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# HELD BACK

WHAT'S SLOWING DOWN ACADEMIC ACCELERATION FOR BRIGHT YOUTH?

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## What's slowing down academic acceleration for bright youth?

by Lisa Van Gemert | illustrations by Tim Oglie

It didn't seem like a big deal at the time. Little Neil was in second grade but reading at a fifth-grade level, so in the middle of the year he was moved to third grade. And Neil Armstrong isn't alone. Martin Luther King Jr. entered college at 15 having never formally completed high school and was 19 when he graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 with a degree in sociology. Sandra Day O'Connor graduated from high school at 16 then enrolled at Stanford University, where she completed two degrees in five years instead of six.

The who's who list of people who have participated in some form of acceleration – the practice of giving students material and assignments typically reserved for students who are older or in higher grades – includes scientists Sally Ride and Marie Curie, celebrities Drew Carey and Roberta Flack, adventurers Amelia Earhart and Sir Edmund Hillary, business icons Steve Jobs and Warren Buffett, and government leaders Condoleezza Rice and Richard Nixon.

In 2004, a group of researchers from the University of Iowa's Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration released a seminal report outlining a meta-analysis of data and research regarding acceleration. *A Nation Deceived* challenged everything the education establishment believed about acceleration and revealed it to be a far stronger and more effective strategy than ever understood before. Their goal was “to change the conversation about acceleration in America's schools.” And they did.

Now, a little more than 10 years later, the researchers are back with a vengeance. Their follow-up report, *A Nation Empowered*, was issued late this spring from the renamed and revamped Acceleration Institute.

While there are no formal records kept on the number of U.S. students participating in acceleration, data

from the National Center for Education Statistics speak to its growing ubiquity. In the 2010-2011 school year, 82 percent of public high schools offered dual credit courses (simultaneously earning high school and postsecondary credit by taking college level courses; 2 million students), the Acceleration Institute reports. Also, the number of U.S. high school graduates earning a 3 or higher – 3 is typically considered a “passing” score – on at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam has risen 7.9 percent since 2003. In Maryland, for example, 29.6 percent of high school graduates have earned the equivalent of college credit in at least one class.

If it's so common, why is acceleration so controversial?

Often equated with grade skipping, acceleration encompasses a broad range of options including the widely practiced and accepted AP classes and distance learning courses, as well as the more controversial skipping of entire grades or early admission to kindergarten.

Acceleration comes in two broad flavors: content-based and grade-based. Content-based acceleration provides students with more difficult material and leaves them in their typical grade level. Grade-based acceleration places students in grade levels higher than those that would be expected in our current system for youth their age. And it is this version that causes the most controversy. Few object to Janey walking down the hall from second grade to third grade for an hour of math every day – but she'd better not stay there, conventional thinking goes.

*A Nation Deceived* has not achieved what many advocates of the gifted want: wholesale acceptance of what many believe is the most effective practice in the education of the highly gifted in a school setting.





The report asserts, “Far too many high-ability children languish in our classrooms, bored and unchallenged, their potential unrecognized and unnourished, their futures imperiled, and their country’s future diminished. We still haven’t figured out excellence.” And one of the easiest, cheapest, most effective ways to accomplish this, the research reveals, is acceleration.

Dr. Susan Assouline is the Director of the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa and one of two editors of both reports. In *A Nation Empowered*, she writes, “Classrooms are the only place where age matters more than ability.”

So why the disconnect between the research and the practice? *A Nation Empowered* lists the common objections:

- Limited familiarity with the research on acceleration
- The belief that children must be kept with their age group
- Belief that acceleration hurries children out of childhood
- Fear that acceleration hurts children socially
- Political concerns about equity

- Worry that other students will be offended if one child is accelerated

Some educational leaders agree with Assouline’s stance, such as John Covington, Superintendent of Kansas City (Mo.) Public Schools. “The current system of public education in this country is not working,” Covington said. “It’s an outdated, industrial, agrarian kind of model that lends itself to still allowing students to progress through school based on the amount of time they sit in a chair rather than whether or not they have truly mastered the competencies and skills.”

Yet many others disagree. Preston Smith, CEO of 11-school charter school network Rocketship, said, “We still have grade levels because of the social-emotional needs of students, especially early elementary. Five-year-olds need to be with 5-year-olds most of the day so they can develop the life skills they need to be successful.”

