



SHARP – What is it?

SHARP (**Students of High Ability in the Regular Program**) is a pilot project in which classroom teachers (Gr. 3-8) enrol a **cluster grouping of 3-6 gifted students** as part of their regular classroom. Cluster grouping is intended to supplement, not replace, the gifted pull-out programs normally offered in schools.

Overview

SHARP started in September 2003 with 12 elementary and middle school classroom teachers enrolling cluster groupings of gifted students and intentionally providing differentiated curriculum and socio-emotional support for them. A cluster group consists of 3—6 identified gifted students that are placed into a mixed ability classroom. The SHARP teacher selects strategies, resources, and materials that address the particular academic and socio-emotional needs of each of the gifted students in the cluster. Support is provided to these teachers in the form of individual consultation as well as bimonthly in-service and networking sessions. SHARP is sponsored by District 43 Student Services and Louise Malfesi, Gifted Education Coordinator.

Philosophy

SHARP is based on the philosophy that gifted children have special needs that are not always met fully in the regular curriculum. These children therefore require curriculum differentiation that addresses their individual intellectual, academic, and socio-emotional needs.

Goals

The goals of SHARP are:

1. Use intentional and informed practices that address the needs of gifted children in the elementary and middle regular classroom.
2. Provide professional development to teachers in areas of curriculum differentiation and the needs of gifted children

3. Create awareness of the need for differentiating the regular curriculum for gifted students and the efficacy of clustering gifted students.

The goals of clustering gifted students in groups of 3 – 6 students, within the regular classroom, are:

1. To provide gifted children with a comfortable and accepting classroom environment in which the teacher acknowledges and actively addresses the unique needs of gifted learners
2. To provide gifted children with academic and intellectual challenges in their areas of ability
3. To support the socio-emotional development of gifted children
4. To provide gifted children the opportunity to have consistent interaction with their intellectual peers.

Clustering benefits gifted students because:

1. Daily interaction with their intellectual peers promotes a sense of belonging and negates the isolation of being the “smart kid”
2. Teachers are more likely to provide appropriate learning opportunities (e.g., open-endedness, choice, complexity) if more than one student will benefit
3. Gifted students are more likely to choose challenging tasks when they are offered to more than one student
4. Gifted students are more likely to have a teacher who sees the “diamond in the rough”. This is especially beneficial for gifted children who are at risk of socio-emotional problems or dropping out of school.
5. Some research suggests that the other students in the class have increased achievement

Expectations of SHARP Teachers

- q Have 3-6 students in your class who have been formally identified as “*gifted*”
- q Work with your school’s Gifted Ed. Contact to develop each student’s IEP.
- q Commit to participating in six SHARP in-service meetings (5 or 6 half day meetings (with release time) or after-school meetings (including the SHARP sharing session in the springtime). SHARP meetings feature guest speakers and interaction time with the goal of teaching teachers strategies for compacting, accelerating, and/or enriching the learning experiences of gifted children, and at times all children in your class.
- q Meet individually with Louise Malfesi twice during the school year to discuss program/individual students, request resources
- q Implement differentiation strategies in the regular classroom. Some money for purchasing resources will be provided. Purchased resources will be brought to SHARP meetings for “show and tell” purposes

Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students

Adapted from Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students:
How to Provide Full-time Services on a Part-time Budget
ERIC EC Digest #E538
Authors: Susan Winebrenner and Barbara Devlin, August 1996

What is Clustering: A group of identified “Gifted” students who are ready for a program of unusual rigor or pace, are clustered in the classroom of one teacher who has training in how to teach exceptionally capable students.

What Are the Advantages of Cluster Grouping?

- Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students just like them in the class.
- They are more likely to choose more challenging tasks when other students will also be eligible.
- Teachers no longer have to deal with the strain of trying to meet the needs of just one precocious student in a class.
- The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day.

What Are the Disadvantages of Cluster Grouping?

- There may be pressure from parents to have their children placed in a cluster classroom, even if they are not in the actual cluster group.
- Gifted students may move into the district during the school year and not be able to be placed in the cluster classroom.
 - These situations may be handled by:
 - Providing training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities in all classes.
 - Requiring parents to provide written documentation of their child's need for curriculum differentiation instead of requesting the placement by phone
 - Rotating the cluster teacher assignment every two years among teachers who have had appropriate training so parents understand that many teachers are capable of teaching gifted students.
 - Rotating other students into cluster classrooms over several years.
- Another disadvantage might arise if the cluster teachers are not expected to consistently compact and differentiate the curriculum. Their supervisor must expect them to maintain the integrity of the program, and must provide the needed support by facilitating regular meetings of cluster teachers, and by providing time for the enrichment specialist to assist the cluster teachers.

Most Frequently Asked Questions about Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students

What Specific Skills Are Needed by Cluster Teachers? Since gifted students are as far removed from the "norm" as are students with significant learning difficulties, it is necessary for teachers to have special training in how to teach children of exceptionally high ability. Cluster teachers should know how to:

- Recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students.
- Create conditions in which all students will be stretched to learn.
- Allow students to demonstrate and get credit for previous mastery of concepts.
- Provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material.
- Incorporate students' passionate interests into their independent studies.
- Facilitate sophisticated research investigations.
- Provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class.

Why Should Gifted Students Be Placed in a Cluster Group Instead of Being Assigned Evenly to All Classes? When teachers try to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, it becomes extremely difficult to provide adequately for everyone. Often, the highest ability students are expected to "make it on their own." When a teacher has several gifted students, taking the time to make appropriate provisions for them seems more realistic. Furthermore, gifted students can better understand and accept their learning differences if there are others just like them in the class. Finally, scheduling out-of-class activities is easier when the resource teacher has only one cluster teacher's schedule to work with.

What Are the Learning Needs of Gifted Students? These students have previously mastered many of the concepts they are expected to "learn" in a given class. They need exactly what all other students need: consistent opportunity to learn new material and to develop the behaviors that allow them to cope with the challenge and struggle of new learning. It is very difficult for such students to have those needs met in heterogeneous classes.

Isn't Gifted Education Elitist? Gifted students need consistent opportunities to learn at their challenge level -- just as all students do. When teachers can provide opportunities for all students, including those who are gifted, to be challenged by rigorous curriculum, there is nothing elitist about the situation.

If Gifted Students Are Not Placed in Some Classes, Won't Those Classes Lack Positive Role Models for Academic and Social Leadership? Teachers overwhelmingly report that new leadership "rises to the top" in the non-cluster classes. There are many students, other than identified gifted students, who welcome opportunities to become the new leaders in groups that no longer include the top 5% of a grade level group. As classes are formed, be sure the classes without clusters of gifted students include several highly capable students.

How Does the Cluster Grouping Concept Fit in with the Inclusion Models That Integrate Students with Exceptional Educational Needs into Regular Classes? The inclusion model, in which students with exceptional learning needs are integrated into regular classrooms, is compatible with the concept of cluster grouping of gifted students, since both groups have exceptional educational needs. The practice of cluster grouping allows educators to come much closer to providing better educational services for groups of students with similar exceptional learning needs.

Won't the Presence of the Clustered Gifted Students Inhibit the Performance of the Other Students in That Class, Having a Negative Effect On Their Achievement?

When the cluster group is kept to a manageable size, many cluster teachers report that there is general improvement in achievement for the entire class.

Should the Cluster Grouping Model Replace Out-of-class Enrichment Programs For Gifted Students? No. Cluster grouping provides an effective complement to any gifted education program. Gifted students need time to be together when they can just "be themselves."

Is Clustering Feasible Only in Elementary Schools? No. Cluster grouping may be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas.