to differentiate the curriculum and the pacing for all types of students, placing learning success within the reach of all. In addition, the SCGM motivates gifted and high-achieving students to work more independently and allows them to spend more learning time on activities that interest and challenge them; this, in turn, opens up more time for teachers to spend with those who need additional assistance.

As teachers become more adept at recognizing giftedness in their students, the number of students they nominate for gifted testing increases yearly in schools that use the SCGM. This is especially noticeable in classes that do *not* have the gifted cluster, demonstrating the benefit of clustering high-achieving children who are *not* identified as gifted in separate classrooms. These classroom structures provide opportunities for the high-achieving students to thrive and emerge as new academic leaders.

Research shows that implementation of the SCGM allows for consistent and comparable levels of achievement growth among students who are not identified as gifted. A 2012 study showed similar achievement gains for general education students (those not identified as gifted) regardless of their placement in a gifted-cluster classroom or another class in the grade level (Brulles, Peters, and Saunders 2012). These results may be attributed to the fact that in the SCGM, classes have a slightly narrowed range of achievement and ability levels.

Achievement Advisory

The SCGM has the potential to significantly improve academic achievement for all students, including English language learners, students from diverse cultures, high-achieving students, and average and below-average learners. Several studies analyzing academic achievement of students in schools that use cluster grouping yield similar results. Marcia Gentry, Mary Rizza, and Steven Owen report statistically significant academic achievement gains in math and reading in a three-year longitudinal study for students in grades three through five (Gentry, Rizza, and Owen 2002). These findings are supported by the research of Dina Brulles, Rachel Saunders, and Sanford Cohn, who analyzed student achievement in mathematics for eleven subgroups at all ability levels in a diverse urban elementary school that used a comprehensive cluster grouping model (Brulles, Saunders, and Cohn 2010). The latter research showed statistically significant achievement gains in mathematics for students regardless of perceived ability levels, gender, ELL status, or ethnicity. Research conducted by Dina Brulles, Scott Peters, and Rachel Saunders shows comparable achievement gains for gifted and nongifted students in this model (Brulles, Peters, and Saunders 2012). (For more details from these studies, see chapter 8.)