But is cognitive development the only purpose of formal education? In its 2001 documentary, *School: The Story of American Public Education*, PBS shared other results schools are often expected to achieve along with intellectual growth, including creating a skilled

workforce, growing good democratic citizens, teaching cultural literacy and developing social skills. It is this last purpose that often is at loggerheads with acceleration.

Some worry that if a child who is already socially different from his or her peers is moved to a grade with youth who are uniformly older, the child will not fit in socially, be ostracized from the peer group or not perform well in sports as compared to class peers. Others argue that the gifted child wasn’t going to fit in any better with age-group peers and that a child’s cognitive needs shouldn’t be ignored simply to ensure that he or she has a fighting chance at popularity.

In an op-ed piece published by the *New York Times* in October of 2012 called “Against Accelerating the Gifted Child,” author Jessica Lahey quotes a teacher who is opposed to accelerating gifted students because of the social ramifications. The teacher told Lahey, “As an educator, I would not recommend grade-skipping for any but the most exceptional students, and only with the realization that skipping a grade almost always exacerbates a child’s social challenges in middle school and college.”

Lahey advises, “In other words, the decision to skip students ahead a grade or two should not be made on the basis of intellect alone.” Advocates of acceleration would not disagree. In an attempt to make this determination with more than just the flip of a coin, the Acceleration Institute publishes the Iowa Acceleration Scale, a decision-making tool to identify the readiness level of a student for acceleration, taking into account cognitive, social and emotional aspects of the child’s preparation.

Cognitively, the child’s current level of achievement needs to be evaluated, Assouline said. Schools and parents must look at the child’s potential to continue to be excellent.

“We want to evaluate the likelihood that the child will continue to perform excellently. There’s no need to accelerate for mediocre performance,” she said.

Dr. Assouline recommends that school officials, parents and the students themselves must all be involved to make that evaluation, and even with a tool like the Iowa Acceleration Scale, it’s not always easy.

“In general, people have a pretty decent understanding of the developmental needs kids have,” Assouline said. “For large groups of individuals, [physical, social, and emotional development patterns] follow a typical pattern and the typical path works well.”

The problem comes, she said, when kids don’t fit the mold of typical childhood development. “It can be difficult when we have evidence for a small number of people who need advanced content. There may be immediate disadvantages [in acceleration], but the long-term advantages are there.”

Should we worry that if a child skips a grade he or she won’t be invited to birthday parties? “It’s legitimate to wonder, and it’s natural for people to draw upon their own experiences and implicit biases,” Assouline said. “We hope that people will take a look at the evidence and think this is something to consider.”

The response that many states and school districts have to acceleration is no response at all. Only eight states have policies specifically permitting the practice, seven allow local educational authorities (school districts) to decide, and one state, Louisiana, specifically does not permit acceleration. The majority are silent. Yet advocates for the practice argue that by their silence or their actions, policymakers enter the fray.

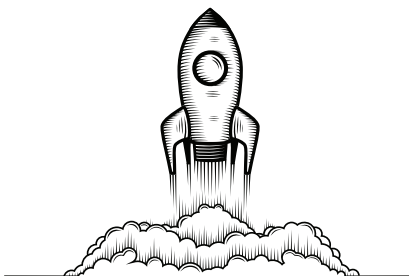
In *A Nation Empowered*, one of the authors, Dr. Karen Rogers writes, “[D]oing nothing... is also a decision, one that can lead to disengaged, bored students who can create their own disasters.” Think Ferris Bueller – a really smart Ferris Bueller.

Parents who were accelerated themselves can become frustrated when their local school districts prohibit the practice, primarily because those who have been accelerated have almost universally positive feedback about it – even with radical acceleration (defined as moving two grade levels or more beyond that which is typical for the child’s age).

Kathy Wagner was accelerated in early elementary school. “I kept telling my parents I was bored in first grade. They asked the school what could be done, and the school readily offered skipping. Apparently it was not considered a big deal at all at the time, not like it seems to be now,” she said.

