

Marcia Gentry—Follow Up Responses to Parent Meetings Spring '09
District Responses to Questions via email

1. *What part of your model are often skimmed on or short changed in the implementation due to logistical issues or bureaucratic issues?*

When buildings fail to implement the model effectively it is usually due to lack of buy-in or commitment to implementation, not to so-called logistical or bureaucratic issues. Most places where we have worked with this model have had success and have continued to implement and refine the model to fit their context. One recent exception involved a school in which there was a new principal each year for 3 years and a staff who really didn't want to be involved in the first place. Logistics, as described in chapter 2 of our book, are really pretty straight forward. The biggest mistake that I believe people make is concentrating only on the high-achieving cluster room for resources and professional development.

2. *How much professional development should a teacher receive before starting implementation of your program?*

I usually suggest a two to three hour overview of the model coupled with reading chapters 1 and 2 of the book to develop a big picture of the model and its possible outcomes. Then, I believe that teachers need a general overview and a few differentiation strategies to begin. Those who take the high achievers need to commit to learning about the nature and needs of these students. PD should be on-going and responsive to the teachers' and students' needs as the model is implemented.

3. *If our worst fears are realized and the district fails to fund this pilot adequately, how will we be able to tell as parents?*

This seems like a loaded question. The district has funded the pilot, so I am not sure of the underlying agenda of this question. The bottom line is that when teachers understand how to and commit to developing talents among their students, all students benefit and they do so on a full-time basis. So if you children are not challenged and do not experience consistent opportunities to engage in advanced content, process, and products in their areas of talent, then you will know that the program is not where it should be.

4. *As years go by using the TSCG model, is there not a risk of a widening gap between high-high and low-low achievers?*

Actually, the opposite has been consistently true. In this model fewer students are identified as low-achieving and more students are identified as high achieving, over time.

5. *Could this make the teachers' jobs really difficult because tensions in the classroom as children are bound and know in which group they fall?*

The achievement categories are used first to help provide teachers with a less extreme range of students who achieve at different levels when creating their class lists. Children not only know how well they achieve, but they also know how well their classmates achieve, so using these categories simply does not influence their awareness of such things. The point is to intervene and to provide individual children with educational opportunities appropriate to both their readiness and skill levels. TSCG help make teachers' jobs easier not more difficult by reducing the range of achievement levels in each teacher's classroom.

6. *In a school with departmentalization and looping and three-found classes—you have one teacher doing reading for three classrooms for 3 years, for example. It seems like you need 100% buy-in and professional development for the 6 teachers doing reading in math in grades 3-5. Is this correct?*

Yes. And this means that all teachers in the grade level know, understand, and will be able to adjust their curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of talented learners, rather than the one g/t specialist who may see these children on a limited basis. All benefit and the gifted students' needs are more likely to be addressed when more teachers understand how to do this.

7. *Is cluster grouping used in other countries?*

Some countries use CG, but I am not aware of any using TSCG. Have you studied methods used by public school systems in other countries that rank the highest in math/reading/writing? This is not my area of research. However, when considering methods used in other countries the culture and context must also be considered.

8. *Is there an easy way to get a schedule for the program and tasks to be completed?*

Perhaps from the proposal that I submitted to get this contract? It would be up to district personnel to decide whether they wanted to share the proposal.

9. *How does this change (1) curriculum; (2) scheduling; (3) in class resources for all children in an ALA school?*

By using this model, teachers will pre-assess and use student proficiency to create time to engage in thematic, interdisciplinary study using advanced resources, methods, and materials. All curriculum standards will still be met, but repetitive drill will be eliminated for those students who (1) already know the content/skills and/or (2) students who master content skills at a more rapid pace than their age peers. I don't see how scheduling will be affected and classroom resource allocation is a district/building issue that I cannot address.

10. *The data you shared on our slides shows growth on whole school progress. Do you have any data specifically on the growth of gifted students within the cluster grouping model?*

We do have new data on growth of individual groups of children, and on individual children, which shows positive gains for gifted students as well as other students as we have shown in past research. In the past with grade-level or criterion measures used by most schools, growth of the gifted students has been difficult to measure due to ceiling effects. With HLM and measures such as the NWEA, we are better able, now, to address individual growth.

11. *How does this cluster grouping tend to affect behavior problems in school?*

In TSCG, students identified as behavior problems are evenly distributed among the classrooms at each grade level, with the intent of helping teachers better address these behavior issues. Additionally, since teachers are involved in developing class lists, they use their knowledge of their students and their colleagues to create classrooms where optimal learning is likely to occur.

12. *How difficult is this to implement in a new setting? How soon is it effective?*

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book describe implementation. Most places see growth in the first year, which continues to surprise us. Implementation is not difficult. Teachers are used to having a class of students, so having a cluster grouped class is not that radical of a change, and the reduction in range of achievement levels in their class in the first year is helpful to their differentiation efforts. After about 3 years, we find the program is usually institutionalized.

13. *Is there difficulty with teacher buy-in? How is this overcome?*

We don't generally recommend implementing if there is not teacher buy-in. Presenting the model, asking, and answering questions, discussing readings are used to create buy-in. I'd rather create the buy-in than overcome resistance.

14. *You mention reading and math as the two skills used to assess achievement. What about writing?*

Writing is important, we use reading and math skills as general areas of achievement as reading and math comprise the majority of the curriculum in elementary schools. Student who excel in reading and math (and yes, writing) are those from whom the most radical differentiation will be necessary.

District Responses to email questions

1. *Will there be compaction for most advanced students in in a subject at all grade levels? If so, what do students do next?*

Yes, curriculum will and should be compacted for students who need this process. Procedures for curriculum compaction in language arts and math are currently being developed in conjunction with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction. Teachers will be trained over the summer in compaction for fall implementation.

Teachers will give the students opportunities to direct their learning opportunities in enrichment experiences or above grade level work. Each compaction is individual to meet the child's needs.

2. *Will there be acceleration at all grade levels? Regrouping across grades for a subject?*

Yes, and once again this is done on a case by case basis. The master schedules are being designed to aid in this process.

3. *Will students who have mastered a skill need to participate in lessons on that skill or will they be allowed to work on a skill they still need to master?*

This was answered in question 1.

4. *Will there be feedback on the progress of a child?*

Absolutely. Regardless of the Total School Cluster Grouping Model, a parent will and should receive regular feedback from the school concerning his/her child's progress.