## TYPES OF

# ACCELERATION



**EARLY ADMISSION TO KINDERGARTEN:** entering kindergarten prior to the minimum age set by policy

**EARLY ADMISSION TO FIRST GRADE:** skipping kindergarten or moving a child from kindergarten to first grade in his or her first year of school

**GRADE-SKIPPING:** moving a student a grade level above his/her chronological-age peers; can occur at the beginning of or during the school year

**CONTINUOUS PROGRESS:** giving a student new content as previous content is mastered at a rate faster than that of peers, but not necessarily at a pace controlled by the teacher or student

**SELF-PACED INSTRUCTION:** (subtype of Continuous Progress) allowing a student to move at his/her own pace through the curriculum

**SUBJECT-MATTER ACCELERATION/ PARTIAL ACCELERATION:** placing a student in a more advanced class for part of the day or in one or more content areas

**COMBINED CLASSES:** allowing a student in a grade-level-combined class (e.g., third- and fourth-graders) to work at the higher grade level

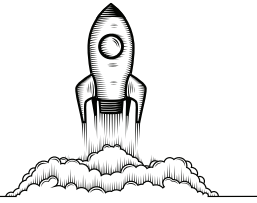
**CURRICULUM COMPACTING:** reducing the amount of introductory work required and/ or eliminating objectives already mastered based on pre-assessment (does not necessarily advance the grade placement)

**TELESCOPING CURRICULUM:** providing instruction at a faster pace through work (e.g., two years’ work in one year’s time), allowing for grade advancement

**MENTORING:** pairing a student with a mentor or tutor who gives the student advanced/more rapid instruction

**EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMS:** enrolling in coursework/after school/ summer programs that give advanced or extra instruction

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## TYPES OF ACCELERATION, CONT.

**DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES:** (previously Correspondence Courses) participating in coursework outside of normal school instruction via Internet-based classes

**CONCURRENT/DUAL ENROLLMENT:** taking a course at one level that grants credit at more than one level (e.g., high school and college or middle school and high school)

**ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP):** receiving college credit for a course taken in high school upon successful taking of a corresponding exam; also taking more rigorous coursework, even if college credit is not granted

**INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB):** participating in a rigorous course of study at an IB school and/or completing college credit through IB exams at the end of high school

**ACCELERATED/HONORS HIGH SCHOOL OR STEM RESIDENTIAL HIGH SCHOOL:** attending a highly selective high school that accepts high-aptitude students; may be a residential school on a college campus

**CREDIT BY EXAMINATION:** awarding credit based on scores on a mastery test or activity

**EARLY ENTRANCE INTO MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL OR COLLEGE:** entering a level of education ahead of the typical chronological expectation

**EARLY GRADUATION FROM HIGH SCHOOL OR COLLEGE:** graduating in 3.5 years or fewer by taking more coursework than typical or through concurrent/dual enrollment

**ACCELERATION IN COLLEGE:** gaining advanced levels of instruction in college based on other techniques (AP, dual credit, etc.) or decision of college instructors/administrators; may include Honors colleges/courses, a double major, or an advanced degree with/in lieu of a bachelor's degree

Source: *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students*



“I skipped second grade in 1974. My parents gave me the choice on whether or not to accelerate, and I didn’t really have to give it a second thought; I happily agreed and never looked back. I was able to make new friends quickly enough and felt well-adjusted throughout the remainder of my academic career. I am now a successful executive in the nonprofit sector, married to a wonderful husband, and we have two bright and talented children of our own.”

Debbie Merz had a similar experience. “I am now 41 years old, and I skipped kindergarten and finished college a year early,” she said. “My daughter, Alyssa, is 15 years old and skipped kindergarten.”

According to *A Nation Empowered*, “The main regret the accelerated adults have, in looking back over their time in school, was not accelerating sooner.”

Students who have been accelerated often have strong

opinions after it’s been done, and Assouline believes it’s critical to have their voices heard during the decision-making process as well, even at young ages. “If a student doesn’t want it, even if the child is really young or old, do not do it. You still must do something, just not this,” she said. “They will prove that you were wrong in your decision-making.”

What would she most like to see as a result of the publication of *A Nation Empowered*?

“We need a change in the training of pre-service and in-service of teachers, administrators and counselors,” Assouline said. “They’re the gatekeepers. We’ve got to change professional development [to include accurate information about] acceleration, and we’ve got to have that change correspond with policy.”

When we accomplish that, the report’s authors believe, we truly will be a nation empowered. 🇺🇸